

Book Review: Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails

by Blog Admin

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Despite billions of dollars in foreign aid and the efforts of thousands of NGOs and tens of thousands of aid workers, rebuilding projects across the world remain sluggish. How can humanitarian efforts, intended to help alleviate suffering, fail so badly? **Doing Bad by Doing Good** explores the constraints and realities facing humanitarians. **Olivia Mason** finds that examples and case studies from Haiti, Afghanistan and wider make this a provocative and useful read for development students.

Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails.
Christopher J. Coyne. Stanford University Press. April 2013.

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Using an economic perspective to challenge how we see state-led Government humanitarian aid is the goal of [Christopher J. Coyne's](#) new book. In *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails*, Coyne urges the reader to re-consider state-led humanitarian aid, arguing that in its current state it is doomed. Coyne argues that humanitarian aid fails because it lacks an understanding of its ability and limits, because instead of governments looking at what they can *actually* do, they often focus on what they *should* do. Coyne contends humanitarian aid has boundaries, and often the idealistic and agenda-driven views of politicians mean that it simply cannot deliver results. This book aims to address what is actually happening in humanitarian aid, and provides the facts to argue that state-led humanitarian action is not always the best option.



Coyne writes that previous literature on this topic has focused either on the various aspects of humanitarian action or how to improve long-term economic growth. This book aims to bridge the gap between these two strands and critically analyze humanitarian action while providing alternative economic solutions. Coyne is clear to emphasize this is a positive book, as economics should be a positive examination of what can be accomplished. The book is divided into three parts: in the first Coyne gives a brief history of humanitarian action; in the second part Coyne offers an economic analysis of the limits and realities of state-led humanitarian action; and part three contains some solutions and alternatives to the problems outlined in the book.



Chapter three, 'Adaptability and the Planner's Problem', is enlightening in its detailing of the main problems of state-led humanitarian aid, primarily addressing questions regarding whether aid can ever be sufficient. Coyne uses the example of Haiti, where due to the \$10 billion pledged by governments "the number of NGOs in operations expanded from ten thousand to fifteen thousand" (p.97). Yet more than 300,000 people in Haiti still remain in temporary shelter with poor sanitation. Coyne concludes this failing is due to the allocation of humanitarian aid being comparable to that of a central planning economic system as opposed to a free market system. This creates a key concept in this book, that of the 'planner's problem', whereby a planned economic system results in no feedback to indicate where funds would best be allocated, and a lack of localized knowledge makes a cost analysis of aid difficult. A lack of localized knowledge by those allocating aid is a major weakness, Coyne argues. State-led humanitarian aid will therefore always fail as it follows a top down central planning approach instead of allocating resources on the ground.

In chapter seven, 'Solving the Puzzle', Coyne considers aid given to Afghanistan by the USA throughout the last seventy years. He compares official policy and press quotations from the US Government in the 1950s-70s with quotes from the 2000s to show how the U.S. government has not changed its policies in this time nor learnt from its mistakes, with money given repeatedly to the same failed projects. Coyne argues that governments rely too much on their own agendas and often lack crucial forward thinking. Coyne uses the case of the [Kajaki dam](#) in the Helmand Valley Province, which failed due to a lack of understanding from the U.S. Government about the limits of what could be achieved there. Money was thrown at this project, which lacked political support on the ground and ultimately failed as a wider infrastructure was not put in place.

As well as highlighting these failings Coyne is also able to present solutions to these issues. The final chapter, 'Rethinking the Man of the Humanitarian System', emphasizes the need for both a constrained approach to development and equally the idea of development as discovery, so that "instead of viewing societal development as something that is 'created' or 'planned' through aid and technical expertise, the constrained approach views development as an ongoing process of discovering new and improved allocations of scarce resources" (p. 179). Coyne argues that we need a system which allows a freer market to decide how best to allocate aid. One of the main problems in Iraq in terms of economic development is that it is one of the most difficult places in the world to open a business, therefore Coyne argues that one of the aid priorities should have been to remove barriers to opening a business. Coyne suggests that we need an emphasis on goals such as these to increase economic progress and not just increase economic output.

In conclusion, Coyne's book is an enlightening and thorough critique of humanitarian action. His use of a wide range of examples in many contexts backs his arguments up well and makes this book accessible, and convincingly urges the reader to reconsider state-led aid. While Coyne's suggestions are able to answer back to any who say he is criticizing without offering alternatives.

If any criticisms could be waged, occasionally the book lacked a balanced view. The failings of the U.S. Government are the examples mostly used by Coyne, and this reader is not adequately convinced that the failings of the U.S. Government can be applied to all state-led humanitarian aid projects. Furthermore, the book lacked a clear introduction and conclusion with Coyne too caught up in making his point at times. It would have been useful to have contrasted stories of the failings of humanitarian aid with success stories to give a more balanced argument. However, this book is ultimately engaging, thought-provoking and contains examples from the U.S., the Middle East, and Haiti to offer a well-constructed economic critique of state-led humanitarian aid.

Olivia Mason is a postgraduate student at the University of Glasgow in the school of Geographical Sciences. Her research interests lie in gender, space, and power and feminist methodologies. Previously she has studied the role of tour guides in shaping the tourist gaze in dark tourist destinations in Bosnia. Her current research interests are in female Islamic blogging in the Middle East and how these blogs use emotional narratives to engage readers and create a new political space of active citizenship. [Read more reviews by Olivia.](#)