

Hardin Against Famine Relief

1. Garrett Hardin on Lifeboat Ethics: Consider the birth rates (i.e., the average # of children that each woman has) of the top five vs the bottom five nations, according to the [Human Development Index](#). ([source](#)) [*For reference: (13) United States – 1.8*]

(1) Norway	-	1.7	(185) Burundi	-	5.5
(2) Switzerland	-	1.5	(186) Chad	-	5.8
(3) Australia	-	1.8	(187) Central African Republic	-	4.8
(4) Ireland	-	1.8	(188) South Sudan	-	4.8
(5) Germany	-	1.6	(189) Niger	-	7.0

Clearly, affluence/well-being and birth rate are strongly correlated. Simply put, the very worst off are reproducing much more quickly than the very well off. So, Hardin notes: If the people in affluent nations were to feed the poor, what would begin as each affluent individual feeding only one impoverished person would, after one generation, result in one person feeding THREE, and (in two generations) one person feeding NINE. Etc.

In short, if we aid people in impoverished countries, the amount of resources allotted to each person will get smaller and smaller over time as the poor populations continue to grow. Basically, Hardin says, if we help the poor, soon we will ALL be poor. The problem of starvation and overpopulation would just get worse until the poor have eventually depleted everything. This is the nature of any animal. Hardin likens the Earth to a **lifeboat**—we simply cannot let everyone on, or it will sink.

The Tragedy of the Commons: Historically, in many of the first settlements, there was a common grazing area where everyone could let their cows out to graze. It would have worked if everyone only let a few of their cattle onto the land. But, people were often greedy and all started overgrazing the land. Pretty soon, the commons area was useless. The lesson here is that, if all of the rich countries pooled their excess resources to create a “common” food bank, the poor people would just deplete it carelessly until the world’s food source was ruined for everyone, and everyone is worse off because of it.

The solution to world poverty: The conclusion is that we should stop sending aid to these poor countries. We are only making the problem worse by doing so. Human beings are animals, and like any other animal, over-population is best solved naturally when the excess animals die of starvation. This is not a call to abolish generosity. While Hardin’s suggestion may seem un-generous to the PRESENT generation, it IS generous to all of the FUTURE generations who will benefit if we stop trying to feed starving people, which just makes the problem worse. If we stop feeding the poor, the problem will resolve itself.

It seems that Hardin's argument appeals to the fact that there would be LESS total suffering if we let the presently starving people die off than there would be if we continued to feed them (because this will just lead to MORE starving people in the future). We can attempt to formalize his argument like so:

1. We ought to minimize the total amount of suffering.
2. If we feed the poor, this will result in MORE total suffering than if we just let the poor die.
3. Therefore, we ought not feed the poor (rather, we ought to let them die).

2. Harrett Gardin (Michael Patton) on Game Preserve Ethics: Hardin claims that, if we feed starving people, they will only reproduce and create an even bigger, hungrier NEXT generation that will face an even WORSE problem than the current generation. Hardin made a call to stop all foreign aid and let evolution take over. Only the societies that are able to sustain themselves will survive, and those that cannot will die. This is the only way to fix the problem. (Or so Hardin thought)

The Solution: Consider premise 1 of Hardin's argument. If we were REALLY concerned about minimizing suffering and doing the most generous thing for future generations, we should start hunting and killing starving people. Third world countries should invite rich Westerners to pay money to hunt down and kill their impoverished citizens for sport. These "human safaris" would have the following benefits, which are all better than merely letting the poor die off:

- Charging money for licenses to go on human safaris would bring in outside money into poor countries (and other tourist money, for guides, food, supplies, etc.).
- Bullets would put starving people out of their misery in a way that is less painful than starvation.
- They would reduce the excess population quickly, and benefit future generations in those countries, by increasing the amount of resources that could be allotted to each person, and thus increasing the quality of life there overall.

Therefore, we should hunt and kill the poor. Really, hunting and killing the poor painlessly and quickly would result in even LESS suffering than if we just let them die a slow, agonizing death due to starvation. Patton's article is actually satirical. It is a "reductio ad absurdum" which attempts to show that, if we really followed Hardin's logic all the way to its conclusion—i.e., if we are REALLY interested in minimizing suffering—an absurd conclusion follows: Namely, that we should hunt and kill the poor. But, killing the poor is clearly morally wrong. Therefore, there must be a flaw somewhere in Hardin's reasoning.

Rebuttal: Doing vs. Allowing Harm, Intending vs. Foreseeing Harm: If it is morally worse to kill than to let die (as many argue), then this would explain why it is permissible to LET the poor die, but wrong to KILL them. Similarly, if it is morally worse to kill someone as a means to an end (namely, in order to reduce suffering) than it is to merely foresee that their death will occur, then again we have some reason why not donating is permissible, but killing the poor is not.

3. Shallow Pond Does Not Account for Overpopulation: Hardin's objection may be seen as an objection to Singer's argument by analogy. In Shallow Pond, if you save the one child, this does not result in even MORE harm later. But, as Hardin argued, for every starving child that we save, that child will just go on to procreate and create even MORE starving children. So, the Shallow Pond should be changed to the following in order to be more analogous to the famine scenario: If you save the drowning child, this will only cause TWO MORE children to fall into the pond and begin drowning. Are we morally obligated to save the child in this situation? Probably not. In fact, we might be morally obligated to NOT save the child—since doing so will only cause even MORE people to begin drowning.

Reply: Singer might point out that this is only true of famine relief if the ONLY sort of efforts that we donate to are those which merely feed the poor. But, this only means that we should not MERELY be feeding the poor—rather, we should ALSO be trying to solve the ROOT of the problem. If we couple our famine relief efforts with things like education, supplying contraception, building up infrastructure, digging wells, planting crops, and so on, we will not only save the PRESENTLY starving children, but we will be taking steps to ensure that FUTURE generations of children in third world countries are not born into a situation where they immediately begin starving and then die.

On Hardin's Predictions: Did Hardin's predictions in 1970 even come true?

Bad stuff: It is still true that the fertility rate of impoverished nations is more than double that of developed nations (about 4 or 5 births per woman vs. 2). It is also true that, since 1970, the population has more than doubled, from about 3.7 billion to 7.6 billion (2017).

Good stuff: But, since 1970 (when Hardin was writing), the average global fertility rate has been reduced by half. (4.7 per woman to 2.4 in 2018)

The reasons for this are **socio-economic development** (people with resources tend to have fewer children; more civilized nations tend to marry off their women at a later age), **female education** (more likely to use contraception, plan pregnancies, etc.), and **family planning programs** (access to contraception).

Studies show that fertility rates of countries DECLINE when there is an increase in education, urbanization, and per capita wealth. For instance:

- An increase in wealth causes a decrease in infant mortality, which (eventually) leads to people producing fewer children.
- Increased wealth makes birth control more affordable, leading to fewer children.
- An increase in education brings a better understanding of birth control, as well as the consequences of overpopulation, which leads to fewer children.
- Longer education of women and more women in the work force causes them to put off having children until later in life, leading to fewer children.
- Infrastructure and wealth causes parents to no longer have children for the sole reason of having the children be the caregivers in the parent's old age, leading to fewer children.

Will the poor deplete the world's resources? Arguably, it is not the POOR who will exhaust the world's resources. It is the rich who will. For instance, the richest 10% in the world (this includes half of all Americans) produce 50% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, while the poorest 50% (3.8 billion people) produce only 10%. ([source](#))¹

[Possible Worry: But, when we bring the poor UP to the standards of the rich, THEY TOO will use just as much as we do. Currently, the U.S. uses 30% of the world's oil, but Americans represent less than 5% of the global population. The average American citizen consumes 23 times more resources than the average citizen in India.]

But, will we run out of food? Probably not. We ALREADY produce enough food to feed 10 billion people. And the rate and efficiency of global food production is increasing. The difficulty is merely getting it TO the people who need it (and at a price where they can afford it. This will require donations, subsidizing, etc.). Also, note that, if we became vegetarians, or at least reduced meat consumption, we could feed billions more. (For instance, only 3% of the nutrients that we put into a cow as feed comes out as beef.)

In summary: Perhaps the conclusion is not that we should IGNORE the poor and let them die. Perhaps, if we are going to help at all, we could try to make the lands of 3rd world countries self-sustainable by building up socio-economic infrastructure, educating women, providing and educating about birth control, and meanwhile curtailing our own use of resources, reducing meat consumption, etc. *[What do you think?]*

¹ More facts: As of 2019, [26 people](#) have as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the global population – i.e., 3.8 billion people. In 2016, the wealth of [the top 1%](#) surpassed that of the bottom 99% combined; i.e., the top 1% (which includes 1 in 7 Americans) owns half of the entire world's wealth, while the remaining 7.5 billion people must split the remaining half – and these disparities are steadily increasing.