

A FILM REVIEW OF *POVERTY INC.*

by Meghan Mendelin

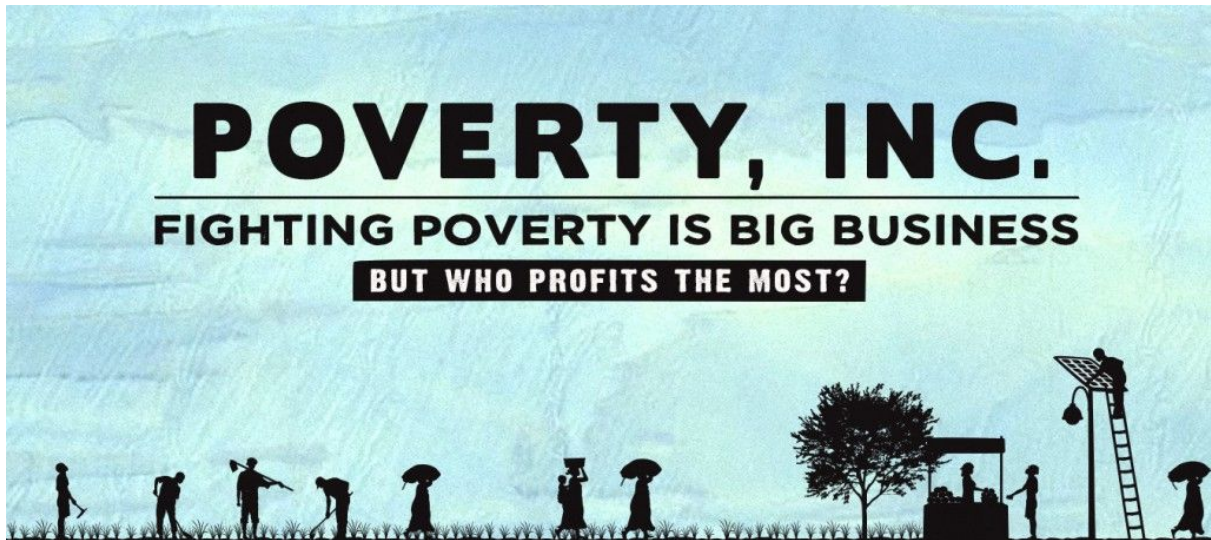


Image source: Huber, Ryan 2016, *Medium*

The 2014 critically acclaimed film *Poverty, Inc.*, directed by Michael Matheson Miller, examines the fundamental flaws of the development industry's common practices, and its role in perpetuating impoverished conditions in the Global South. The film deconstructs the widespread notion of 'doing good' by demonstrating the unintended harmful consequences of many mainstream development and anti-poverty initiatives. Through numerous interviews with professionals and scholars in international development and local actors in developing countries, *Poverty, Inc.* relays the complex topic of paternalistic development discourse in a highly accessible manner, provoking its audience to reflect on how they themselves may be perpetuating harmful conceptions of 'doing good'. While the film fails to address significant structural causes for global inequality, and propagates a somewhat problematic pro-capitalist approach to poverty reduction, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution in the effort to de-paternalize the development discourse.

DECONSTRUCTING 'DOING GOOD': AN UNNOVEL, YET NECESSARY ENDEAVOUR

Poverty, Inc. critically examines popular poverty alleviation initiatives, including humanitarian relief, foreign aid, celebrity endorsement and international adoption, and successfully reveals the harmful consequences that can arise from these well-intended practices. The film uses post-2010 Haiti as a primary case study for how the development industry often creates dependencies that hinder domestic production and economic growth. In the last decade, Haiti has witnessed an influx of hundreds of NGOs, whose temporary disaster relief efforts have evolved into permanent provisions of free goods to Haitian society, thus thwarting many domestic business endeavors. The film thereby effectively depicts how 'do-good' initiatives by NGOs can actually cause harm, when their own interests are prioritized over those of the supposed beneficiaries.

International adoption is also scrutinized, through the example of an American couple who travelled to Haiti with the intention of adopting a child, but end up starting a jewellery-making business that employs local Haitians with the purpose of allowing them to earn enough money to take care of their children. The film therefore portrays a classic example of two well-intentioned Western individuals who lack a proper understanding of the local context in which they wish to 'do good'. It also shows viewers the importance of practicing self-reflection and educating oneself when engaging in development work, as well as the importance of empowering local actors through employment rather than charity to promote self-sufficiency. Celebrity endorsement of humanitarian action is also considered through the case of Bono, who has played an influential role in aid advocacy and raising awareness for charity campaigns. His endorsement is depicted as problematic in perpetuating false notions of 'doing good', such as sustained foreign aid and fundraising efforts through songs about 'Africa'.

For development scholars, the film's illumination of the flaws of the development industry is no novel revelation. *Poverty, Inc.*'s anecdotes of 'doing good gone wrong' are classic examples with which students of development studies are all too familiar. Foreign aid, for example, has been critiqued for its ineffectiveness and role in perpetuating unequal North-South relations by a number of development scholars and professionals, notably Moyo (2010), Calderisi (2006), and Easterly (2007), among others. Celebrity endorsement has also been subject to criticism for its self-serving interest as a marketing technique for preserving a positive public image (e.g. Barnes and Goodman 2011), and its role in perpetuating hierarchical ideologies (e.g. Hall, Shah and Carr 2014). Nonetheless, *Poverty, Inc.* serves as an effective overview of the harmful effects of Western-dominated approaches to development by addressing the most fundamental flaws of 'doing good' practices that have been highlighted in development academia, with which non-development academics may be unfamiliar. Moreover, considering that despite an abundance of scholarly critiques the top-down development practices depicted in *Poverty, Inc.* continue to exist, the film remains a highly relevant and necessary resource.

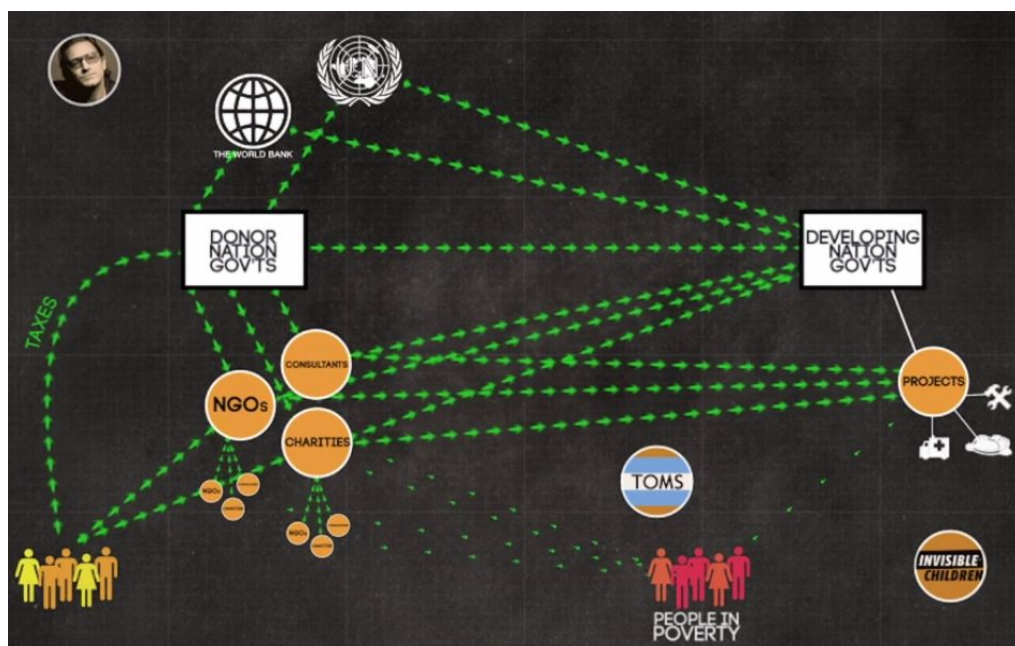


Image source: Miller Michael Matheson, 2014, *Poverty, Inc.*

Description: *Poverty, Inc.*'s visualization of the international aid industry network

NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM: A PROBLEMATIC POVERTY SOLUTION PROPOSAL

A major shortcoming of *Poverty, Inc.* lies in its proposal of an alternative way to promoting development and ending poverty. Through numerous interviews with scholarly experts, such as Hernando de Soto (Miller 2014, 1:18:04), Muhammad Yunus (Miller 2014, 1:08:42) and Paul Collier (Miller 2014, 1:10:57), as well as local entrepreneurs in developing countries, the film proposes that the solution to ending poverty lies in facilitating entrepreneurship through establishing solid domestic rule of law and property rights, and spurring the integration of developing countries into the world market. This proposed solution fails to address significant structural issues that perpetuate unequal relations between the West and the developing world, and is situated in a pro-neoliberal capitalist framework. Here, I adopt David Harvey's (2007) definition of neoliberalism as a "theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade", and in which state interventions must be kept to a bare minimum (p. 22-23). This is problematic in several ways.

First, the proposal that entrepreneurship and spurring global market integration is an alternative and more effective way in development than contemporary Western-dominated approaches is somewhat contradictory. Facilitating entrepreneurship and global market integration are key elements of neoliberal capitalism, a Western-invented project aimed to foster prosperity that has dominated Western policy-making since the 1980s (Peck and Tickell 2002). Therefore, while the film attempts to deconstruct Western notions of development, its proposed solution still falls within Western epistemology. Moreover, by situating the solution to poverty within a neoliberal capitalist

framework, the film disregards other, non-Western based, yet successful approaches to development and economic growth. The most notable example of countries that followed a non-integration based approach to development is that of the Asian Tigers, including South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong (Paldam 2003). Mentions of these cases could have enhanced the audience's understanding of alternative paths to development that are not based on a replication of the Western model.

Second, the film's pro-neoliberal capitalist proposal is somewhat flawed in that it pinpoints the facilitation of entrepreneurship and integration into the world market as a way to alleviate poverty, yet does not address why extreme rates of poverty persist in Western countries such as the United States. The latter has firmly established property rights and legal institutions, and is well integrated into global markets, yet has one of the highest rates of poverty of the OECD countries (Alston 2018). The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in the United States estimates 40 million Americans to be living in poverty in his 2018 report (Alston 2018). This indicates a lack of understanding of the class relations that underpin capitalist societies, in which, scholars have argued, wealth accumulation necessitates the dispossession and impoverishment of the poor (e.g. Rist 2007, Seabrook 1988). Although this oversight is understandable considering the non-academic nature of the medium, class relations are nonetheless a crucial structural consideration when designing alternative development approaches.

Finally, proposing that developing countries' integration into global free trade is a foolproof way to promote development is rather optimistic. Numerous studies have elucidated the harm that can come from developing countries' integration into global free trade, due to the unequal power relations that permeate the

World Trade Organization (e.g. Bribena 2018), the exploitative nature in which resource-rich developing nations are integrated into the world trading system (e.g. Surin 2000), and the harmful effects of the arrival of multi-national corporations that significantly disadvantage local producers (e.g. O'Hearn 2003). Global market integration as a pro-neoliberal capitalist solution therefore disregards these underlying structural issues of the world trading system, which perpetuate unequal relations between developed and developing nations.

TOWARDS A DE-PATERNALIZED DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Although *Poverty, Inc.*'s proposed alternative approach to development is problematic in its failure to address crucial structural issues and in promoting pro-neoliberal capitalist mechanisms, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution in the effort to de-paternalize the development discourse. The film successfully relays the detrimental impacts of paternalistic conceptions of 'doing good' by providing its audience with a critical and comprehensive overview of the development industry's contemporary practices in an accessible, non-academic manner. *Poverty, Inc.* thereby complements an abundance of critiques that development scholars have put forth in the realm of academia. Yet, despite these critiques, top-down approaches to poverty relief persist. Perhaps this is partly because the harmful consequences of 'doing good' practices are largely unknown to ordinary, non-development educated global citizens, who trust that powerful actors in the philanthropy sector such as Bono and Bill Gates would only engage in effective poverty relief practices. Thus, the persistence of top-down development approaches indicates the need to continually produce content that seeks to demonstrate the detrimental impact of paternalistic development work, particularly through non-academic and accessible resources such as *Poverty, Inc.*, in order to shed light on the harmfulness of paternalism in the development industry.

Visit *Poverty, Inc.*'s website to watch the film and for a Q&A with the filmmaker at <https://www.povertyinc.org/>.

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