

From the introduction to *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging effects of foreign aid and international charity*

by Michael Maren

This book is about aid and charity--aid and charity as an industry, as religion, as a self-serving system that sacrifices its own practitioners and intended beneficiaries in order that it may survive and grow. Much of this book is centered in Somalia, but it draws on my experiences with aid organizations over nineteen years around Africa: in places such as Kenya, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Like most people in the United States and Western Europe, I've heard the pleas of aid organizations and boasts of their accomplishments in the Third World, but the Africa I know today is in much worse shape than it was when I first arrived. The futures of Africa's children are less hopeful than ever before. The countries that received the most aid--Somalia, Liberia, and Zaire--have slid into virtual anarchy. Another large recipient, Kenya, inflicts unspeakable abuses of human rights on their own citizens while aid pays the bills.

In Africa, the people who are supposed to benefit from aid see what is happening. They hear foreigners talking about development, but they know development was a colonial policy. Development was a policy of subjugation. When colonials came ashore, they didn't say, "We're here to steal your land and take your resources and employ your people to clean our toilets and guard our big houses." They said, "We're here to help you." And then they went and took their land and resources and hired their people to clean their toilets. And now here come the aid workers, who move into the big colonial houses and ride in high cars above the squalor, all the while insisting they've come to help.

As in colonial times, the foreigners employ an elite cadre of locals to carry out their work. The elites are rewarded for their relationships with the foreigners. They enjoy higher pay than most. They have access to foreign goods, education and visas to foreign countries. And, just as in colonial times, the foreigners use this elite as their link to the rest of the population. They are regarded as the voice of the people and employed to speak on their behalf. In reality, however, the elite, with their vested interests in the system, tell the foreigners exactly what they want to hear: The system is good; the system works.

Thus affirmed, the aid establishment moves forward, as the colonial one did, ignorant of the widening rift between them and the supposed recipients of their beneficence.

In 1981, I left Kenya to take a job with USAID in Somalia. I knew little of what was going on in Somalia except that perhaps a million and a half refugees had entered the country fleeing the Ogaden war in Ethiopia. The world was mobilizing to help. I thought it was a good opportunity to try something new and get a fresh start in a different country. Alert to the corrupt and politicized aid business in Kenya, I felt ready to deal with the situation in Somalia.

I had learned to view development aid with skepticism, a skill I had hoped to put to good use to help ensure that aid projects, at worst, didn't hurt people. But Somalia added a whole new dimension to my view of the aid business. My experience there made me see that aid could be worse than incompetent and inadvertently destructive. It could be positively evil.