High-income countries (HICs) have traditionally provided significant amounts of international aid for lower and middle-income countries (LMICs). In today’s economic and political climate, international aid has fallen to the wayside as the citizens of HICs face domestic problems of unprecedented magnitude. International aid is commonly perceived as a purely charitable act; however, the social sciences have firmly established that the HICs are to blame—at least to some extent—for the vast disparity in standard-of-living between HICs and LMICs. Thus, international aid should not be seen as charity, but instead rectification. An overwhelming body of evidence points to the actions of HICs from the 18th century to the present day as a primary cause of global inequality and endemic poverty found in LMICs; thus, HICs have a duty to rectify the harm they have caused LMICs.

The 18th century marks the beginning of the industrial revolution and contemporary globalization, laying the foundations for the markedly unequal distribution of wealth seen today (Marks 2007). Prior to the 18th century, China and India were the world’s economic superpowers, producing over 60% of world GDP. By 1900, their share had dropped to just 10%, while Europe’s rose to 80% (Milanovic 2006). This dramatic reversal of fortunes was accomplished through the ad-hoc creation of a global economic and political system that provided the West with unrivaled advantage at the expense of the rest; widespread and systematic European conquest of Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Milanovic 2006). Starting in 1760, Britain engaged South Asian states for the creation of an Indian colony. Established and productive ways of livelihood were usurped for British interests, namely for the production of British cash crops such as cotton and opium (Marks 2007). China, an eminent military power at the time, was weakened and eventually subjugated by Britain through a robust combination
of economic, political, and social policies that undermined Chinese power internally and internationally (Marks 2007). While China was never fully colonized, it saw an “informal imperialism” through military influence and economic dominance by Western powers (Marks 2007). The Americas underwent wholesale European colonization, with 90% of the native population dying in the process (Marks 2007). With the discovery of resources such as silver and tobacco, immense amounts of wealth were exported from the colonies, causing irreparable damage to the land and its people. “The scramble for Africa” began in 1813, with Europeans dividing the continent with little regard to the traditional lands of its people—a legacy that causes much bloodshed to this day (Marks 2007). With slavery, subjugation, and colonialism, the rise of HICs caused immeasurable harm to LMICs—historical evidence for this claim is so overwhelming that denial is all but impossible.

Though history speaks clearly of the harm HICs have caused LMICs, some philosophical theories consider this irrelevant. “Time-slice theory” and others like it argue that history is too distant to factor into the ethical considerations of the present (Nozick 1968). However, a strong argument exists that HICs are actively harming LMICs in the present day (Pogge 2002). Agricultural subsidies in HICs are a pertinent example of present harm towards LMICs. The developed world spends an average of $318 billion each year to subsidize the operations of farmers and other food-related industries, dramatically lowering production costs in HICs (UNFAO 2003). Thus, HICs dominate the global food market, exporting to nations whose own farmers cannot compete, despite their willingness to work for marginal wages (Milanovic 2006). Agriculture is labor-intensive but requires little start-up capital and technical skill; it is one of the few industries poor nations can be competitive in, as they have abundant cheap and unskilled labor (UNFAO 2003). Thus, HICs’ agricultural subsidies prevent LMICs from being competitive in the global economy, promoting the cycle of perpetual poverty (Milanovic 2006; UNFAO 2003).
Academics point to neoliberalism for a broader example of the harm HICs are currently inflicting upon LMICs. The central tenant in neoliberal ideology is economic liberalization, promoting initiatives such as free trade, privatization, and deregulation. Since the mid-20th century, neoliberalism has dominated world economics and geopolitics, with institutions such as the WTO, IMF, and World Bank at the forefront (World Bank 2006; Milanovic 2006). While economic liberalization in itself may not be inherently flawed, the way it has been enacted through neoliberalism has been deeply inequitable (Pogge 2002). In essence, HICs have used neoliberal reforms to protect their economies from cheap imports, while LMICs have been forced to open their markets to the likes of Coca-Cola and McDonalds (Pogge 2002; Stuckler et al. 2012). International initiatives meant to equalize trade policy, such as the Uruguay and Doha rounds, have instead furthered the advantages of HICs (Milanovic 2006). The UN estimates that LMICs could export $700 billion more annually if HICs were to adopt equitable trade policies—an immense help for LMICs at comparatively little cost for HICs (Pogge 2002). The previously-mentioned multinational institutions that were responsible for neoliberal reform are headquartered in and dominated by HICs; though they are ostensibly global institutions, it is clear that the balance of power is skewed towards HICs, inflicting significant harm to LMICs.

Opponents to global redistribution, such as James Fishkin, argue that what needs to accomplished is too demanding for HICs (Fishkin 1982). It could be argued that global rectification lies above the “cutoff for heroism,” as in absolute terms, the price tag for an effective wealth redistribution scheme is immense, and doing so could be easily construed as “heroic.” To eliminate absolute poverty (persons subsisting ≤ US$2/day), it would cost an estimated $300 billion annually—just 1.2% of HICs’ GDP, and comparable to the amount spent on rich-world agricultural subsidies (Pogge 2002). Furthermore, the elimination of inequitable trade policies and agricultural subsidies would just be change in policy and be of no (direct)
cost to the rich world’s coffers. Though there would undoubtedly be negative economic impacts for HICs, they would pale in comparison to the positive impacts for LMICs; a real chance at escaping poverty, or at the very least, $700 billion of additional exports. The costs of rectification are truly negligible for HICs, considering that the cost of eliminating poverty—an unprecedented humanitarian achievement—is just 3/10\(^{th}\) of the US Military’s 2012 budget (White House 2012). Others may argue that rectification lies under the “robust zone of moral indifference.” This may be true at the level of individual charitable contributions, however, rectification is only feasible if done through governmental channels, and if so, renders redistribution as equivalent to anything else in HICs’ tax schemes, expenditures, and general policy.

The world is entering its fourth century of being in a state of dramatic inequality. The actions of developed nations (and their predecessors) have been actively harming lesser-developed nations since the 18\(^{th}\) century to the present day. Considering the enormity of this problem, and the relatively negligible costs of fixing it, the rich world has a moral imperative for redistribution that is grounded in the widely-accepted moral code of rectification. Doing so would end the world’s biggest and longest-running humanitarian crisis, ending the suffering of billions. Furthermore, the benefits of a prosperous and more equal world would extend to HICs, as there will be more opportunities for economic, political, and cultural exchange.
Works Cited


