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The Good Samaritan Project

Addressing the issue of the bystander effect

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THE GOOD SAMARITAN PROJECT: ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

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IDENTIFYING HUMANITY'S MOST PRESSING PROBLEMS



FIGURE 1 - THE 8 MILLENNIUM GOALS AS IDENTIFIED BY THE UNITED NATIONS; THESE REPRESENT HUMANITY'S MOST PRESSING PROBLEMS [3].

Today, billions of people live in underdeveloped countries, where progress is plagued by disease, hunger, thirst, poverty, warfare, and corruption. Despite the many attempts by charities and other humanitarian organizations to aid these societies by bringing them technology and resources, these nations are still struggling to deal with the multitude of problems they face.

Humanitarian organizations from the first world are largely run by a few concerned citizens. To deal with the mounting problems of today's societies, a far greater effort must be given – not only by those in charge, but by all citizens of the developed world.

The United Nations proposed a set of eight *Millennium Development Goals* (figure 1) which were designed to tackle some of humanity's most pressing problems in the new millennium. Of the goals in the list, many of them – such as universal primary education, reducing child mortality, and eradicating hunger – have already been solved, or are under control in the first world.

Year	1992	2002
Aid (\$US, billions)	65	49
Debt (\$US, billions)	1667	2572
Interest (\$US, billions)	83	129

TABLE 1- FOREIGN AID RECEIVED, AND INTEREST AND DEBT PAID BY DEVELOPING NATIONS [6].

Although the goals are slowly being met, many of the developing countries are still stuck in a vicious cycle, since the amount of aid they receive from developed nations is still only 1% of their Gross National Income [2,4]. This amount is not even enough to cover the interest payments on the debt owed to the developed nations [5,6].

According to the CIA World Factbook [1], death rates and child mortality rates are most prevalent in developing countries. Most notably, in Africa, child mortality rates are as high as 10%. HIV/AIDS is present in as much as 38.8% of the population in Swaziland, and the figure is close to that in many similar developing countries. The unemployment rate in some African countries is as high as 80%, leading subsequently to poverty and hunger. A 2007 UN report indicated the need for a strong focus on addressing the needs of developing nations [3]. Despite the fact that humanity has already addressed the majority of these problems in the developed world, they still persist in developing countries.

The core of these problems lie in the fact that they are socio-economic issues, not easily tackled by science and engineering solutions directly. While organizations such as Engineers Without Borders attempts to aid underprivileged people through physical solutions, many of the underlying problems are left untouched.

As a developed society, we have the responsibility to aid our fellow humans. We have the resources, the wealth, and the ability to do so. Unfortunately, we are so caught up in their lives that we do not even stop to think about the conditions of billions of people on the other side of the Earth. In fact, the majority of the privileged in developed countries find themselves too busy to even give any thought to the impoverished homeless that they pass by every day.

If we can overlook even the most blatantly apparent problems staring us directly in the face, how can we be expected to send aid and support to those living across the ocean in the third world? When only a select few in humanitarian aid organizations are doing what is necessary to help solve problems, many members of society feel indifferent to the cause, and choose to ignore them in the hopes that someone else will deal with it.

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

What is it about human nature that allows this shocking phenomenon to occur? Research by Princeton Psychology's John Darley (Ph.D.) reveals something called the Bystander Effect, whereby people, when in groups, tend to ignore problems, sometimes even emergencies, which do not directly affect them [2]. Postulated theories on the cause of this effect include the diffusion of responsibility, unwillingness to get involved in others' problems, and lack of awareness.

It has been shown that the bystander effect is a prevalent factor in human rights abuses and social indifference to third world problems. The bystander effect can be used to describe not only in ignoring the problems of an individual – such as passing by an injured or homeless person – but can also be used to describe a general social ignorance of problems from other countries [9].

Figure 2 depicts a pyramid of problems facing society, starting with those identified by the United Nations at the top. In order to solve these tremendous problems, we must first address the problems located below it. Located at the tip of the pyramid, the cause of many continual problems, is the bystander effect. This problem is one that has become inherent in urban societies around the world. Despite this, we must be able to provide a solution if we are to have any hope of addressing the millennium goals identified by the UN.

Before trying to tackle the world's most pressing problems, we must take a more sensible approach, and start by solving the smaller underlying problems, one at a time.

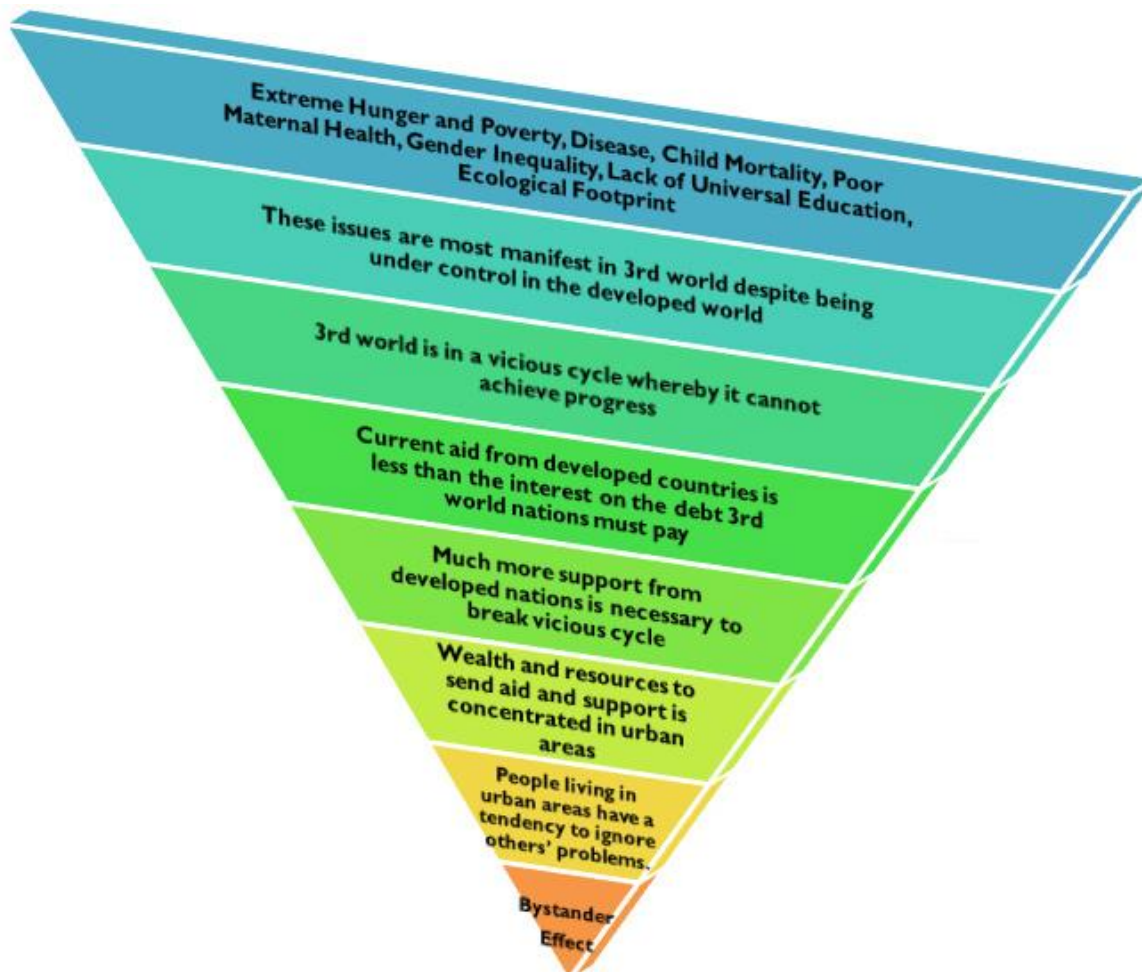


FIGURE 2 - AN INVERTED PYRAMID DISPLAYING THE WORLD'S MOST PRESSING PROBLEMS ON TOP, FOLLOWED BY THE PROBLEMS THAT MUST BE SOLVED BEFORE THE LARGER ONES ARE TACKLED.

A SOLUTION

A solution to the bystander effect in developed nations will bring forth a society of people that are not only aware of the social and economic imbalance between developed and developing nations, but will actively push for change. They will learn to appreciate the standard of living as a fortunate privilege and reach out to ensure that their counterparts in developing worlds can attain the same.

Research on the subject of bystander intervention has shown that the bystander effect is heavily related to an individual's identification with the group being ignored. That is, a person is more likely to help another individual or a group of people if they can identify with them – without relation to relative geographical location [9]. Citizens of the first world may live far away from those in the third world, but as long as they can relate to those in the developing nations, aid can and will be given.

Before developing a solution to the bystander effect, one must consider some criteria with which to judge the design. A “trimtab” solution must be cost effective, scalable, easy to implement, and verifiable. It will satisfy the needs of the problem, and at the same time address the entry criteria of the Buckminster Fuller Challenge.

To combat the bystander effect, one must be able to form compassionate, emotional bonds between different people. If a person can see from the point of view of one in need, then they will be far more likely to help.

James Nachtwey, an influential photojournalist and winner of the 2007 TED Prize, is an example of someone working in this direction. Nachtwey has dedicated his life to taking photographs in war zones and impoverished nations. His personal efforts in documenting wars, epidemics, and important issues in both the developing and developed world have helped many people better identify with those who are in need of aid.

Free the Children, an organization dedicated to aiding children in the third world, focuses on the concept of conveying a global sense of belonging and to help people find self fulfillment in aiding others. Craig and Marc Kielburger, the founders of Free the Children, believe that by spreading compassion, and reaching out to touch the lives of others, the world will become a better place [8].

Establishing identity with developing nations as well as instilling compassion are central to combating the bystander effect. Efforts from the likes of James Nachtwey and Free the Children embody this ideal – however, there is still great room for improvement.

Using the powers of modern mass communication and technology, it is possible not only to have individuals from the first world tell us stories about the developing world, but it is possible to allow those in the developing world most in need of aid tell their own stories, thus creating a more palatable identity to present to the bystanders in the first world.

Cheap, portable electronic implementations such as video cameras, along with the use of existing global communications infrastructures via the internet will allow the underprivileged to share their stories to developed nations with no bias or media censorship. It will be more personal than Nachtwey's approach, yet is more suited to forming the kind of emotional bonds required to

counteract the bystander effect. Such a solution will not require prohibitive sums of money, is easily scalable, and very visible – thus embodying the principles of a trimtab design.

CONCLUSION

Our research has shown that there are a great number of socio-economic problems facing humanity. The majority of these problems cannot be solved with devices from the realm of science and engineering. However, many of these problems have already been solved or are under control in the first world. Instead of targeting the problems directly, we have narrowed the problem down to the bystander effect. By allowing those in the first world to better identify with those in the third world, we hope to increase awareness of the many problems facing humanity, and eradicate our indifference towards others. This newly instilled compassion should lead to more effective aid towards humanity's greatest socio-economic problems.

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