

Unveiling the Fallacies: A Critical Examination of Peter Singer's Book 'The Life You Can Save'

Zien Sheng^{1,a,*}

¹*The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Zhongguancun Street, Beijing, 100086, China*

a. EllaSheng@stu.hebmu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Peter Singer's book *The Life You Can Save* highlights the global concern of child mortality resulting from poverty and its profound impact on the well-being of children. Singer urges affluent individuals to give proportionate to their financial status to global aid organizations in the interest of alleviating poverty among children. However, Singer's proposal is not entirely flawless. Poverty, particularly in the present, rapidly advancing world, not only poses moral and ethical dilemmas, but also impedes human development, fosters inequality, and undermines social stability. As a result, it needs to be handled with the utmost caution. This paper critically analyzes the flaw in Singer's argument, emphasizing that individual donations alone are insufficient to solve complex societal issues and highlights the dependency issues and ineffective targeting of charitable efforts, ultimately revealing that while charitable giving has some positive impact, poverty cannot be significantly reduced without addressing non-cash issues, such as medical care, and implementing international laws and policies to incentivize investment in developing countries.

Keywords: giving, poverty, children, charity, policies

1. Introduction

The problem Peter Singer addresses in his book *The Life You Can Save* is a growing worldwide concern in today's modern world. Specifically, he expressed genuine concerns about the crisis of child mortality due to poverty, and about the unceasing status quo of global poverty as a whole to a small extent. It is without a doubt that poverty has had a great impact on children, as Singer pointed out: nearly ten million children under the age of five die each year from causes related to poverty according to UNICEF [1]. Poverty thwarts individuals of their basic human rights, including access to adequate food, shelter, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. It traps individuals and communities in a cycle of deprivation, limiting their potential and hindering social mobility. In such a rapidly developing world, extreme poverty would undoubtedly give rise to social unrest and mass discrimination.

To ease the influence of the ever-growing severeness of poverty on children, Singer proposed his idea of giving and brings out persuasive arguments with a call to action. Despite its many strengths and praises, however, the book is not without its flaws. The bulk of this paper will be used to analyze the flaw in Singer's argument and to present a critical ground that while charitable giving can make a positive impact, poverty cannot be significantly reduced without focusing majorly on non-cash

issues (like medical care) and these issues can only be satisfactorily addressed through international laws and policies that incentivize investment in developing countries. Afterward, a more comprehensive approach to address the problem of child mortality will be put forward and explained in detail.

2. Peter Singer's Idea

The aim Peter Singer tries to address in *The Life You Can Save* is mainly to eliminate children from dying because of poverty, specifically, due to lack of medical care, lack of food, and lack of shelter [1]. Singer, in the book *The Life You Can Save*, argues that affluent individuals have a moral responsibility to give to global aid organizations so as to lower the annual death toll from poverty. Singer further suggested that donations to worthwhile causes ought to be proportionate to an individual's financial status. He contends that wealthier individuals should donate a larger portion of their income since they can better aid others without severely compromising their own well-being. Thus, one should give at least 1% of net income to charity. Thereafter, Singer calls for a greater amount of giving that would enable some of the infrastructure projects to improve citizens' overall life quality. To further elucidate, he used specific data from both the UNICEF and the world bank to restate the severeness of the status quo and emphasized the significance of the impact maximizing one's giving to charities as an approach to alleviating death would give.

Though he revolves a lot around the ethical obligation of individuals and encourages the mass population to critically evaluate the spending habits of individuals to guarantee a portion of the asset to give to the ones in need, morals would not be the focus of this paper. The bulk of the analysis provided in this paper would be around the other topic with equal importance in *The Life You Can Save* — whether the result of a charity is worthwhile. By “worthwhile” one means not the praiseworthy virtues of charity giving, but the efficiency and effectiveness of donation as a method of alleviating child death in the current society.

3. The Fundamental Flaw

To clarify, the standpoint of this paper remains that individual charitable giving *can* make some difference since one can do nothing without financial support. However, the most significant and impactful efforts at poverty eradication will need to come from governmental and other institutional sources. It is vital for one to note that death, as discussed in *The Life You Can Save*, is caused by reasons that are completely different from one another and could not be solved merely by charitable giving. Two status quo weakens Singer's argument. One, the root causes Singer points to — medical care, food, and shelter — relate more to government policies than individual wealth. Two, the majority of charities are ineffective in today's world due to targeting problems and limited subvention, which will be proved in the following paragraph. Thus, bearing in mind the goal to maximize utility, charity is not enough, and governmental intervention, both national and international, also is needed.

Furthermore, the issue of child death should not be isolated from the problems of families and societies, as oftentimes children's health conditions are the indicator of the overall financial condition of families and the degree of advancement in the infrastructure of the nation. Thus, alleviating poverty as a whole should be treated more seriously and thoroughly than Singer previously thought when dealing with such problems.

3.1. Flaw I. Unsustainable Dependency

Subjects of donation, as Singer proposed, are only young children. As part of the younger generation in the world, they have no ability to generate income by themselves, yet still have tens of years of life. Therefore, suppose the charity gives them the portion of the donation as previously planned and

the results are positive, those children would no doubt enjoy a much better life. While that outcome appears to be satisfying, a directly related result is that children would be indulged in the sudden wealthy lifestyle. In other words, children would be dependent on the small amount of money they receive, wanting to prolong their luxurious lifestyle. This means once one has given them money, one cannot cease, but must continuously give to ensure that the child would not be killed by starvation or other financial problems in the future. Unfortunately, few charities would adopt this strategy, since under such circumstances, the aid spent on a single individual would almost always exceed the original budget, signifying a dramatic drop in the number of people targeted to help. Therefore, the best charities can do is to give each child no more than twice. Sadly, short-term financial aid still could not guarantee long-term benefits. Children could still die a few years later because of disease or starvation, which indicated that donation and the system of charity is ineffective.

3.2. Flaw II. Targeting Problem in Societies Today

Moreover, it might be challenging to pinpoint those who are truly in need of financial aid and hence qualify for monetary assistance as financial needs are not static, and people's situations can change over time. A recent study conducted by Caitlin Brown evaluated the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs' common strategy to target the poor by looking at data from nine sub-Saharan African nations. It was discovered that roughly half of the homes chosen by the approach were not low-income, while the other half were not [2]. Therefore, even if there is enough aid for children, there's a 50 percent chance that it's not delivered successfully to the ones in need. Furthermore, studies conducted by Lisa Cameron and Manisha Shah have shown in 2014 that badly run transfer programs have significant negative consequences that go beyond purely monetary expenses, mainly due to hatred and competition between neighbors. They discovered that the incorrect targeting of a money transfer program in Indonesia had serious detrimental societal repercussions [3]. Crime became more commonplace in communities, and involvement in civic organizations fell due to unfair treatment obtained by not only children but also households.

3.3. Flaw III. Donation Fails to Address the Underlying Causes Singer Proposed

To further analyze the problematic role of donation, one assumes the best scenario under which donations can be given to the ones in need. Even so, children might not directly benefit because some of the issues they face cannot be mitigated merely by individual wealth accumulation. Adolescents may suffer from innate problems with their physical or mental health, for instance. Even if they do receive financial aid, the hospital could be inaccessible (that is, too far from housing estates or with no legally built roads) or of poor quality (hospitals may not have certain treatments). These issues could only be solved by government policies, for instance, reconstructing hospitals and recruiting skilled doctors. In sum, the power of cash is limited only to a certain extent, leaving some of the vital details unsolved.

Another example is that it failed to address one of the problems Singer proposes in the book as one of the major causes of death, namely, a lack of shelter since the most significant burden of inadequate shelter was placed by unfair or unreasonable policies, which could not be improved by financial power. In a few of the developing countries, there are not enough housing estates constructed in the first place, not to mention the soaring price. This policy is unreasonable since the government should not make housing overly scarce, especially in a nation where individual households have accumulated little or no wealth. Initially, housing prices may not be as high, but when it evolves into a scarce resource due to rapid population growth, the price would no doubt surge dramatically. As a result, the majority of people who can afford housing fees before the surge in prices could no longer afford it. Thus, people living in proper houses in turn dropped yet again.

4. In-Depth Analysis of Mortality Crisis and a More Comprehensive Approach

As discussed in the previous section, the crisis of mortality is a result of various complex factors. Therefore, solutions on multiple grounds should be combined to ease the magnitude. Bearing in mind the three major causes of death Peter Singer suggests: lack of medical care, food, and shelter, it is best to structure solutions by addressing each independently.

In terms of medical care, the status quo of drug unaffordability in developing countries must be reconstructed. First off, because of the lack of competition and investments in pharmaceutical companies among poor nations, the market is similar to a monopoly. As a result, drug prices for children charged sky-high price, some of which are substantially higher than those in developed countries. For instance, in recent years, studies conducted in 2016 suggested that the number of women suffering from Hepatitis C increases dramatically, leading to newborn babies with inborn Hepatitis C disease [4]. Surprisingly, Hepatitis C drugs cost \$1,000 per pill across developing countries. More than 49 million people in these nations—representing more than 40% of the world's hepatitis C burden—no longer have access to this medication. As a result, 700,000 deaths involving both adults and children die each year from hepatitis C worldwide. Another study presented by BBC News in 2019 suggested that everyday drug prices also severely exceed prices in bigger countries [5]. Daily medications like paracetamol may cost as many as thirty times as much in nations like Zambia, Senegal, and Tunisia as they do in the UK and the USA. Note that donations could only provide short-term solutions but failed to guarantee long-term affordability. Therefore, pharmaceutical policy reforms need to be done imminently to address the radical problem. Such changes in policies could involve subsidizing certain medical firms to produce more output, providing better and more diverse opportunities for global cooperation to ensure up-to-standard qualities and quantities of supply, and a further reconstitution of healthcare allocation so that the majority would receive treatment in time if needed.

In terms of child starvation and lack of shelter, the subjects of solutions should be the family as a whole, since it is still too young for adolescents to possess adequate skills and resources to plant enough edibles on their own, not to mention constructing a house independently. Thus, it is a family matter if the child has stable housing and food supply or vice versa. The most typical approach is to introduce newly developed planting techniques to increase yield. One desirable technology is the hybrid rice plantation method. Introduced in 1973 by Chinese Academician Yuan Longping, hybrid rice increases total rice yields by 44% [6]. A study in 2020 conducted in Africa when hybrid rice technology was first introduced suggested that over traditional inbred types cultivated in identical circumstances, a yield advantage of 15% to 30% has been documented [7]. Such an increase is enough to prevent starvation at least among the younger generation. Other minor aids such as introducing automatic machinery and high-tech breeding could also be implemented.

A final problem is the lack of shelter. Firstly, compared to the surprisingly rapid population growth, the construction of houses lags far behind. According to the United Nations prediction, Africa has an unfinished inventory of 51 million dwellings [8]. Muyeba, the recorder, commented that the housing estates are “about nine years behind current demand”. Similarly, another cause is the affordability of housing. As discussed in the previous section, aroused by the population growth, even the lowest quality dwelling was becoming a scarce resource. “In many African countries, merely the top 5 to 10 percent of the general population are able to pay the least expensive kind of formal housing,” said World Bank Senior Director Ede Jorge Ijjasz Vasquez [9]. Because of this, 90% of Africans live in unofficial dwellings. As a result, the mass population of poor nations has no choice but to struggle a living in slums or other rural areas. Indeed, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 59% of the household supported their children in slums – areas that are packed, lack access to clean water or sanitary facilities, and have subpar housing structures as well as unstable housing tenure [10]. Unsurprisingly, it is estimated

that in comparison to established settlements, child mortality rates in such a terrible living environment are 65 percent greater [11]. Note that both issues cannot be mitigated in a short time period, since both are affected by the overall strength of the country. In the short term, the problem could only be eased but not eliminated. By charitable giving, as Singer emphasized in *The Life You Can Save*, an imminent boost of individual capital accumulation would occur, which would improve at least several years of living conditions. To further erase the problem, the nation's overall economy, specifically indicated in GDP per capita, would have to make great progress. It would be more complicated to structure a utilitarian strategy due to countless factors that may have an invisible effect on the results, such as different regimes, policies as well as cultures and beliefs. Thus, the long-term strategy would still have to be considered in depth.

5. Conclusion

While Singer's proposal is convincing and while his view has changed what most people believed as giving, it should be acknowledged that Singer's argument is overly ideal if put to use in modern society. It is ideal, for various details of giving adds to the imperfectness of donation, diminishing the effectiveness of the ultimate result. Non-cash issues, as being only shortly addressed in *The Life You Can Save*, represent a much more significant role in the solution. When faced with a world with such complexity and uncertainties, it would be more complete to address each of the root cause independently and combine distinct approach together to attain maximum potency. Thus, to truly reduce poverty, Singer should combine both donations and government reforms to address financial and non-financial issues. Looking ahead, future academic research could explore the development and implementation of innovative policy measures to address healthcare accessibility, food security, and affordable housing in developing nations. Additionally, research could delve into assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of existing aid programs and exploring strategies to improve targeting and delivery mechanisms to maximize their impact.

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