Pogge’s Argument for the Obligation to Provide Aid

First, Thomas Pogge begins by pointing out that, clearly you have a greater moral responsibility to help someone avoid a harm that YOU are the cause of than you do to help someone avoid a harm that you DIDN’T cause.

Second: Though many people believe that we have stronger moral obligations to our compatriots (i.e., people living in our home country) than we do to citizens of other nations, Pogge disagrees. At the very least, one’s duty to help someone that they have harmed is not affected by facts about what country that person is a citizen of. For instance, it is not as if our moral reason to drive carefully or not swing knives around or fire guns into crowded areas is somehow WEAKER when we travel abroad. That would be absurd.

So far, then, we seem to have something like the following argument:

1. You have a stronger obligation to aid someone whose poor condition you have caused than someone whose poor condition you have not caused.
2. If you have caused someone to be in a poor condition, your obligation to aid them does not depend on whether or not they are the same nationality as you.
3. Therefore, you have a stronger obligation to aid foreigners whose poor health or condition you have helped to cause than you do to aid compatriots whose poor health you have not caused (but merely allowed).

In individual contexts, this is not likely to yield very controversial verdicts. For instance, imagine the following:

- **Double Collision:** You and a stranger are driving side by side down the road. Suddenly, at the same time, two children run out into the road. You hit and injure one of them. The other driver hits and injures the other. As it turns out, the child you hit is a foreigner. But, the child that the other driver hits is a U.S. citizen.

The verdict that the argument above would yield is simply that you have a stronger duty to aid the foreign child (whom YOU hit) than you do to aid the local child (whom the OTHER driver hit). This seems right.

Second, your obligation to help the (foreign) child that YOU hit is JUST AS STRONG as the other driver’s obligation to help the (local) child that THEY hit. This seems right too.
But, the verdict at the societal level is much more controversial. For, the following conclusion will also turn out to be true:

**Conclusion:** We have a greater obligation to aid foreigner’s poor conditions that are partially caused by social institutions that we are involved in upholding than we do to aid patriot’s conditions that we have not contributed to.

We can expand on the argument above as follows:

1. You have a stronger obligation to aid someone whose poor condition you have caused than someone whose poor condition you have not caused.
2. If you have caused someone to be in a poor condition, your obligation to aid them does not depend on whether or not they are the same nationality as you.
3. Therefore, you have a stronger obligation to aid foreigners whose poor health or condition you have helped to cause than you do to aid compatriots whose poor health you have not caused (but merely allowed).
4. But, we HAVE helped to cause poor health and poor conditions for many foreigners (by contributing to social institutions which cause these things).
5. Therefore, we have a greater obligation to aid foreigner’s poor conditions that are partially caused by social institutions that we are involved in upholding than we do to aid patriot’s conditions that we have not contributed to.

**Premise 4:** Is premise 4 true? People like Hardin will generally try to deny it, claiming that impoverished peoples and nations are only impoverished due to their own poor choices (e.g., to overgraze their land, to be lazy, or due to their own government corruption, etc.). While it is surely true that these things CAN be factors, Pogge argues that we too have contributed substantially to their plight.

How so? Primarily, we support institutions that contribute to radical global inequality of wealth; namely, our government. He writes:

> Governments and their hired negotiators are designing these supranational rules and pressing for their adoption and for compliance - and the US government first and foremost. These governments are elected by us, funded by us, acting on our behalf, sensitive to our will, and so, we are not mere bystanders observing the injustice.
Here are some other concerns: We exploit third world citizens via sweatshop labor (which we contribute to by purchasing their products), we release greenhouse gases which are destroying air conditions, contributing to climate change, etc. This is making weather conditions more severe and unlivable in many places (increased draught, floods, hurricanes, fires, and so on), and causing sea levels to rise (some countries, e.g. Tuvalu, will soon be uninhabitable due to being underwater). We have also benefitted from riches gained by PAST exploitation as well (e.g., slavery and European colonization of Africa).

[What do you think? Is it true that WE personally contribute to poorer global conditions? And, if it is true, does this entail that we have a stronger moral reason to help the unfortunate in other countries than we do to help our own?]

Conclusion: The result is that we have a stronger obligation to help children in third world countries escape death due to famine than we do to, say, help citizens in our own country escape harms that we are not the cause of.