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## Why the West Led the Rest to Poverty

**New Vision** (Kampala)

BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Sam Agatre Okuonzi

Kampala

*Title: The Whiteman's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Harm and So Little Good*

*Author: William Easterly*

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Those who genuinely believe that Uganda will develop by getting more aid and by working with development-partners through the emerging culture of sector-wide approaches will be shattered when they read the new book, *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Harm and So Little Good*. In this brutally honest, angry and rigorous book, William Easterly says the West is responsible for the global poverty and also for failing to solve the poverty problem they created when they squandered US \$2.3 trillion of aid over a period of 50 years. With one big idea after another, and with no accountability for such ideas or aid, the West has meddled in poor countries, making them worse off.

The Whiteman's mischief includes colonisation of other nations, reckless and unplanned decolonisation, arbitrary setting of boundaries which split nations, shifting and eliminating whole populations, and combining enemy groups in one country. Today, neo-imperialism is possible through aid, the spread of democracy and capitalism, and through military invasions.

Easterly says it all starts with the attitude of the West. The West believes that they, the whites, are chosen by nature or God to save the Rest - that is, all the others. The Rest have empty and meaningless lives and need the West's assistance to become civilised. This philosophy runs through generations, from colonialism through the covenant of the League of Nations, the charter of United Nations, to the most recent advocates, Jeffrey Sachs and Gordon Brown.

The latter two recently proclaimed the "End of Poverty" and "Make Poverty History" respectively. They separately declared that it would be up to them, meaning whites from the West, in the current generation, to accomplish these tasks. And yet such big plans have typically failed, says the professor. Such plans are not connected to grass-root populations. Social change cannot be achieved through social engineering plans, argues Easterly. The West achieved development by "muddling through", not through grand plans. The professor argues that big plans manufactured by the West are premised on three false legends:

-The poor are poverty trapped, they cannot emerge without an aid financed big-push.

-Poor economic-growth is due to poverty-trap, but not due to bad governance.

-Aid can give the necessary push for a country to take-off into self-sustained growth.

Through statistical testing the author shows that aid is not correlated with economic growth at all. He dismisses all excuses such as good policy, and type, length and size of the aid, as inconsequential. This former World Bank economist says in the whole of human history, only eight countries have moved out of poverty rapidly. These are Japan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, India and Taiwan. All other developed countries moved out of poverty slowly.

Easterly argues that the bureaucracy of aid does not provide the correct incentives for it to achieve results or for its agents to be accountable. For over 50 years, the same problems of aid's bureaucracy have persisted. These include aid coordination, capacity to handle aid, selecting who gets aid, emphasising poverty reduction, country ownership and debt servicing. Easterly concludes that the future of aid policy must be humbled by the experience of 50 years of failure. The West should give up Utopian goals and focus on tangible targets. And aid should be given to individuals, not to governments. Aid should be given knowing that it cannot cure poverty, but may alleviate suffering. Aid should be given to provide basic services and infrastructure, and to improve banking, business regulations and merit-based civil service. Aid should be focused on few specialised tasks with independent evaluations.

To make aid more useful each aid-agency should be held individually accountable. Aid agents need to use only interventions that work based on experience and research. Evaluations should be based on the feedback from the intended and actual beneficiaries. An incentive system to reward successful interventions and to penalise failures needs to be instituted in the aid administration.

The development of a nation is too complex for aid to address. It has to be homegrown and based on markets which are spontaneous. These markets arise from local traditions and circumstances, and not through reforms imposed by outsiders. The rules that make a society function and develop originate from the bottom. They are based on social norms, networks and history.

Easterly concludes that development has no formula but some commonalities can be discerned: the free-market is not violated, there are no grave cases of corruption by the state; and piecemeal solutions to poverty are determined through local research, participation and accountability. "It is easier for a community to search for solutions to its own problems than those of others" counsels the author. He identifies eight recent economic success stories as those countries that did not get aid or get involved with IMF, and these countries had never been colonised by the West, except the special colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong. The success of these countries was due to their massive commitment to science education, export of high technology, defiance of West's schemes and tutelage, homegrown formula of development, and disciplined work ethics and dynamism.

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