



Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails

Christopher Coyne

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In 2010, Haiti was ravaged by a brutal earthquake that affected the lives of millions. The call to assist those in need was heard around the globe. Yet two years later humanitarian efforts led by governments and NGOs have largely failed. Resources are not reaching the needy due to bureaucratic red tape, and many assets have been squandered. How can efforts intended to help the suffering fail so badly? In this timely and provocative book, Christopher J. Coyne uses the economic way of thinking to explain why this and other humanitarian efforts that intend to do good end up doing nothing or causing harm.

In addition to Haiti, Coyne considers a wide range of interventions. He explains why the U.S. government was ineffective following Hurricane Katrina, why the international humanitarian push to remove Muammar Gaddafi in Libya may very well end up causing more problems than prosperity, and why decades of efforts to respond to crises and foster development around the world have resulted in repeated failures.

In place of the dominant approach to state-led humanitarian action, this book offers a bold alternative, focused on establishing an environment of economic freedom. If we are willing to experiment with aid—asking questions about how to foster development as a process of societal discovery, or how else we might engage the private sector, for instance—we increase the range of alternatives to help people and empower them to improve their communities. Anyone concerned with and dedicated to alleviating human suffering in the short term or for the long haul, from policymakers and activists to scholars, will find this book to be an insightful and provocative reframing of humanitarian action.

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