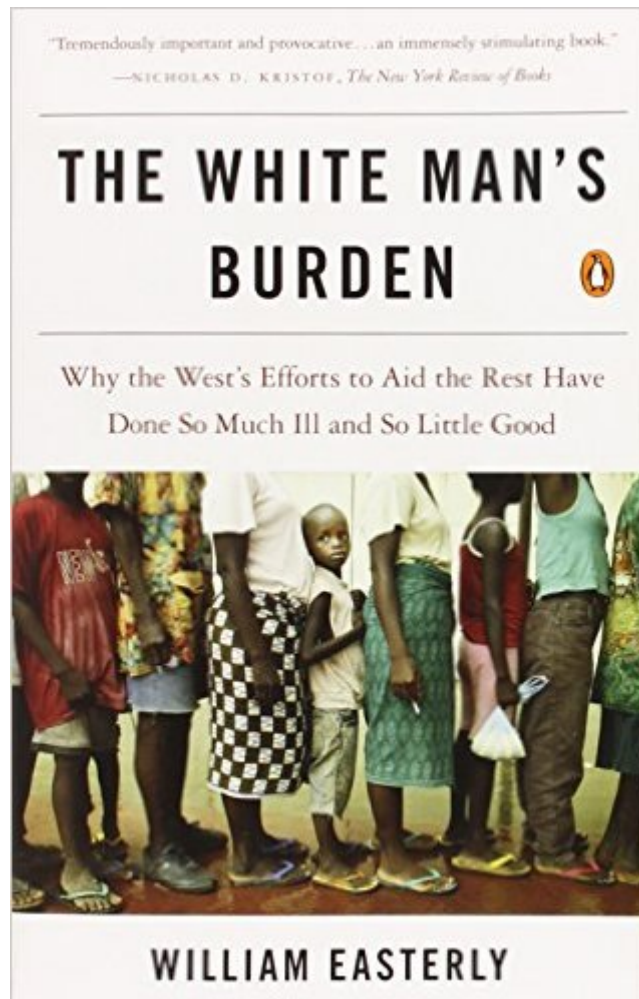


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The White Man's Burden: Why The West's Efforts To Aid The Rest Have Done So Much Ill And So Little Good



Synopsis

From one of the world's best-known development economists; an excoriating attack on the tragic hubris of the West's efforts to improve the lot of the so-called developing world. In his previous book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, William Easterly criticized the utter ineffectiveness of Western organizations to mitigate global poverty, and he was promptly fired by his then-employer, the World Bank. *The White Man's Burden* is his widely anticipated counterpunch; a brilliant and blistering indictment of the West's economic policies for the world's poor. Sometimes angry, sometimes irreverent, but always clear-eyed and rigorous, Easterly argues that we in the West need to face our own history of ineptitude and draw the proper conclusions, especially at a time when the question of our ability to transplant Western institutions has become one of the most pressing issues we face.

Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (February 27, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143038826

ISBN-13: 978-0143038825

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.9 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (111 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #31,464 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) [#39 in](#) Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Political Economy [#41 in](#) Books > Business & Money > International > Economics [#44 in](#) Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Poverty

Customer Reviews

William Easterly, a New York University economics professor who previously worked at the World Bank, divides the international development aid community into two groups: there are planners, who have grandiose large-scale utopian plans for ending poverty, and there are searchers, who favor piecemeal interventions by finding things that actually work. Planners have good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry out their plan or hold anyone responsible for getting results. Searchers, on the other hand, find out first what the poor need then try to meet the demand. Easterly has special contempt for aging rock stars such as Bono and Bob Geldof for soliciting money for large

anti-poverty programs, but he gets apoplectic when he talks about Jeffrey Sachs' book "The End of Poverty" - which he gave a scathing review in the Washington Post. Easterly does not believe that ending poverty is a valid policy goal. He says its like mandating that a cow should win the Kentucky Derby. Anger brings out some strange analogies. Sachs represents everything that Easterly thinks is wrong with the development community. To drive home the point, Easterly argues how "the West spent \$2.3 trillion in foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get 12 cent medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get \$4 bed nets to poor families. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get \$3 to each new mother to prevent five million child deaths." Easterly likes repeating the \$2.3 trillion to emphasize how the West keeps spending and getting very meager results. Let me add one of my own: the US has incurred \$2.3 trillion worth of new debt in the last five years with very little to show for it. The question is: does this spending do good or ill? What would Africa and the rest of the developing world look like if this money had not been spent? Would they be prosperous and democratic? Easterly fails to explain why aid has done "so much ill." It is pretty obvious that many of the grand development schemes of the planners have failed, but it is not obvious that these societies would have been better off without aid. The critique of large-scale planning made in the West may appeal, at first glance, to free traders who call for market solutions to solve the problems associated with poverty. However, he is also critical of those who attempt to "plan" markets. (Think of Sachs' "big bang" market schemes for Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.) His years at the World Bank have made him very cynical about imposing "Washington Consensus" on other countries. The approach favored by Easterly is to examine each culture individually and offer aid specific to local conditions. Sounds good. He offers many case studies that are very compelling, yet it is difficult to draw many conclusions because they are specific to each situation. Many of his case studies showed that aid administered actually helped rather than hindered development. One of the conclusions drawn, however, is that healthcare and primary education are two areas where aid has been successful. In the end, Easterly and Sachs have more in common than Easterly would like to acknowledge. They both believe that it is important for the West to give aid to the rest, and that it is important that those providing aid get results and be held accountable. Where they differ is that Easterly adamantly believes that the large scale planning administered by organizations such as the UN and the World Bank will never reach the people that need it. He might be right. This book is an important contribution to reforming the development community.

Easterly's central theme is that the West is spending a fortune on foreign aid yet cheap simple things (bed nets for \$4, malaria medicine at 20c a dose) don't get delivered to the poor. Increasing spending isn't the answer as it isn't lack of money that is causing these failures. Easterly lays the blame on high-level utopian planning that is far too disjoint from what the poor need. He presents data that shows that economic success isn't tied to aid delivery and that aid programs have done very little to help the poor. But the West keeps applying the same broken formulas. Easterly asserts that what is needed isn't more money, but better spending. Easterly argues that it is easy to dream up grand utopian plans, but these are typically focused on making the donors feel good and ignore the realities of actual local situations and needs. There is no feedback loop from the intended recipients, so money is easily lost or wasted. He argues that more aid should be driven by what he calls "Searchers" (bottom-up pragmatists) and much less by "Planners" (top-down bureaucrats). The West shouldn't seek to reform countries or economies wholesale. Rather it should work on delivering lots of piecemeal localized improvements that can be individually analyzed, evaluated, and either abandoned or refined. He gives examples of the vast bureaucratic efforts spent on aid summits, planning frameworks and reports. These consume lots of energy in both the aid organizations and (worse) in the over-burdened target governments. He recycles the amusing point that if you apply the standard doctrines of two of the largest aid agencies (the World Bank and the IMF) to the aid process itself, they would insist that it abandon central planning and grand schemes and instead move to privatization and market-based mechanisms. He observes that many of the target governments are wildly dysfunctional. Aid money (like oil revenue) is treated as a resource that can be exploited. However, in his proposed solutions he tends to ignore that aspect. If governments have a tendency to steal or mispend their aid budgets, then donor groups are bound to demand detailed plans and reports. And I doubt if those governments will tolerate groups that try to bypass them. Unfortunately it is exactly those countries with the worst governments that most need help. Easterly sometimes comes across as overly dogmatic in his emphasis on "Searchers" and his attacks on "Planners". However he does a good job of making his core points: the West should show much more humility, avoid grand plans and look for detailed programs that actually help the poor and allow for both feedback and remedy.

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