

Shoes or Schooling: Neo-Colonialism, Aid, Social Entrepreneurship, and Empowerment



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“You don't get a get-home-free card just for having good intentions. You have to do things that make sense.”

William Easterly

Many may have heard the famous foreign aid horror story of Jason Sadler, a Floridian businessman who, in 2010, launched a campaign he called “1 Million Shirts for Africa,” with the aim of collecting one million t-shirts from Americans who no longer wanted them, and distributing them to Africa. The criticisms were myriad, and in no way new: decrying the danger of dumping goods on an economy in which there was already an industry and market for them; that t-shirts are simply not what people in abject poverty in many African countries were or continue to be in need of; that the money spent processing and distributing these goods could have been spent better in the aid of the people these t-shirts were attempting to reach (Nairobi).

But what of the good, effective ventures we keep hearing about? What of the melding of business and social capital (positive social change) building- what of TOMS shoes and the like? In order to ask about the efficacy of what one might think is good, we must first understand what we know to be bad.

And so, perhaps the most poignant, but least immediately apparent or understandable of these claims against ‘A Million T-Shirts for Africa’ is the first, the danger of goods-dumping. One might ask, and reasonably so: what’s wrong with giving excess, unwanted goods to the less wealthy- isn’t that what aid is? The answer, however, is that unleashing free, abundant commodities on an economy where an affordable trade already exists puts residents of the community involved in the industry out of work, and, although it may serve some purpose, ends up disempowering community members.

Proponents of this type of aid might point out that a single industry will not employ an entire population. It's obviously true that if a shoe-giving organization stops pouring shoes into a community, a whole city or village will not suddenly form a footwear-based economy, and live on selling shoes back and forth alone. However, widespread and continued aid of this sort does have a disempowering effect on a community.

A very relevant example is in the second-hand clothing market across many countries in Africa. The practice of cheap sale of American second-hand clothing, bought and then shipped to Africa by American companies, is widespread. Literal bales of American second-hand clothing are sorted through, tailored to fit a thinner population, and sold for very little to African consumers. In fact, this market is so saturated that even the poor can be selective consumers, often choosing only to purchase clothing that is in line with their perception of current western style, and smells musty, meaning that it has just come in a bale and is a fresh import to the area. Even some of the poorest have consumer options within their reach when it comes to clothing.

Although many have their doubts about the so called 'Mitumba' (bale/bundle in Swahili) industry, it is beyond rash to deny that the industry employs a variety of people, with various skills, while still providing cheap clothing that even most in poverty can afford. It is clear that to suddenly dump a million t-shirts in an industry like this would have a net negative effect, displacing many jobs in the existing informal market to provide an existing service (Rivoli).

While one can't know the intention of aid-givers such as Jason Sadler, one would likely assume their intentions are not negative, that they do not mean harm. One might ask oneself, however, if intention truly matters when it comes to aid. As much as one's motivations might count when it comes to personal moral judgements, positive thinking and good vibes, simply put, do absolutely nothing good for people truly in need of assistance.

The tragedy in this harmful aid is not simply the tragedy of wasted aid and resources- the tragedy is multiplied in the real harm it does. Like the centuries of colonialism that have dominated many of the countries towards which this harmful aid is pointed, aid that focuses on the moral placating, on the appeasement, of the aid givers, and not on the actual development and self-sustainability of a recipient community is aid which furthers lack of dependence.

Luckily, widespread criticism (not all of it so civil) pushed Sadler to reconsider, and pursue other ways of using the t-shirts he had already collected, hopefully this time more carefully and thoughtfully. One might think that this type of mistake would be the misstep of a motivated, well intentioned, ignorant newcomer to aid. It pains me to write, that in 2011, World Vision, a well established, 60+ year old organization, rather than carefully considering their course of action, and brainstorming destinations for the unwanted shirts, donated more than 100,000 pre-printed super bowl championship shirts of the losing team to a variety of countries, and faced fairly limited criticism for it (Freschi).

Say what you will about World Vision in general (critics of the organization mainly decry its evangelism and argued inefficacy of child sponsorship), but for an organization as established as World Vision to give aid this obviously lacking forethought seems more than questionable. This dumping of goods, referred to as goods-in-kind aid, is not only ineffectual, but in fact, perpetuates neo-colonial aid dependence that contributes to the very symptoms that World Vision claims to combat (Gelan)- while their goods dumping disempowers local growth and industry through erosion of local trade and development, the organization claims in its vision statement to be committed to help children “...grow strong in communities free of need and full of promise (wvi.org).”

If the goal of an organization's (non-disaster) aid is not imply to alleviate abject poverty (a noble goal, to be sure), but also to stimulate self-sustainability and community empowerment, then it is clear that directionless goods-in-kind aid, illustrated above with the pitfalls of t-shirt giving, is simply not what struggling communities need.

Jeffrey Sachs refers to his ideal of aid as freeing impoverished aid recipients from the 'poverty trap' of sustenance, survival-oriented lifestyle, with the continuing growth after this initial surge being almost wholly from the recipient community:

...the goal is to end extreme poverty, not to end all poverty, and still less to equalize world incomes or to close the gap between the rich and the poor. This may eventually happen, but if so, the poor will have to get rich on their own effort. The rich can help most by giving the extreme poor some assistance to extricate themselves from the poverty trap that now ensnares them. (Sachs, 289)

Although some may be inflamed by Sach's statement 'the poor will have to get rich on their own effort,' the important thing to realize is that this is not to discourage aid funders and providers in any way- simply to stress the importance of thoughtful consideration on the wider-reaching effect of aid, and according deliberate action. This realization should push us as an international community to also know that aid must not only be physical, directly tangible aid, but anything that allows for communities lifted out of a 'poverty trap' to prosper sustainably. To summarize, a holistic aid scheme must be not only the livestock given to community to aid physical sustenance, but the lobby (or in the case of a missing government, a local push) to create or modify basic infrastructure that, at the very least, does not inhibit cattle trade and community development.

This holistic idea of aid is clearly not practiced by many, or, at the very least, the aid giant World Vision. But what of the "New Heroes" of aid (PBS), the social entrepreneurs of such recent acclaim- TOMS shoes and the like, straddling the boundary between the social capital

world and commercial capital world. Do these organization/corporations tend to view and practice aid holistically, effectually promoting community development and combating neo-colonialism?

The answer to this question cannot be absolute- simply put, any given organization will vary so much site by site that any generalization about efficacy and thoughtfulness is inaccurate. However, in order for aid to eschew the perpetuation of neo-colonialism, an organization must implement policies that foster local development and self-sustainability in constituent communities.

Colonialism

Criticism of poverty alleviation aid often invokes the term ‘neo-colonialism,’ meaning new colonialism. In order to understand neo-colonialism, however, one first must understand colonialism itself. While anyone reading this will almost surely know a brief history of widespread British colonization, the roots, facets, and effects of colonialism may not be initially apparent.

Widespread colonization began in the 15th century, with the dawn of the age of exploration. As Europeans with the technology and drive to conquer set out for new lands in the coming years (why European conquest, and not Asian or other conquest, would be the subject of a whole other paper), conquests were made throughout Africa, and in the coming centuries Asia and the Americas. European (primarily British, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch) colonizers established settlements, almost always extracting natural resources to send back for trade, and imposing cultural and religious values on their new subjects.

One key factor in early colonization was the inhibition of native growth and self-reliance.

Dr. Gloria Emeagwali, professor of history and african studies at Central Connecticut State

University has this to say:

Colonialism is a system of administration; a process of exploitation; and a production system often geared towards the creation of capitalist relations and the economic and socio-cultural aggrandizement of the colonizer. This may be done by covert or overt, psychological, legal and military mechanisms. Colonialism inhibited the development of indigenous technology in Africa to a large extent. Colonial domination brought with it a shift into a cash crop economy and destabilized [sic] some of the existing processes of technical growth.

In brief, colonialism served to uproot traditional societal and (mostly pre-)industrial structures, and implant its own colonist-serving roots, in effect inhibiting general development and self-sustenance of the colonized group.

The dumping of goods took place. African markets were flooded with cheap mass-produced textile, glass and iron products in the context of policies such as "the scrap iron policy" of Britain. Indigenous manufacturing capability was deliberately undermined to facilitate European exports. Captive markets were created. There were deliberate laws aimed at suppressing African indigenous technological development. (Emeagwali)

Although Dr. Emeagwali refers specifically to colonialism in Africa, this obliteration of native industry was in no way endemic to the continent. In the Americas, Spanish colonizers colonized the native peoples of the region around Potosí (in modern Bolivia), driving them into labor in the silver mines of the mountains, allowing Spain to become a (arguably, the) chief player in a new global silver trade. Inhuman conditions were placed upon native workers in the mines.

Obviously, one should note the injustice of the conditions placed upon the native people, but what is perhaps more important is the simple fact that any conditions were being placed upon native people in the first place- that instead of traditional methods of sustenance and

development, people were now relying on handouts and being ‘employed,’ if one could call it that, externally rather than in self-created, self-sustaining industry. This is, it seems, is what strongly links colonialism to neo-colonialism and modern neo-colonial aid.

The term neo-colonialism was coined by Kwame Nkrumah during the post world-war ii decolonization of Africa. Nkrumah, a Marxist president of Ghana, laid out a foundation for discussion of the term neo-colonialism in his writings:

In place of colonialism, as the main instrument of imperialism, we have today neo-colonialism . . . [which] like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries. . . .

The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. The struggle against neo-colonialism is not aimed at excluding the capital of the developed world from operating in less developed countries. It is aimed at preventing the financial power of the developed countries being used in such a way as to impoverish the less developed. (Nkrumah)

While exploitation may not be the goal of almost any aid project, what resonates through both Nkrumah’s foreign corporate power and bad aid is the inhibition to development that comes inherent with habitual, poorly planned goods-in-kind aid. This connection is the crux of the notion that bad aid perpetuates neo-colonialism. Harkening back to Africa and t-shirts, one example of this is disrupting the developing mitumba (2nd hand t-shirt trade) in Africa with free t-shirts en-masse. While the intention may be wholly positive, the intention changes nothing in the effect of impeding development and local sustainability.

Defining Social Entrepreneurship

Before discussing the merits and drawbacks of an organization labeled as ‘Socially Entrepreneurial,’ we must have a rich understanding of the term and its uses. Although social

entrepreneurship may be defined in myriad ways, for the purpose of this paper, social entrepreneurship will be defined chiefly as a non-governmental organization that operates as a business, sidestepping the relative uncertainty of donation as a means of aid funding, and instead using profit generated by business ventures to serve an 'aid constituency.' This is not to say that an organization that practices social entrepreneurship must, in all circumstances, operate as business- it it simply, as stated, going beyond relying on typical grants and aid.

Gregory Dees's, of Stanford University, identification of the key traits of a social entrepreneur are congruent:

Social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:

- Adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value),
- Recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission,
- Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning,
- Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand, and
- Exhibiting a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created. (Dees)

One could certainly, and successfully argue that non-business like charities and organizations also 'relentlessly pursue new opportunities to serve their mission' (to paraphrase), however, in the globalized, capitalist world in which we live and operate, a social entrepreneur is simply the logical extension of this trait, pursuing social value through profit simply because this seems the most effective and reliable method of our time.

Although companies like TOMS may seem to have a line drawn between their aid and their sales (although both sides deal in shoes, they seem to be altogether different sides of the company), some socially entrepreneuring companies' sources of income and funding generation are somewhat more in line, less separate. One example of this is an organization called Fundación Paraguaya, a "pioneer in sustainable agricultural education, providing 100% employability to poor rural youth through a market-based curriculum in free, quality, 100%

financially self-sufficient schools. This education allows students to find agricultural jobs upon graduation, create small enterprises, or enter university (World Economic Forum).”

Fundación Paraguaya

Fundación Paraguaya, a Kiva microfinance partner, operates through three separate but interconnected programs: a microlending program targeting those for whom even other microlenders are inaccessible; a youth education program promoting financial literacy; an agricultural school that sustains itself through actual entrepreneurial practice opportunities for its students (kiva.org).

Fundación Paraguaya’s (or, FP’s) approach to microfinance is interlocked with their finance education programs. FP provides loans and education to those who are ‘financially excluded’ (and at an impressively low delinquency rate of 2%) in efforts to “strengthen precarious jobs, promote the creation of jobs, and increase gender equity and augment family income (Fundación Paraguaya).” In effort to serve these goals, a large volume of loans have gone to those seeking post-secondary education that could otherwise not.

Much of FP’s education is carried out through one or two time, and therefore more accessible (less time missing a job or farm) workshops, for example, the Beyond Money program (sponsored by HSBC bank) a single six hour workshop delivered in public schools conveying key financial concepts such as intelligent consumption, budget, etc.

Most intriguing, perhaps, is FP’s self sufficient agri-entrepreneurial school, boasting “100% employability... 100% financial self-sufficiency... (Fundación Paraguaya).” Students from around Latin America live at the school, where they have the option of earning diplomas either in agriculture and livestock management or tourism entrepreneurship. The school achieves self-sufficiency by operating both a 153-acre farm and a hotel. In order to graduate,

students are required to draft business plans for a future enterprise. The school aims to give students the skills to promote rural development- however, these business plan drafts establish credit lines for students to actually carry out their plans.

In a 2011 interview with Forbes, Martín Burt, a co-founder of the organization, spoke of how Fundación Paraguaya was founded, its goals, and its practices:

In 1985, together with a group of visionary businessmen and professionals we founded Fundación Paraguaya. It was the country's first microfinance program and first development NGO. We were under a military dictatorship then, so social work was quite difficult. Our objective was to develop social innovations that could help create jobs and increase family income among the country's poor. We wanted to show that self-help and economic self-reliance programs were better than charitable approaches. Our microfinance programs have evolved and we are now quite serious in going to the next level, which is to help all our clients overcome and eliminate poverty. We also have developed new educational programs that borrow the basic concepts of microfinance... concepts such as dignity, self-sufficiency, accountability, impact...

Our dissemination strategy aims to promote awareness, understanding, and action. We are systematizing our work, writing manuals, spreading the word in conferences and publications, holding workshops, visiting partners in different countries, and doing a lot of training. Of course, this all means that we are in a journey of learning... The more we share our work, the better we become. Sharing allows us to grow and to learn from others. (Kanani)

While these goals might sound all well and good, many will undoubtedly continue to question the efficacy of an organization with lofty goals. However, Kiva Microfinance reports a default rate (the rate at which borrowers are unable to pay their loans) from May 23, 2007 to September 12, 2013 of .01% with over 20 million USD loaned in total. In comparison, the average Kiva default rate is around 1%. The average Fundación Paraguaya loan was \$226 to Kiva's overall average of \$416. Both Kiva and Fundación Paraguaya loaned around 74% of all loans to women in the reported period.

Although hard data about the Fundación Paraguaya agricultural school is less available, from these statistics it seems clear that the organization has had success in serving its mission of continual poverty reduction through self-sufficiency- a key factor in ‘good aid.’

TOMS

Another organization commonly recognized as socially entrepreneuring, albeit better known, is TOMS shoes. Recognizable by its blue and white striped flag logo with the writing ‘TOMS’ in the middle, the company's flag logo represents its origins in Argentina, where founder and current CEO Blake Mycoskie found his calling to provide shoes for children in the ultra poor ‘villas’ of Buenos Aires. Mycoskie, already a successful entrepreneur, having launched a college laundry service and online driving school, decided to launch a company with a business/giving model of buy a pair, give a pair (meaning one pair would be donated for each sale). The shoe design was based on a traditional argentine flat shoe, and has since become wildly popular in the US and abroad.

In many ways, TOMS exemplifies academically defined characteristics of social entrepreneurship. In his book, ‘Start Something That Matters,’ in which Blake Mycoskie aims to encourage and assist budding social entrepreneurs, Mycoskie describes the beginnings of his own company: “...longtime veterans of the footwear industry (shoe dogs, as they’re called) argued that the model was unsustainable or at least untested-- that combining a for-profit company with a social mission would complicate and undermine both... TOMs is only one example of a new breed of companies that are succeeding at this volatile moment in capitalism (Mycoskie, 19).”

While the popularity and acclaim of TOMS shoes is unquestionable, growing criticism of the company has taken voice on the internet, in part through social networking and blogging.

Many argue that while TOMS may placate humanitarily-minded, fashion conscious consumers, its actual efficacy, its net positive effect in relieving poverty and its effects is quite small-- that “while donating a pair of shoes helps shoelessness, it does not help poverty (Stupart).”

Another common criticism accuses TOMS of the same good-dumping as Jason Sadler of One Million T-Shirts for Africa planned to unleash on the African Mitumba trade. While shoes may not be as common and economically saturated as used clothing in developing nations, some commentators claim that TOMS deprives local shoemakers of business, stifling growth. Another argument highlights a perceived misuse of TOMS profit- that is, instead of spending money on shoes, which will eventually become unusable, to address the issues of parasitic foot-entering ringworm or E. Coli, the company could instead build concrete bathhouses to more lastingly eliminate fecal ground-cover borne disease.

Harkening back to the issue of economic disruption through goods-dumping, Blake Mycoskie addresses non-local production in an interview with Entrepreneur magazine:

‘I think that statement -- people making the shoes and not getting the wages they deserve -- is just false, and it’s just people assuming that you’re making a product in Asia and people are not being properly paid. That is, in my opinion, an ignorant understanding of production. Yeah, maybe it was true in the 1980s and maybe early 1990s. But if you go to China now the facilities are better than the facilities in Africa or South America.’ (Parmar)

While Mycoskie underscores the fairness shown toward the workers making TOMS shoes, his interview fails to address the issue of non-local goods production. However, the same interviewer does note a new initiative with respect to local production, and through that, local development, in this case to post-disaster Haiti:

During the Clinton Global Initiative’s annual meeting this week, where leaders of businesses, nonprofits and governments have convened to address

social challenges, Mycoskie, 37, announced plans to build a new shoe-manufacturing plant in Haiti, where locals will be trained to begin production in January. 'I want everyone to hear me clearly: This is not just additional aid to Haiti,' Mycoskie said in a session where both former President Bill Clinton and activist-actor Sean Penn spoke about development progress in Haiti. 'This marks a major investment and will have one of the most important investment returns possible -- and that is improving people's lives.' (Parmar)

Aside from the issue of local enrichment versus ineffective goods-in-kind aid, an analysis of aid distribution itself is key to an analysis of the company. In the experience of the author, however, it can be difficult to find information about the exact distribution methods of TOMS shoes. TOMS' website has plenty of references to giving partners, but little meaningful documentation of actual aid being dispersed. To be fair, Fundación Paraguaya also does not, to the date of this writing, have similar documentation available on their website.

However, anecdotal analysis of TOMS shoes giving found online, often in aid-related blogs, and less in academic writings, raises the question of TOMS' involvement with evangelical giving partners. TOMS lists World Vision as one of their giving partners, and some have reported instances of shoes being distributed disproportionately to Christian churches and schools. Additionally, many wrote of shoes being distributed to people showing up wearing shoes in near-perfect condition.

Reports also exist of poor logistical planning in shoe distribution. One blog commentator reported a World Vision giving partner arriving to a church, announcing shoe distribution to all the youth, while only having half as many pairs of shoes as youth, and all in one size. The commentator noted that after the World Vision van left, his organization was left to console all the children left without new shoes.

Thus, while TOMS performs excellently on the entrepreneurial side of social entrepreneurship, its actual capacity to raise social capital is severely limited by the lack of a

broader-reaching vision to eschew the perpetuation of dependency in its aid. However, with respect to the Haitian production facility, it does seem that TOMS is aware of a need for local direction.

‘Good Aid’

While a holistic, effective vision, of aid can be ascertained from previous sections, to recapitulate, the key traits of poverty reduction aid that promotes local sustainability and development are aid that: (1) avoids stepping on the toes of local industry; (2) empowers, both culturally and economically, the aid recipients; (3) meets needs of recipients rather than dumping donors’ surpluses.

While it may simplistic and inaccurate to broadly claim that ‘x organization is bad’ due to site-to-site variation, with respect to Fundación Paraguaya and TOMS, these characteristics of good aid are fairly visibly apparent or not apparent. As far as undermining local industry, while empirical data on correlation between TOMS’ presence is unavailable, it seems that TOMS’ operations do in fact undermine local production. This criterion seems less applicable to FP, as the organization loans to and works with local industry participants, rather than giving goods.

Regarding the second criterion, TOMS seems to be doing this somewhat with locally-based production in Haiti, and could stand to do much more of this, specifically by focusing more on local production and less on plain giving (that is, more on education and empowerment). Fundación Paraguaya empowers the recipients of their service through education, and entrepreneurial loan granting.

While TOMS may not necessarily have an excess of shoes, TOMS certainly is geared towards producing shoes, and the people served by TOMS’ giving operations certainly have

other needs than shoes. That said, TOMS has expanded in scope of giving, and donates eyewear to those in need- however, as stated, TOMS could focus on more community building education. This criterion is also not necessarily applicable to FP, which does no goods in kind aid- however, their aid is giving what is necessary to small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs.

The Fetish of Social Entrepreneurship and a Vision for Effective Aid

At odds with these chief characteristics of effective aid is the fetish, so to speak, of aid and social entrepreneurship. Rather than fact and empirical analysis of aid, the popular narrative of poverty alleviation is anecdotal. While it is true that data collection and fair representation of an objective reality of the situation is no easy task, the ‘fetish,’ so to speak, of the philanthropist is an easier pill to swallow for the general public funding these initiatives. An illustration of this is the nature of the information TOMS shoes puts out. The vast majority of information on the TOMS website is stories of giving, and Blake Mycoskie’s book focuses on his personal social entrepreneurial journey rather than the realities of his organization (TOMS.com). Fredrik Andersson, in a 2012 article of *Nonprofit Quarterly* agrees:

Viewed from a scholarly perspective, marshaling facts and analyzing data may indeed be the correct or rational way to gain support, but if you want to foster belief, purpose, and passion you are better off using drama and storytelling. It is not difficult to understand that many academics are indeed befuddled by such passion—as a recent research review noted, ‘There tends to be an underlying assumption that these heroic social entrepreneurs will somehow save the world.’ But it is precisely the stories and dramas of successful social entrepreneurs that perpetuate and keep the fetish alive, so that when we hear and think of social entrepreneurship, it is not what is being produced that matters the most but rather what is being *expressed*. (Andersson)

Beyond questioning the narrative of social entrepreneurship in our society, we must question aid itself. A perspective shared by some members of the development community is one of a lessening importance of aid and a greater importance of entry into the global economy. This

positions holds that while aid may prompt development and alleviate poverty, nothing on an aid-giving level can ever raise nations up to a conventional development level expected by those behind aid- that is, if you want widespread medical care, or flat screen tv's, community-driven and national growth is simply not enough. Obviously, this perspective is one with an understanding of embetterment as fiscal-wealth increase.

Furthermore, one must make a decision whether or not to reconcile the negative parts of aid-- chiefly, the perpetuation of neo-colonialism-- at all. If there is no purely good-doing aid, in part due to such erratic variation and bureaucracy within aid-giving organizations, then do we give aid at all? Are we morally obliged to simply operate altogether outside the frameworks of 'aid?'

So what does this leave us with? When the average American, semi-socially conscious, middle-class consumer is of course going to support emotionally moving, story-heavy organizations with sexy products like TOMS, how can we move toward aid that fosters positive growth and cultural survival? While there is no simple, accurate answer, the key is holistic thoughtfulness, and a tendency to think beyond goods-in-kind aid . While we can appreciate the emotional depth of aid anecdotes, we must not be pacified by the stories- we must look at the larger picture, at an objective truth of the complex effects of any aid or action, and cry out for socially entrepreneurial corporations and NGOs alike to be socially responsible and conscientious of the wider effects of their actions- to, as William Easterly, an economics professor at NYU, would put it “...do things that make sense.”

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