2016

When Elephants Fight, the Grass Gets Trampled

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A small global elite dominates most of today's social, cultural and economic spheres, while the majority of the planet's population remains on the short end of the stick. Socioeconomic inequality and deep cultural division run rampant in society today, operating within the context of elitist and hegemonic power structures, which in turn have manifested themselves both discursively and practically in "developing" countries, especially those in the African continent. World poverty and hunger are now considered amongst the most pressing issues of our time, and while several reactionary instruments have been created to protect the rights of impoverished and disadvantaged populations – the efficacy of which remains questionable – the underlying power structures are rarely addressed. The economically affluent population of the world, the top one percent, in theory possesses sufficient resources to "solve" this problem. It is the human rights project that seeks to make these theoretical possibilities into reality. However, despite being born out of noble intentions, the ways in which human rights are understood, interpreted and implemented today prove to be problematic in several regards. According to the contemporary theoretical understanding of human rights, the international community should be primarily responsible for ensuring that basic human rights, like those to subsistence, are met in countries whose governments are financially unable or politically unwilling to protect their own citizens. This paper will look at the ways global politics and power structures have, in practice, hindered the altruistic aims of the human rights project, in particular regard to African states.

The nature of human rights theory and practice changed over the course of the last few decades, as shifts in political power occurred both domestically and internationally. Still situated within the context of decolonization and following the fall of the Soviet Union, much of the developing world experienced an upsurge of globalization and capitalist reform policies. Economic globalization is defined simply as the implementation of neoliberal economic policies by governments, especially privatization and deregulation of markets, which are put in place to increase the flow of goods, services, labour and capital internationally (Richards and Gelleny, 2013, p. 180). The force with which economic globalization took hold became increasingly more rapid and widespread, both materially and ideologically, purportedly intended to foster development and growth on both economic and political fronts. International organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were created to uphold the capitalist system by maintaining global financial stability, monitoring economic balance in international trade and directing development initiatives.

These organizations were established to help developing countries increase their economic strength, a claim that is merely illusory in retrospect. In reality, they served only to create the conditions and frameworks necessary for Western powers to uphold and preserve the neoliberal politics that preserved their own political interests. For instance, their projected shift away from global agricultural policy and the fortification of free market systems and private sector investment virtually crippled a large part of Africa (Thurow and Kilman, 2009, p. 53). African states began owing huge amounts in debt due to the loans from the World Bank. The free market theory of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the IMF and World Bank basically outlawing subsidies, which were essential for the poor farmers and lumpenproletariat of Africa. As a condition of aid or debt relief, poor countries had to cut government spending and privatize, despite having an insufficiently developed private corporate sphere. This was convenient for the West, since it is the United States – the major financial superpower that allegedly pulls all the strings in the modus operandi of the IMF and World Bank – that had implemented large subsidies domestically that protected its own farmers, providing a “safety net” that would allow them to keep producing even when their yields were low (ibid., p. 71). To ensure the food security of their own farmers, all the food aid that the U.S. gave was in the form of surplus crops. This prevented local markets in Africa from growing, making it more of a threat and competitor rather than a self-proclaimed saviour (ibid., p.97).

In many African countries, there would be a food deficit in one region, often owing to famine, but flourishing resources in another. The problem was then one of infrastructure; transportation networks were poor and it was difficult to facilitate local exchange of goods.

That in turn presupposed international investment to modernize and redevelop agricultural markets and improve rural infrastructure (ibid., p. 71). In order to achieve that, most African countries would have to restructure their economic and trade policies by opening up their markets, to attract the necessary foreign investment in the first place. In other words, the same international economic policies that were needed to obtain foreign investment ended up hindering progress, whilst the developed world benefited from the imposed dependency of foreign developmental aid.

International development in theory aligned with the objectives of human rights, yet in practice it did more damage than good as poorer countries tended to be excluded from the profitability of globalization (Fukuda-Parr, 2013, p. 162). Although agricultural development initiatives led by American biologist Normal Borlaug, which sparked the Green Revolution, provided an innovative restructuring of food production that helped alleviate hunger and poverty in Mexico, international political factors ultimately petered out his ideas and proposals, to preserve the lucrativeness of world hunger. The success of the Green Revolution in Mexico and Asia was unable to be extrapolated to Africa for a number of reasons: the diversity of the crops, the political violence, poor infrastructure, unfavourable climate, and socioeconomic imbalances, amongst others (Thurow and Kilman, 2009, p. 39-42).

The West took this opportunity to generate a system of dependency by monopolizing the availability of food, under the pretext that Africa was incapable of progress in the agricultural sector. Suffering from poverty and famine, African states relied entirely on foreign aid and investment – chiefly from the United States – to sustain their people. American foreign policy refused to provide food aid in the form of cash aid, owing in large part to economic self-interest, ensuring an environment of reliance on food aid rather than self-sufficiency. It prevented African states from being able to feed themselves; instead it encouraged them to develop businesses that would give them economic capital to import food products, rather than grow their own.

All this did was create a system of "comparative advantage" – using a Eurocentric lens to affect means of production – where the agriculture sector was written off because it was cheaper to import food grown abroad. The focus then shifted to industrialization because labour was cheaper at home (ibid., p. 33). In theory, this made sense because if Africa had food security, they could focus on improving other sectors of their nations. This model of development economics focuses on maximum economic growth as the end goal, which is how the international economic system conventionally functions today. However, the problems of implementation that arise from it are inherently political and imperialist. The idea of importing food by money made from labour did not work out as planned, because the affluent West presupposed protectionist policies like tariffs, quotas, export credits and large subsidies to domestic producers, which only intensified the severe poverty amongst most African nations (Pogge, 2007, p. 6). A different approach to international economics is needed to counteract the dominant political force of the West, one that put ideals of equality and justice at the forefront rather than charity and perpetual aid, and fundamentally changes the existing oppressive power dynamics.

To that end, international law established the right to development (RTD), which promoted considerations of poor countries in the global economic system, and the human rights-based approach to development (HRBA), which aimed to help poor people realize their rights (Fukuda-Parr, 2013, p. 162). Human rights are founded on principles of equality and justice, and that includes economic equality for both individuals and countries. The Declaration on the Right to Development was adopted in 1986, which required fair distribution of wealth and respect for self-determination and sovereignty. The core idea was that development was not just about economic growth, but also about equally distributing the wealth produced by it, amongst people from all groups of society, especially ones that were politically marginalized (ibid., p. 163-5). Again, in theory, this was sound, but in practice it posed several problems, arising mainly from the aforementioned power dynamics of domestic governments.

For several African governments, poverty and hunger were not the only problems they were grappling with, but they were the root cause of many. Most governments owed large amounts of international debt, which could only be relieved with the backing of the U.S., the world's current financial superpower, who stood unyielding on the issue. Through the involvement of various celebrities and philanthropists like Bono, eventually the World Bank was able to write off ninety percent in debt relief, the money for which could then be used to actually improve conditions, like providing health and education services (Thurow and Kilman, 2009, p. 140-1). But when governments did not receive adequate financial support, they could barely keep their countries' economies afloat, and protecting human rights was slowly pushed off the agenda. HRBA aims to empower those vulnerable groups of people that are denied their human rights, but when the state does not have the means to provide the conditions necessary to fulfill the rights of its citizens, claiming them becomes futile. This discourse subsequently begs the question of whether political and civil rights versus economic, social and cultural rights ought to be hierarchical at all, and how an environment can be created for governments to be able to also protect positive rights, which are those that require action from the state for their fulfillment, such as the right to education.

Furthermore, in many cases domestic governments are corrupt, authoritarian, inefficient and incompetent, whilst practicing mismanagement on large scales. Political violence has been an issue for African states for all of the twentieth century, as the processes of decolonization and transitional justice often gave way to chaos and crime in the immediate aftermath of political change. These problems are either ignored by the international developed world, or used as a means to justify the poverty and poor climate of such countries in what is known as "explanatory nationalism" (Pogge, 2007, p.6). This theory does not hold, however, because in most cases these oppressive or corrupt governments are not in power out of the people's own accord, and stay there much against the people's will ('people' meaning the oppressed or silenced majority), for instance Idi Amin's presidency in Uganda or the apartheid in South Africa. And it seems to be the aggregate of international superpowers that perpetuate such leaders' prevailing rules. Their developed allies in the West provide them with arms and money to stay in power, often through barbaric means favouring an allied elite and no popular support, in exchange for securing the resource imports and upholding favourable trade relations (Pogge, 2007, p.7). Inadvertently, the fate of entire populations is determined as a matter of financial convenience to the world's governing elite.

As it stands today, the international economic system is controlled by a few Western powers acting primarily out of self-interest. The political agenda of the international community seems to be hindering all progress by cutting off development for the Third World, but it is important to note that it is nonetheless the international superpowers that have the capability to incite change as well.

Although domestic governments bear a great deal of responsibility in protecting the rights of their citizens, the rights in question are chiefly civil and political rights, and in context of issues like global poverty and hunger, it is unreasonable to expect that all governments the world over will have the means necessary to realize economic, social and cultural rights too. Governments in the developing world do not have the ability to influence world politics the way major international creditors do. One only has to turn to the United Nations Security Council to see the unequal distribution of global influence. Neglect, corruption and greed do result in poor governance, but even the most promising government system could never write off billions in debt to improve their own economies, and so they remain heavily dependent on international human rights frameworks. The international community has instituted several different laws, organizations and policies aimed at improving lives of the impoverished masses the world over, and yet not much is being done to ensure they are put into effect to the best of their capabilities, almost always due to a self-interest driven gridlock from the major players. While human rights discourse presents the simplest, and perhaps the most naïve, answer to these questions, global exclusionary and hegemonic politics have undermined what ought to be a non-negotiable moral and ethical standpoint, which I believe is the biggest failure of our shared humanity.

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