

U.S. Food Aid: Political or Not?

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (“Universal Declaration of Human Rights” 2015). This is stated in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Doubtlessly, providing food for those in need is a morally good, humanitarian act – an upholding of human rights.

A plethora of humanitarian organizations exist to address this basic human right. The U.S. has provided food aid to developing countries since 1954. Food aid organizations are saving human lives, and some of these programs are very effective. Furthermore, many of them have truly altruistic goals. Nevertheless, in the past 10-15 years, some criticism has fallen upon these organizations, bringing to light the possibility that they might be doing more harm than good. These organizations often undercut local economies, they tend to be inefficient, and they sometimes crowd out other exporters of food.

How and why do food aid organizations with good intentions often inflict negative consequences upon the countries they are supporting? Many NGOs face this problem, including Proyecto Eco-Quetzal in Guatemala. These organizations do not fully understand the societies they are dealing with, and this lack of understanding often leads to an insufficient solution, sometimes even causing an effect opposite than intended.

Furthermore, are these organizations, by being humanitarian and addressing economic issues, intrinsically non-political? Some organizations are trying to save human lives on the basis of Catholic virtues; others may be acting in the interests of agribusiness and shipping. How do the NGOs frame their work, and do their motivations matter in the end? Does it matter whether or not they are political?

BACKGROUND OF FOOD AID

Food aid has its origins in the United States in 1954. The U.S. has played a “leading role in global efforts to alleviate hunger and malnutrition and to enhance world food security through international food assistance” for almost six decades (Schnepf 2016). While today food aid efforts are generally humanitarian in nature, at its inception, the food aid policy had a “cynical, subsidiary aim” – the bill that started the program states that the program aimed to “develop and expand export markets for United States agricultural commodities” (Renton 2007). The U.S. was trying to get rid of its surplus maize, wheat and rice (Renton 2007). This ‘food dumping’ strategy peaked in 1999-2000, when there were large surpluses and low prices for cereals (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Over the decades, food aid has shifted towards humanitarian objectives, and today “the core intent of most food aid [...] is plainly to relieve unnecessary human suffering” (Barrett 2006). Some organizations focus on Catholic goals as well; for example, preserving and upholding the sacredness and dignity of all human life (“Mission Statement” 2015).

There are three major types of food aid: program, project, and emergency (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Program food aid is a “contribution of food produced in a rich country to the government of a recipient country” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Food aid is sold in the recipient country to generate cash, a process known as monetization. Project food aid is used to support developmental activities and projects (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Emergency food aid is donated for free to the recipient country in times of crisis, such as war or famine (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005).

MORE HARM THAN GOOD

While the giving of food to the hungry seems, on the surface, a purely good act, such aims have, on the contrary, often caused harm to recipient countries. Some of the main issues

that have arisen from food aid are related to efficiency, effectiveness, and targeting. The greatest concern is that food aid tends to undercut local economies: “It can undermine the livelihoods of poor farmers by creating disincentives for local food producers, by flooding markets and depressing prices” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Food aid makes it harder for local farmers to sell their produce and reduces growth in local markets, especially in the case of emergency food aid, when free food is readily available (Warah 2012). Food aid is thus a circular system, one where American farmers benefit by selling their crops and where local farmers perish. In the case of project food aid, the system is fraught with the “paradoxes of paying for rural development through sales of American farm foods” (Dugger 2007).

Another issue with food aid is that it is very inefficient and can be wildly expensive. A lot of money is spent solely on transportation, as well as on fees to pay off officials and militia so that aid convoys can pass (Warah 2012). This can amount to a great fraction of the actual value of the food aid.

Furthermore, food aid crowds other exporters out of markets. For example, in the 1990s, Guyanese rice producers exported their product to Jamaica. However, they faced intense competition from U.S. food aid, which began to ship large amounts of rice to Jamaica at the same time. As the General Secretary of the Guyana Rice Producers’ Association stated:

“[US food aid] was meant to boost food security... It was supposed to assist in the elimination of poverty, not in creating it. And we have seen a direct effect whereby in the very process of eliminating poverty [in one place], we have poverty being created in another region” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005).

A large concern surrounding food aid is the ulterior motives of surplus disposal: “US agriculture industry groups often consider food aid as a means of surplus disposal and market expansion” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). This is true in the case of the U.S. rice industry,

which uses food aid as a “critical escape route” when prices are low and production is high (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Humanitarianism could thus be a ‘moral cover’ for corporate aims. The problem of ulterior motives is dire when surplus production is tight; during these times, the U.S. is likely to cut back on food aid donations, leaving poor countries to struggle.

MOTIVATIONS – DO THEY MATTER?

Thus, there are many inefficiencies and absurdities in the food aid space. Some of the problems seem to stem from the motives of the organizations; if the goal is to get rid of surplus food, then certainly the focus is not on alleviating hunger in the recipient countries. In these cases, the organizations likely do not think through the potential cascading effects of their actions. This lack of thought and care can lead to quite foolish situations: “American porridge being shipped, at vast expense, for schoolchildren in Malawi, where the same food could be bought locally at a third the price, is just one in a long list of lunacies that punctuate the 50-year history of sending the rich world's food and drink to help the hungry” (“Mission Statement” 2015).

Even organizations with humanitarian goals – organizations that are genuinely trying to alleviate hunger and human suffering – may not be doing the work that is most beneficial for the recipient country. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may not be motivated by agribusiness and shipping interests, but they still appear to have circular and non-effective strategies, displaying a lack of understanding of what the country at hand actually needs. For example, many NGOs have been “ignoring this evidence for years that there's a negative impact on the prices farmers receive” when the U.S. sells their crops in impoverished countries (Dugger 2007).

Is humanitarianism merely a ‘moral cover’ for ulterior, potentially adverse, motives? Does it even matter what is motivating the various food aid organizations? Theoretically, it

should not matter what the motivations of a particular organization are; the only thing that should matter is what the organization is doing. Even if some U.S. food aid groups are motivated by corporate subsidies, this doesn't change the fact that they are giving food to people in need. As a senior vice president of one organization, ACDI/VOCA, expressed: "Sure it's self-interest if staying in business to help the hungry is self-interested. [...] We're not lining our pockets" (Dugger 2007). From this perspective, giving to the hungry cannot be anything other than benevolent, regardless of ulterior motives.

The question is of whether motivation matters is often relevant in discussions of NGOs. For example, there are many NGOs dealing with border practices in the Mediterranean sea, organizations that make it a point to announce their motivations. One such NGO, Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), emphasizes their avoidance of politics; their stated aim is simply to save lives, which they consider to be a non-political action. It would go against human rights not to save these drowning people. The Italian-U.S. couple that started the organization, Regina and Christopher Catrambone, are motivated by the idea that every human deserves to live. They "decided to mobilise their own rescue mission after hearing about the gruesome shipwrecks off the Italian island of Lampedusa" with the hope that they would "inspire others globally, and help dispel what Pope Francis calls the 'globalisation of indifference'" (Stierl 2018).

MOAS' aim is certainly noble, just like food aid's. However, their lack of political motivation leads to an incomplete solution. Is MOAS actually eliminating the migrant problem? What will they be doing with the people once they save them? Why did the people get there in the first place? Without considering these questions, MOAS will never do anything to stop the human suffering at its source.

I would argue that intentions do matter because they create very different outcomes. In the case of food aid, intentions greatly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the

organization. If motivations were in the right place, then perhaps large portions of money would not be wasted on transportation. Additionally, perhaps organizations would think through the potentially dire affects that they may inflict upon the recipient countries, such as undercutting local farmers. Similar to the case of MOAS, if food aid organizations do not have the proper intentions in mind, then they will not solve the underlying problems, and hunger may persist into eternity.

INTENTION AND IMPACT

The situation of poorly understanding the country that an organization is attempting to help is common in the NGO world. There is often a huge discrepancy between intentions and impact. Sometimes the outcomes are even orthogonal to the NGO's goals. Such was the case with Proyecto Eco-Quetzal (PEQ), an NGO in Guatemala that attempted to foster an ecotourism program as a means to promote conservation of the cloud forest (Kockelman 2016). The German ecologists that started PEQ figured that if the indigenous peoples were offered economic incentives, they would stop destroying the cloud forest. The funding agencies and national organizations, on the other hand, would be motivated by ethical arguments, such as loss of national identity and biodiversity.

What ended up happening, though, was that the local villagers ended up further destroying the cloud forest by cutting down more trees to build houses fit for accommodating ecotourists. PEQ didn't quite understand the society they were dealing with – a society that operates by a replacement economy rather than by market values.

Now let's look at the two situations to better understand the gulf between intention and impact. Situation 1: Villagers in Guatemala are destroying the cloud forest. PEQ swoops in and decides to promote ecotourism to incentivize villagers to protect the cloud forest. The result: villagers end up destroying the cloud forest even further. Situation 2: People in

developing countries are starving. U.S. organizations come in and begin to sell U.S. crops for lower prices in these countries. The result: local farmers cannot sell their crops due to competition, which leads to more hunger and economic issues.

Both situations represent a lack of understanding of a society, their values, and their economy, as well as an inability to develop well-thought out solutions. PEQ so poorly understood the society they were trying to change that their intentions had the opposite effects. Food aid, in turn, is bringing American capitalism and market competition into third-world countries, as well as meddling with all aspects of society, without the foresight to predict its impacts on local economies and without addressing the new problems they create. Additionally, with so many different organizations using different tactics, things can get very messy.

STRIPPED DOWN, OVERSIMPLIFIED PROBLEM

Many food aid organizations work by monetization, a process whereby food is converted to cash. Monetization basically strips down the problem into a question of funds. The money is used to “finance anti-hunger projects, or to run nutrition programs, or for any number of other worthy purposes” such as anti-poverty efforts (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). In essence, food is converted to money, which is converted to food – a ridiculous, circular distribution.

This oversimplified view of the problem mirrors the efforts of MOAS. Their view was that, in order to tackle the problem of people in the sea who needed saving, all they needed was large sums of money. This is a very black and white view of the world – the idea that more money means more power to act in the world, to sway others.

At the end of the day, the U.S. could just be writing checks to impoverished countries: “the fact remains that a large part of the food that is donated as aid is simply a heavily

discounted and cumbersome cash contribution” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). So why the roundabout way of dealing with hunger? Some groups, such as the Christian charity World Vision, say monetization is beneficial because “it keeps hard currency in poor countries, [and] can help prevent food price spikes in them” (Dugger 2007). Or, perhaps it simply acts best in corporate interests to generate cash. Whatever the reason may be, this oversimplification of the hunger problem is a troubling aspect of food aid. According to the Oxfam briefing paper, “Monetized food aid is untargeted food aid: selling food aid on markets permits little or no targeting of distribution or consumption to the most food insecure or malnourished populations” (“Oxfam Briefing Paper” 2005). Monetization is an inefficient and potentially counterproductive way to go about the hunger problem.

POLITICAL OR NOT?

NGOs seem to exist in a sacred, ‘non-political’ space. The overarching view of humanitarian efforts is that they are not political – the goal is simply to save lives and uphold human rights. What does this have to do with politics? NGOs go above politics; they connect all humans rather than connect people within a nation. Furthermore, food aid is doubly non-political, since it deals not only with humanitarian issues but also economic issues, and economics is not considered to be political.

On the other hand, in some senses food aid seems fraught with politics. For example, where does the funding come from? Many NGOs and charities receive federal funding. One Christian charity organization, CARE, felt that this source of funding led to major problems, and they decided to step away from \$45 million a year in federal funding. They felt that “American food aid is not only plagued with inefficiencies, but may hurt some of the very poor people it aims to help” (Dugger 2007). George Odo, a CARE official disillusioned with the practice of selling American farm products in African countries, stated that "What's

happened to humanitarian organizations over the years is that a lot of us have become contractors on behalf of the government. [...] That's sad but true. It compromised our ability to speak up when things went wrong” (Dugger 2007). Thus, the question of where food aid organizations get their money is an important one because it is intricately tied to politics, and it can affect the ways that the organizations are run. Such was the case with MOAS; their money came from private profits that they likely gained from the Iraq war, which led to the migrant problem in the first place. CARE felt that by stepping away from federal funding, they would be able to “candidly address the flaws in the American strategy to combat world hunger” (Dugger 2007). Ironically, they hope to make up for the loss of funding by making their business profitable, which doesn't seem like a much better idea.

Additionally, the policy aspect of food aid is clearly a political question. Better policy would help solve the inefficiencies and poor targeting which abound in food aid. Instead of bringing in food from the U.S., food aid groups could purchase and sell local food, since processing and shipping from the U.S. is expensive, and there are often delays in delivery. An estimated 40,000 children's lives are “lost annually due to outdated policies, including meeting cargo preference requirements, monetization, and reliance on in-kind shipments sourced from the US” (Schaefer 2018). Food aid groups could do so much more with the funding they have, which goes back to the question of the goals and strategies of the organization; their underlying motivations may impact the effectiveness with which they use their resources.

Another aspect of food aid that is charged with politics is the question of image. Some organizations could be acting in the interest of their image and simply doing things that are good for branding. This is problematic because it means that the high-profile cases receive large amounts of aid, while other, more hidden crises go unnoticed: “National interests and media attention, rather than need, often determine how governments as well as private donors

prioritize crises” (Wahlberg 2008). Unfortunately, after a while donors lose interest even in the prominent cases. Furthermore, while there is a great deal of poverty in developing countries, there are also people in the U.S. who are struggling to feed themselves, but they do not receive the same kind of aid. Is saving hungry Americans not a valiant enough effort compared to saving poor kids in third-world countries?

Finally, the distinction between economics and politics itself is fraught. Organizations may claim that their actions are political or non-political, but in order to make these claims, they have to see the world in a certain way. If saving people from hunger is just a humanitarian issue, then it is impossible to have a have broader conversation about how people got into the situation in the first place. Therefore, there are certain ways of framing that close off certain possibilities, and others that open up to discussions of underlying causes.

THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA

Let’s take an extreme example of people in North Korea who are dying of starvation to illustrate the political nature of food aid. Is it our job in the U.S. to save them? Is this issue still simply humanitarian, or does it become political?

In the case of North Korea, it is widely known that “donor countries use food aid to promote a political agenda” (Wahlberg 2008). For example, “in 2005, as the Washington-Pyongyang dispute over nuclear arms intensified, the US government halted all food shipments to North Korea” (Wahlberg 2008). Recently, the U.S. has used humanitarian food aid shipments to incentivize North Korea to “reduce tensions and return to dialogue”, but such an approach is controversial (Sang-Hun 2019):

In recent years, American officials have been increasingly skeptical about the approach, arguing that the North should have bought food for its own people with the money it spent on building nuclear weapons. Nor did humanitarian aid help persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons development, they said (Sang-Hun 2019).

It is clear that, in this case, food aid cannot be marked as non-political. If the North Korean government chooses to spend its money on nuclear arms rather than feeding its country, then starvation is a political choice. Furthermore, a country that chooses to intervene and feed the country is, in a roundabout way, supporting their nuclear arms development. Or, they may be providing aid as an incentive to reduce tensions. Either way, food aid is a political act.

CONCLUSION

Giving food to those in need is a simple upholding of human rights, and thus feeding people in developing countries has become a widespread humanitarian issue. Many food aid organizations are trying to tackle the problem, but its origins were less magnanimous; the program started off as a way to get rid of large surpluses of crops. In this essay I examined whether the motivations of food aid organizations matter. I concluded that motivations do matter, especially if organizations are motivated by corporate aims, since this often leads to a lack of well-thought out solutions. Furthermore, using the case of MOAS as an example, I argued that organizations with explicitly non-political aims close off the opportunity to solve a problem at its roots.

I then evaluated the gulf between intention and impact that is frequent in NGOs, using Proyecto Eco-Quetzal in Guatemala as an example of how things can go extremely wrong. I argued that such a gulf arises from a lack of understanding of the society at hand. NGOs

often introduce American and capitalistic values to societies run by other principles, which then negatively impacts local economies and creates a new set of problems.

Finally, I discussed whether or not food aid is a political issue. Food aid is marked as a non-political realm: first, because it deals with a humanitarian issue, and second, because it deals with economics, and economics are not considered political. In my paper I argued that this view is flawed and that food aid is, in fact, political due to aspects such as funding, policy, and image. Furthermore, the distinction between economics and politics itself is fraught. Food aid thus becomes a question of framing, and only certain ways of framing open up to constructive discussions of root causes, which can help to tackle the hunger problem at its source.

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