Foreign Aid Reading List (188 pages)

Exploring Liberty Discussion Colloquium
Institute for Humane Studies

Reader Abstract: This reader is largely building off the Jeffrey Sachs-William Easterly debate about foreign aid, with a couple of other authors included to complement their arguments. The first two sessions focus solely on the Sachs-Easterly back-and-forth, with the second two sessions bringing in two other perspectives about Western involvement in the Third World, as well as the relationship between aid and despots.

Session I: Two Approaches to Foreign Aid (46 pages)


Session Abstract: This session introduces the debate. Sachs outlines his approach to foreign aid by using the analogy of pediatric medicine, creating the idea that the economy is like an organism that economists and politicians can diagnose and treat with the correct policies. Easterly counters this by introducing the old notion of “white man’s burden” to contextualize modern foreign aid as a cycle of antiquated ideas based on good intentions but with negative consequences. He compares “Planners,” like Sachs, to “Searchers,” like private-sector business people.

Session II: Poverty Traps and the Big Push (44 pages)


Session Abstract: Building off the introductions from the first session, Sachs introduces the idea of the “poverty trap” that suggests that without external aid, the cycle of poverty in third world countries will be impossible to escape from because impoverished people cannot save or invest. Easterly offers a direct critique of the poverty-trap thesis.
Session III: Western Guilt (57 pages)

Easterly, William. “From Colonialism to Postmodern Imperialism.” In *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*, 269-293. New York: Oxford University, 2006.


Session Abstract: This session approaches the debate from a different angle. The Easterly piece suggests that modern foreign involvement is not fundamentally different than historic colonialism, as it is based on similar moral justifications and has similar negative consequences. The Bauer piece suggests that colonialism does not explain third world poverty, and that Western contact has been beneficial to third world countries; however, the West is not “responsible” for helping impoverished countries.

Session IV: Can Foreign Aid Work? (41 pages)


Session Abstract: The final session focuses on the negative consequences that foreign aid can have in foreign governments and war. The Moyo reading argues that foreign aid helps to keep foreign despots and corrupt governments in power, in addition to stifling economic growth. The Easterly chapter gives various examples of how foreign aid contributed to civil wars, such as those in Nicaragua and Angola. His examples also highlight the proxy-wars that third world countries were caught up in during the Cold War, as his examples of aid highlights Communist and Western aid.