



## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Just hanging out reading the paper ... more than 160ft above the ground. This is the Highline Meeting Monte Piana, an annual festival for extreme sports enthusiasts in which people can clamber along a 685ft long rope stretched over ravines in the Dolomite mountains of northeastern Italy – and then get comfortable in a brightly coloured hammock to read, have a chat, take a nap or even play guitar.

# The West's aid illusion is betraying the world's poor

As UK foreign aid increases to £16bn, William Easterly argues that promoting freedom is a surer way to end poverty than providing vitamins and clean water

The farmers in Mubende, Uganda, never saw it coming. On the morning of Sunday, February 28, 2010, soldiers arrived while they were in church. Hearing gunshots, they rushed to their houses, which were already in flames.

While some soldiers kept the farmers at gunpoint to stop them trying to save their homes, others poured petrol over the recent grain harvest in the barns and burnt that as well. One eight-year-old child was trapped and died. The dairy cows were dispatched with a burst of machinegun fire.

Then the soldiers marched more than 20,000 farmers away at gunpoint. Never come back, they were told; the land is no longer yours. The farmers, many of whose homesteads had been in their families for generations, were unhappy to learn that a British company was taking their land. It was going to grow forests and then sell the timber.

The farmers were even more distressed to learn that the World Bank had financed and promoted the project. The farmers might have hoped that publicity would help them. And indeed a year later Oxfam published a report on what had happened. The New York Times ran a story on the report on September 21, 2011. The next day the World Bank promised an investigation. But as we approach the event's sixth anniversary the World Bank has never had to answer publicly for its role.

The rights violated here include property rights, freedom to choose your own economic activities and constitutional rights that guarantee your human rights against government abuses.

Those of us who believe economists should openly consider moral values such as human rights

have no claim to self-righteousness – many of us came embarrassingly late to such an argument anyway – and we respect those of the opposite view. The important thing is just that a serious debate should happen – on both sides.

Economists do also debate a scientific hypothesis about rights, that economic and political rights also constitute the best system for ending poverty. Here's roughly how the theory goes: with property rights, farmers choose for themselves what is the best use of their land. They know their own circumstances better than outside experts, and they have the incentive to use the land in a way that is best for them and their customers.

With political rights we can hold our governments accountable, to respect and protect our economic rights, and to meet any of our needs that can be addressed only by public services, such as health services or supplies of clean water.

The neglect of poor people's rights in foreign aid and development has deep historical roots. The

Mubende story has elements that go far back into the history of Africa.

The western powers justify their support of oppressive rulers such as Uganda's by support of humanitarian objectives such as relief from hunger and disease. This is ironic, because if the theory sketched above is correct, dictators that deny individuals freedom are not part of the solution; they are the cause of the poverty in the first place.

There was a similar story back in the days when the western colonial powers were themselves the oppressive rulers, often governing through African intermediaries. They justified the continuation of colonial rule because of its ability to provide technical solutions to hunger and disease and asked humanitarians to ignore the political issues such as colonialism versus self-determination. In 1938 a report by Lord Hailey on British colonial rule in Africa already had the same technical answers that we have today on malaria, malnutrition and clean water.

Hailey justified colonial rule as necessary to these technocratic solutions, in which the British Empire would join the "movement for the betterment of the backward peoples of the world". He made the argument that poor people did not care about their political rights: "Political liberties are meaningless unless they can be built upon a better foundation of social and economic progress."

When British humanitarians asked, "What should we do to end poverty?", Hailey wanted them to focus on answers such as vitamin A capsules for malnutrition and boreholes for clean water. He wanted them to embrace the technocratic illusion that humanitarians could ignore political issues such as colonialism. He did not want them to ask whether colonialism might be perpetuating poverty, not solving it.

A better answer to "What should we do to end poverty?" might have been "We should end our own colonialism". If we are going to criticise rights violations today, let's not neglect to criticise our own governments. Let's examine even ourselves as development workers and experts and philanthropists as voices in the global debate on autocracy versus freedom.

Bill Gates praised the Ethiopian government in 2013 for setting "clear goals, choosing an approach, measuring results and then using those measurements to continually refine our approach". Gates said that this "helps us to deliver tools and services to everybody who will benefit".

His foundation has spent more than \$265m (£175m) on health and development in Ethiopia over the past decade. He said that he "had a great working relationship" with the late Ethiopian autocrat Meles Zenawi, whose policies "made real progress in helping the people of Ethiopia". Gates is very much embracing the technocratic illusion;

he seems unaware of the argument that dictators do not cause progress; they cause poverty.

Similarly, celebrities who advocate development usually call for more technical solutions and seldom highlight violations of liberty for the poor by the West or by local governments.

Expert plans accomplish little; advocacy for freedom can accomplish much more. Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream". He did not say, "I have a plan". The good news is that freedom is advancing in Africa despite western support for oppressors. The desire for freedom around the world is so strong as to make progress despite the technocratic illusion of western poverty experts that makes them blind to freedom for the world's poor.

In 1988 there were only two African countries classified as politically free by the advocacy organisation Freedom House. In 2012 there were 11. Freedom House divides the rest between "partly free" and, for the most ruthless dictatorships, "not free". In 1988 there were 31 "not free"; in 2012 the number had reduced to 18.

In Africa increased economic freedom has allowed strong economic growth since the mid-1990s. One positive sign is a private sector explosion of mobile phones – Africa now has more than twice as many subscribers as America.

Let me go back to that unavoidable question "What should we do to end poverty?". If you really insist on an answer to what "we" should do, I will give you a constructive answer: we should dismiss the technocratic illusion, and openly join the battle of values on the side of freedom against dictatorships.

This includes convincing voters in Britain and America not to tolerate violations of the freedom of the world's poor by our own foreign policy, by our own military, by our own immigration policies and by our own aid agencies.

Freedom is winning, but the battle is far from over. We must convince many more that all people everywhere – women and men, black and white, rich and poor – deserve to be free at last.

The author is a professor of economics at New York University. This article is based on his Hayek Memorial Lecture, to be delivered at the Institute of Economic Affairs on Wednesday

## QUOTES OF THE WEEK



*I bet you didn't think things would get worse*

*The former Labour leader Ed Miliband delivers an unhelpful verdict on his successor*

*Please, can parents realise that children don't rule the world*

*Let's ban youngsters from cafes and restaurants, says the broadcaster Janet Street-Porter*

*If you don't show your underwear, you're just not cool*

*The designer Tommy Hilfiger (who has a range of undies) urges men to flaunt their boxers*

*Any imbecile who has learnt to type thinks he can write*

*Computers seem to be destroying literacy, complains the author Raymond Briggs*

## Poet's corner

**Inversnaid** by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89)

This darksome burn, horseback brown, His rollock highroad roaring down, In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-broth Turns and twindles over the broth Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning, It rounds and rounds despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through, Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern, And the beadbony ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, O let them be left, wildness and wet; Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

A Highland stream passes over a waterfall into a lake. The end is a plea to preserve such a wilderness. Hopkins uses Scottish dialect ("degged" is sprinkled; "braes" a steep bank) and coins his own words. "Coop" is an enclosed hollow, "comb" a wave crest, "twindles" twists and dwindles, "groins" curves, "heathpacks" clumps of heather, "flitches" usually the side of an animal, but here flicks, and "beadbony" beautifully beaded. "Bonnet" is a sail as well as a hat. This contorted, obscure language makes the poem a challenge, but it is also where its compelling power lies. poetry@sunday-times.co.uk

David Mills

Celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, who try to help developing countries, would do well to highlight states that violate the liberty of their people



JASON TANNER