

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

More Harm Than Good

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THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

By William Easterly

(Penguin Press, 448 pages, \$27.95)

Pledging money to Africa was the hip thing to do last year. The United Nations Millennium Project rolled out its big plan to combat global poverty. British Prime Minister Tony Blair talked about "a big, big push forward" to help Africa. Jeffrey Sachs wrote an earnest tome on how to end poverty, made the cover of Time and wound up traveling across Africa with Angelina Jolie. At Gleneagles, Scotland, the G-8 pledged to double its aid flows to Africa; Bob Geldof organized the Live 8 concert at the same time. Time magazine capped off the year by naming Bono one of its persons of the year for his tireless campaigning for African debt relief.

The trouble with these charitable efforts is that they will probably do more harm than good. At least, that is the conclusion one comes to after reading William Easterly's "The White Man's Burden." Mr. Easterly was a World Bank economist for more than 15 years, until he wrote a book -- 2001's "The Elusive Quest for Growth" -- that was honest enough to note that the World Bank did not have a good grip on how to promote economic growth in the developing world. In "The White Man's Burden," Mr. Easterly -- now a New York University economist -- focuses his keen analytic prowess on the utility of foreign aid.

The foreign-aid community, according to Mr. Easterly, is mostly composed of Planners. They think of development as a technical engineering problem and generate ambitious plans to eliminate the causes of poverty in a multi-pronged intervention. But Planners are embedded in and beholden to rich donors -- large institutions in the West. Thus they lack real-life, on-the-ground feedback, and they lack accountability, both of which would allow them to improve their policies over time. Mr. Easterly prefers what he calls Searchers -- those who learn through trial and error in the field. They can't achieve the ambitious goals set out by Planners, but they can deliver at least some results.

"The White Man's Burden" is one long exercise in demonstrating why the Planners' mentality is wrong and why a little humility is in order: "The West cannot transform the Rest. It is a fantasy to think that the West can change complex societies with very different histories and cultures into some image of itself. The main hope for the poor is

for them to be their own Searchers, borrowing ideas and technology from the West when it suits them to do so."

Mr. Easterly shows why many of the development fads of the past 50 years -- the big push, donor coordination, shock therapy -- failed to do much good. He does a nifty job of disproving Jeffrey Sachs's claim that the real problem with Africa is that it is stuck in a "poverty trap" -- i.e., so poor that it cannot generate economic growth on its own. The real problem is bad governance. Aid institutions have not helped matters by doling out grants and loans to corrupt and thuggish regimes.

Even the recent push to make AIDS treatment more accessible in Africa withers under Mr. Easterly's gaze. The aid community, by focusing on treatment of those already suffering from HIV, has cut back on investments that would get a bigger bang for the buck -- like efforts to prevent the spread of AIDS or to encourage vaccination for other diseases.

Lest one think that Mr. Easterly is generalizing unfairly, it is worth noting that he has done something that very few people do: He has actually read the reams of reports churned out by the development community year after year. Deja vu begins to set in after seeing Mr. Easterly quote from the failed projects of decades ago -- the problems and "solutions" repeat themselves miserably. He has great fun, too, interpreting this turgid prose for the layman. A war is relabeled as a "conflict-related reallocation of resources"; corrupt leaders who raid public coffers create "governance issues."

After reading Mr. Easterly's assault on the hubris of Planners, one should not expect him to provide miracle cures. And indeed, he makes it clear that "the only Big Answer is that there is no Big Answer." He suggests that development experts take the economic equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath and first pledge to do no harm. After that, focus aid on observable outputs so that aid agencies can measure their effectiveness. Fund ombudsmen or other outside observers to evaluate what has been done. Aim for piecemeal, gradual progress rather than the big bang.

All this is quite persuasive. Still, "The White Man's Burden" merits a bit of negative feedback itself. The Planners/Searchers dichotomy is a bit too glib -- even a technocrat like Mr. Sachs has argued for local knowledge and on-the-ground feedback. And after thundering against Planners for most of the book, Mr. Easterly trumpets the governments of Singapore and Japan as the epitome of Searchers. Arguably there is a great deal of top-down Planning going on in both places. Since the theme of "The Elusive Quest for Growth" was that "people respond to incentives," it's odd that, in "The White Man's Burden," Mr. Easterly bashes the idea of conditioning foreign aid on results -- especially since, along the way, he praises a Mexican domestic program that uses incentives to good effect.

Mr. Easterly devotes too little space discussing the ways in which nongovernmental organizations -- so-called NGOs -- could provide a competitive market for aid provision. And he says fairly little about the potential value of humanitarian relief -- a surprising

omission given the role that aid played following the tsunami and earthquakes that devastated Asia in 2005. He does blast the folly of humanitarian interventions, they are Wilsonian or neoconservative in origin, but fails to discuss the ethics of doing nothing when tragedies like Darfur unfold.

Mr. Easterly's response to Darfur might well be: "Do nothing -- action is worse than inaction." After reading "The White Man's Burden," I fear that he may be right.

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