A Time for Giving
Brian Zaharatos

The holiday season has now passed and a new year is upon us. But the ‘season of giving’ should not fade into the past with 2012. To see why this is the case, consider the following. According to Economist Jeffery Sachs, a calculation carried out in 2001 revealed that it would have taken $124 billion a year to raise everyone on earth above the absolute poverty line of $1.25 per day per individual. This sounds like a lot of money. But consider that the combined gross annual income of developed nations (the twenty-two members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) in that year was $20 trillion (with a ‘t’). Supposing that these calculations are not far from what is true of the world today, a few additional calculations reveal that the cost of completely eradicating world poverty is, relatively speaking, very low. If each individual in the developed world contributed .62% (that’s point-six-two percent) of his or her income to efficient aid organizations, every human on the planet would be elevated above the absolute poverty line. For an engineer making $50,000 per year, that’s just over $300 per year. To put this in perspective, the average American spends 1% of their income on alcohol—that’s $500 for an individual making $50,000 per year!

Many immediately object to this call for action. They claim, for example, that “the world’s problems are not my problems; why should I spend my hard earned money on people I’ve never met, people who live on the other side of the world?”

There are several compelling replies to this objection; for one, we might note that, as the result of globalization, in a very real sense, the world’s problems are our problems. For example, overpopulation is a problem inextricably linked to global poverty; numerous studies show that, when income and education levels increase, the number of children per mother, and thus overall population, decreases. Thus, alleviation of world poverty is a solution to a problem that will affect you and me.

A second, and perhaps more penetrating reply has to do, not with self-interest, but with our ethical obligations to others. If you think that suffering and death are bad, and if you think that one ought to prevent bad as long as one does not sacrifice something equally bad, then it follows that giving aid to alleviate absolute poverty is morally required. After all, the suffering caused to an individual by malaria or diarrhea (in 2009, diarrhea is estimated to have caused 2.1 million deaths!) is almost certainly worse than the suffering that would be caused to you or I if we refrained from buying a soft drink or a new pair of shoes. Thus, when faced with the choice between those new shoes or a donation to an aid organization, it seems as though you and I have an obligation to donate.

Finally, one might object that aid does not work. Perhaps it is thought that aid organizations are inefficient and foreign governments are corrupt. But this is no excuse. Although this may be true of some organizations and some governments, studies show that there are highly efficient aid organizations that save lives. For more details on these organizations, visit givewell.org or thelifeyoucansave.org. Happy New Year!

---

1 The views presented in this article are derived from Peter Singer’s The Live You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty.