

TRANSCRIPT OF DEVELOPMENT DRUMS EPISODE 15 – PETER SINGER

Host: Owen Barder. Guests: Peter Singer

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Owen Barder

Thanks for downloading Development Drums. I am Owen Barder in Ethiopia. Development Drums is a podcast about international development issues. And my guest today is Peter Singer, the famous philosopher whose new book, *The Life You Can Save*, is about the moral duty to give money for developing countries.

I'll be talking to Peter in a few minutes. But before that I want to remind you that you can download Development Drums free on iTunes. Just search for Development Drums in the iTunes Store and you can set it to download each episode automatically. Alternatively, you can download Development Drums from the Development Drums' website at developmentdrums.org.

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And finally, if you have any problems getting the show to download where you live, please email me on owen@developmentdrums.org that's owen@developmentdrums.org and I'll see if I can help.

I'm joined today by Peter Singer who is Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. *New Yorker* magazine called him "the most influential living philosopher." His latest book, *The Life You Can Save*, is about international development and in this edition of Development Drums we'll be exploring the arguments in the book.

Peter, welcome to Development Drums.

Peter Singer

Thank you, it's good to be with you.

Owen Barder

It's a real pleasure to have you with us. I am a huge fan of yours. When I was an undergraduate, I was very heavily influenced by your book, *Animal Liberation*, about animal rights. And not only did it contribute to my decision to become a vegetarian, which I've actually been ever since, it also convinced me that we should try to live our lives according to some kind of intellectually defensible ethical principles. Is it important to you in your work that you influence the way people live their lives?

Peter Singer

Well, I think it is to a certain extent. I mean, it's great when people say as you just did that they read *Animal Liberation* and they became vegetarian even more broadly that it influenced them to think about ethics and to want to live in accordance with ethical principles. If it didn't happen at all and somehow if I thought it's never going to happen I might feel that a lot of the writing I do is a bit pointless. I don't really want to write just for my philosophical colleagues to discuss what I say in Academic Journals, that nobody reads or that don't make any practical difference to the world.



So yes, it is important to me but I suppose I'm here for the long run and even if people were not reading my works much now, but I have some confidence that people will come to them in time and think about them, and that would probably be enough to keep me going.

Owen Barder

Great, okay so let's see if we can persuade some people about your argument in *The Life You Can Save*. And let's begin with the central argument which is your analogy of a child in the pond. Tell us that story.

Peter Singer

I asked people to imagine that they are walking across a park and there is a shallow ornamental pond in the park, and as they pass it by, they notice that there is a small child, a toddler who has fallen in and appears to be in imminent danger of drowning. They look around for the parents or the babysitter but there is nobody there. So naturally, their first instinct is to rush down into the pond and pull the child out and then they realize that they're wearing a new pair of shoes that they just bought recently. That's quite expensive. They don't really have time to get them off. Should I nevertheless rush into the pond even though the shoes are going to be ruined? Of course most people say, well that's absurd, you shouldn't think about a pair of shoes as compared to saving a child's life. If anybody did think that and decided not to rescue the child because they were worried about ruining their shoes, there'd be something seriously wrong with them. They would have done the wrong thing. They'd be some kind of monster even.

So that's the story and I guess I used that to say look, we do think we have an obligation to save a child's life if we can do it relatively easily and even if there is some cost to us, if that cost is one that's clearly not comparable to the loss of a child's life. And then I moved from there to looking at the situation with regard to global poverty and what, I would argue, we can do at relatively low cost to save the lives of children living in extreme poverty, and adults too of course

Owen Barder

This argument first appeared in your article about nearly 40 years ago now, *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, I think you were writing about the Bengal Famine, which is another article actually that made a big impact on me, but it made the important point that not only is it a good thing to do to save a child's life if you can, but that you actually have a moral duty to do it and that's quite an important distinction. I think most people would think it was a nice thing to do if you can, but you are making a stronger point than that, aren't you, which is that you actually have an obligation to help in situation like that?

Peter Singer

Definitely. I want us to get beyond that kind of thinking that says, all you really have an obligation to do – to obey the thou shalt not, rules. So you have obligations not to steal or not to maim or kill others and not to cheat or lie perhaps and a variety of things like that, but they were all things that you should not do. I think that some of the things that we ought to be doing that it's good to do just as obligatory as some of the things that violate those rules. So I'm trying to get people to see that to allow a child to die when you can easily save that child at small cost to yourself is really something that is not only as serious but more serious than many of the infractions of moral rules that people normally associate with wrongdoing.

Owen Barder

Now, your book is partly an exercise in answering those people who've raised objections to this argument over the last 40 years, since you wrote the article, and my guess is that there are lots of people listening to *Development Drums* who are thinking of some of those objections now. So let's try and address the key arguments in turn. It seems to me that there are four main objections that have been leveled in which you address in your book. And the most obvious objection is a practical objection which is that if you are saving a child's life, you know that you are going to walk into the pool and save the child right there, whereas if you give money to charity, you don't actually know whether you will end up saving a life. One of the listeners, Will Snell, who I know has engaged himself in NGO work, asks how do you get around the view which is sometimes justified, that actually a large proportion of the money spent on administration or isn't used well?



Peter Singer

Well, firstly I think that people often have exaggerated ideas of how much of the money is spent on administration, and it depends on the organization, but you know I've talked about this quite a lot in the last few months and I have done it on TalkBack radio and I very often get this, and I get people saying – somebody said to me the other day, look if I give money to these organizations 90% of it will get swallowed up by the organization, only 10% will get overseas to the people who need it.

Now, if you look at the balance sheets – the financial reports of these organizations, it's actually pretty much the reverse, about 90% of it will get to the people who need it and about 10% maybe in some cases 15% will get used in administration. It's quite a modest figure and of course you need some administration, we shouldn't begrudge organizations having to pay some staff to put the cheques in the bank or make sure that the money – that the projects that are selected are good projects that are going to be effective, that's a very important thing.

So we've got to say look, compared to the need out there even if only 80% of what I give, or even if it were only 50%, although I'm sure it's pretty much always more than that, but even if it were only 50% that got to the people who need it, their needs are so much greater than ours that \$0.50 would do a lot more good for them than a dollar is going to do for me. So I'd be prepared to wear it even if that were the case, but I think mostly it's not the case.

Owen Barder

But you are reasonably confident that when you give money to an NGO that it will end up saving a life. You're confident enough to make the moral case that people have an obligation to do that.

Peter Singer

Well I'm not confident that every time you give money to NGO it will save a life and that would be going too far. I am confident that most of the money will get to people who need it where it will do some good for them. If you really want to be highly confident about saving a life then you have to give to particular organizations, that are doing that kind of work, organizations that are, for example, immunizing kids against measles, providing oral re-hydration therapy in areas where there's lots of diarrhea and some kids dying from that, providing bed nets in areas where there's malaria which kids die from, all those things and in the book I talk about some organizations that are doing those things.

And yes, I think you can be confident with some of them that your donation will save a life. Depending on what it's doing, it might be more than the cost of a pair of shoes and depending on where you shop for your shoes, if you shop at some expensive Fifth Avenue stores and you pay \$1,000 for a pair of shoes then I think you can be highly confident. If you only pay \$300 for a pair of shoes, you can't be quite so confident that \$300 will be enough to save a life. If you go to Pay Less Shoes and pay \$25 probably it's not going to save a life, although, it may still do significant amount of good to someone.

Owen Barder

So that's the practical objection. There are, I think, three theoretical objections to your argument and which you address in the book and the first is a difference between action and inaction. Lots of religions and societies draw a moral distinction between doing something; such as killing a person and allowing something to happen such as if a doctor lets a person die. And yet, most moral philosophers, and that includes you, are arguing that there is no moral distinction that we ought to be as concerned about doing something as we are about letting something happen.

Peter Singer

Yes, that's right, but the only thing, I don't think the argument in my book really requires me to make a strong claim that you just mentioned that we ought to be as concerned about letting something happen as about doing something. Because the argument in my book doesn't depend on saying for instance that if you don't give money to an aid organization but, let's say, you spend it on a vacation and because of that somewhere in the world a child dies, who would have lived had you taken the money you spent on the vacation and given it to the aid organization. I don't say that this makes you a murderer, that would be the



strong claim and I think there is some things that can be said about that primarily about motivation and so on which enable us to draw a distinction there.

All I have to say, really, my argument, is that this is something that is very serious, that allowing something bad to happen when we can prevent it is something morally serious. I don't have to say that it's exactly on the same footing as directly causing, doing that thing to happen.

Now, having said that, as a philosopher, as distinct from the author of the book, *The Life You Can Save*, I would be prepared to defend the stronger thesis with some caveats for the relevance of motivation to how we assess agents. But in some ultimate sense I don't think it makes a difference. If we bring about a death whether by an action or an inaction, and if we know that this will be the result of our action or inaction and if our motivation is the same in both cases I can't see that there is a difference. I can't see that the mean effect that in one case to take a famous philosophical example, in one case you push someone under water and hold them there until they drown and in the other case you are motivated to do this and planning to do it but they actually tripped and hit their head and fall facedown into the water and you just sit there and make sure that they don't recover consciousness, but in fact they don't so you don't have to do anything. You just sit there while they drown. I really don't think that in that case what you've done, your deliberately refraining from easily helping them is morally any different than if you had actually pushed them into the water.

Owen Barder

Right. So but you're saying that, in fact, the argument you're making in this book you don't need to believe quite as strongly as that in there being no distinction between action and inaction.

Peter Singer

No that's right. No if somebody said, look the person who allows the drowning to happen is doing something very seriously wrong but not quite as badly wrong as the person who actually pushes the person into the water and holds them under, for the purpose of my book that would be fine, it wouldn't affect my argument.

Owen Barder

Right. They're still going to agree that we have an obligation to do something about people dying in developing countries.

The second theoretical disagreement with your book is that we – is that there are people who say that we don't have the same obligation to people who are a long way away from us as we do to for example, our own family or neighbors. So this is an argument that says that charity begins at home that we should sort out those nearest and dearest to us and we should only worry about people who are many miles away if we've got capacity left over to care for them. What do you say to that?

Peter Singer

Well, I would say that I recognize, of course, that as human beings we are always going to feel most strongly obligated to do something for those who are close to us, particularly parents for children, but generally speaking for kin, that's the kind of animal that we are. We can see that essentially throughout human societies and in our close primate relatives and other social mammals as well. So I think we have a kind of a biological bias to helping our kin, no doubt about that.

But if we look at it ethically, I think that once we had a society obligation to ensure that our children are cared for to the degree that they are going to be okay basically, I don't think that we have really obligations to do a lot more than that. I think that if we – comparing for instance, saving the life of the child of a stranger and buying our own child with the latest computer gadgets, I can't see that we have an obligation to provide our own child with whatever he or she wants to or whatever his or her school friends have that override their obligation to help people who are complete strangers to us, but who don't have the basic necessities that you need to maintain life.



So I suppose what I'm saying is I do think that we can recognize in a limited way a prior obligation to help your children and perhaps some other who are close to you, close friends even maybe. But it's a limited one and it's certainly not enough I think to outweigh the obligations we have to people in extreme poverty once we get beyond satisfying the basic needs of those close to us.

Owen Barder

The fourth objection, the third theoretical objection is that many people think that while we collectively have an obligation to do something to help people more generally that it would be madness for any one of us individually to make a big sacrifice if no one else is going to do the same, this sense of it makes no difference what I do, there are problems that we have to address together but if we are not going to address them together then none of us individually has a reason to act?

Peter Singer

Well, this one I do think is a fallacy, it's a psychological fallacy almost, more than a philosophical one I think, to look at this huge problem, if we say, world poverty, 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty; what can I do about that? You know, in one sense you might say I can do nothing about that, whatever I do will make no difference really. There'll still be 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty. The number that I can help, even if I devote all my resources, the number that I can help is within the margin of error, the World Bank's counting obviously. And even if I were Bill Gates I couldn't solve the problem, I could make a bigger difference and I think Bill Gates is making a bigger difference but I couldn't solve the problem of world poverty. But the fallacy is to just look at it as one big problem and say well either I solve it or I don't. There are 1.4 billion people, give or take a few hundred million, living in extreme poverty. But I can help some of them, I can help maybe five, maybe ten, maybe a couple of villages depending on my resources. And that does make a difference.

It makes a difference to those people. It makes a difference to those villages. And that's important, I mean, there's really nothing much that I can do with my money to make as big a difference to the world as if I use it to help some families or a village, that is living in extreme poverty. Spending the money on myself isn't really going to make that much difference to my happiness or to anyone else's, it may make some, but not a huge amount. But spending it to help the world's poorest can make life changing differences to a number of people.

Owen Barder

You're listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder talking to Professor Peter Singer about his book, *The Life You Can Save*. You can follow Development Drums on Twitter, the user name is developmentdrum on our Facebook Group or on our website at developmentdrums.org.

Peter let's move on now to the actions you propose in your book in response to these moral arguments. And in particular, you suggest a sliding scale of how much each person should be giving of their income. Tell us what you propose and how you arrived at it?

Peter Singer

Well, it's just slightly complicated scale, I guess because I do wanted to be progressive in the way that tax scales are, and if your listeners don't want to take all of this in, they can go to the website that has the same address as the title of the book, thelifeyoucansave.com, and they will be able to find the scale there. But roughly it says, look, if you are living in an affluent country and you're not really poor, you're not around the poverty line for people in an affluent country, which of course is much, much higher than this extreme poverty line of the World Bank, then you ought to be able to give at least 1% of your income to help the world's poor. And if you get up beyond that, as you get up into the relatively affluent, so let's say you're in the top half but not the top 10% of your society, you should work up from that 1% progressively towards 5%, I suggest. And if you get to the top 10%, which in the United States mean you're earning around \$100,000 per year, if you get to that top 10%, you should be giving 5% of your income and then it goes up from there, so that if you get to the top 5% which is earning around the 148,000 a year, I suggest 10%, and I scale it up until it reaches 33%, one-third, but it only reaches that for people who are earning more than a million dollars a year. So there won't be very many in that category.



And I suggest this scale because I think it's a scale that is true to the basic example that we began with, that is something that you could call the rule of easy rescue, you're rescuing people without imposing a huge burden on yourself. I don't think that 1% or 5% or 10% given the kind of income that the people have once we get up to the five and 10% and above levels, I don't think that's imposing any real burden on them and that's why I think it's something that we can say this is what you ought to be doing, you can do more if you like, but this is the kind of community standard that we want to set, so that we can say that if people are not giving in accordance with the scale they're doing something wrong, they're not meeting that moral obligation that we were talking about earlier.

Owen Barder

And in your book you argue that if people gave that kind of sum of money, that that would be enough to make an appreciable difference to world poverty?

Peter Singer

How it works out, this is the thing that surprised me about doing these calculations. It works out to a huge sum of money. I did it just for the people in the United States because I had U.S. Tax Department figures on how many people there were in each of these income brackets. And I was quite astonished at how much was realized just from the United States alone. Something like half a trillion dollars which you know if you compare it with what Jeffrey Sachs says would be needed to meet the millennium development goals, it's several times as much as is needed and that's just from the United States alone.

So if people throughout the affluent world were to give this, we'd be around a trillion and a half dollars in aid per year, which I really think would be enough not only to meet the millennium development goals which is important to meet those goals that all the world leaders pledged to meet in the year 2000, but we could go further. We could really start coming into this vast amount of world poverty, the 1.4 billion people, we could develop new projects, we could afford to experiment and be innovative about what projects really work to assess them properly. I think if we were giving those sorts of amounts we would be on the road to virtually eliminating large scale extreme poverty over the next two or three decades.

Owen Barder

Now, as you've mentioned the numbers that you're proposing are set out on your website, thelifeyoucansave.com, and you also suggest that people who are willing to make this commitment should make a public pledge on the website on the grounds that there'll be some sort of demonstration effect that will encourage other people to do the same. And when I checked this morning I see about 3,500 people so far have done so. Is that more than you were expecting or less than you were expecting?

Peter Singer

I didn't really know what to expect, I must admit. I think it's good. I think three and a half thousand is a good number of people that are pledging to do something serious. It's a start. What I don't know is how many people have heard of the website. So people who've read the book would have heard of the website because it mentions it in the book. I don't even have really sales figures as yet to how the book is doing worldwide but maybe the book has sold 20, 30,000 copies, I really don't know. So it's – we could say maybe we're talking about 10% of the people who've read the book, that's not bad. But the problem is there are of course more people who've heard of the book or heard of the website perhaps through interviews like this one, of which I have been doing quite a few, and so from that perspective you could say, well it could be higher, it's not as if everybody who hears about it is going there and pledging, that's obviously the case.

So from that perspective, yes, perhaps we could have hoped that it would be higher. But it's still moving up, it's moving up steadily. The website's now in, I think, 12 languages and we're increasing the number of foreign translations of it. So we're reaching a large possible audience anyway. And I hope it will keep going and I hope we'll start to eventually to see it getting up and above to 10,000 which will start to look pretty respectable but it just really all depends on how much of this idea catch on it, but really would it catch on. We could get even more and that would be great.



Owen Barder

Let's take a couple of questions from our listeners, and this one I think is quite a compliment. It's from Errol Tresland [ph] and he asks this question on Facebook. He says, if I gave you US\$2,000 right now and asked to you to direct it to the most worthy charities, where would you direct it. And he adds, please keep in mind that the answer that you give will actually be implemented, by the Canadian Errol Tresland who asked the question, and he says he is a huge fan of The Life You Can Save.

Peter Singer

Well that's fantastic and it's great when people are prepared not only to search for that information but really to make a difference. And there are many possible answers that you could give to this question. So I'm going to suggest one which in a way talks about a method rather than a particular content. And that is, I'm going to say donate it to GiveWell.net, you can find them on the web, GiveWell.net and ask them to put it towards the money that they award to the organization that they find most effective in saving life.

Now to explain to those who don't know about GiveWell, I talked about them in the book. This is an organization started by a couple of guys who were working for a hedge fund in the United States, were making quite a bit of money, wanted to give some away and wanted to say how will we know that our donation will be used effectively. And so they contacted a number of charities but all they got was kind of glossy brochures with smiling kids and not a lot of hard information about what their money would be used for. So they decided to set up an organization that would scrutinize a number of charities and try to decide which ones you could really be confident that your money was being used cost effectively not just that we're talking about earlier, the administrative costs were being kept low, because that's not enough to say that your donation is really doing some good obviously. You could have low administrative costs and give it to projects that were not well thought out and were not effective.

So what they did was, they said, look we'll set up an award – they didn't start with a lot of money so I think it was only \$10,000 the first year they did it – and we'll invite organizations to document how effective they are at saving lives of people in extreme poverty, and we'll give these \$10,000 to the one who's most effective and having done the first round they're doing it again and I think they've been able to increase the amount that they're giving, so hopefully they'll get more organizations competing for this award.

But the more people who give the money then they can put it towards the award and in that way the donation works twice. It works firstly to increase the amount of the award and therefore to get more organizations thinking can we demonstrate our cost effectiveness to GiveWell so that we can get this award. And that's a good thing because obviously the charity should think about their cost effectiveness.

And secondly, the money will then go to the organization that a couple of very bright guys have judged is the most cost effective in saving the lives of those who are in extreme poverty.

So we don't know at this stage because they're working on the ground, they haven't done their work. We don't know what organization that would be. But I would have confidence that whatever organization Give Well judges to be effective will be, if not the most, at least one of the really effective organizations that you could give to.

Owen Barder

So there you are, Errol, that's your answer and I'll put a link to GiveWell on the Development Drums website at developmentdrums.org. And there are also links there to The Life You Can Save website and to Amazon where you can buy the book.

I've got a question now from Alice Evans who put the following. She says, I totally agree with Peter Singer's moral arguments. But I am less convinced by his claim that we should give money to NGOs.

I agree that we should give up some of our incomes but perhaps not to NGOs since they are a messy business with possible adverse implications for governance. I think she means in developing countries.



If we want to give money to the poor, why don't we reduce our own such as by ending the Common Agricultural Policy, ending tariffs on goods where developing countries have a comparative advantage, regulating the arms trade, cracking down on tax havens, reducing international migration restrictions, and taking much more preventative action on climate change.

Those changes would increase the incomes of developing countries, but without reproducing the power relations that currently characterize charitable giving. What's your answer to Alice?

Peter Singer

Well, my answer to that is if you really think that you have the ability to bring about those changes and that your contribution can make or has a chance of making some difference to the prospect of bringing about those changes, that's fine. I am not going to argue with you. I think it's excellent that we have people working for a fairer global trade system.

I think Alice talked about the Common Agricultural Policy. Well, that's relevant for people living in the European Union. It's not relevant for the people living in the United States or Australia. United States could campaign against grain subsidies and cotton subsidies in particular, which are harmful to the ability of developing countries to trade.

I am currently speaking from Australia. Australia is good on agricultural policies because it's an agricultural producer itself. So it's also working against agricultural protectionist policies. So you can't do anything there.

We could certainly work for better climate change policies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by taking a strong stance at the Kyoto, sorry the Copenhagen Conference that's coming up later this year. And, yes, for increasing immigration, a lot will depend on what country you are in, what the political system is like, what the prospects are that you could really [indiscernible] here.

And that's what you are balancing. You are balancing – suppose that you are able to give, let's say, \$5,000 per year or something, whatever your income allows you to give. With that amount of money, I think you could make, if you pick the right NGO as I was just talking about before in response to Errol Tresland, if you pick the right NGO, you could save maybe five lives, maybe more for that amount of money.

If you give it to a campaign to cut greenhouse gas emissions, it may do nothing at all. We don't know. We don't know to what extent the money is going to influence that issue. It may be that it'd be better to spend some time writing to your representatives about that, getting on the streets with people. There are all sorts of things.

So I am definitely in favor of trying to make the changes that Alice referred to. I am just not really convinced that something that we should do with our money instead of giving it to NGOs. So you might want to give some to those causes to encourage those as well as giving some, perhaps more to NGOs.

Owen Barder

I have got a related question, which is perhaps the only nuance that I disagree with in your book, and that's your equivocation about whether giving aids through official aid budgets from governments, mainly to other governments, works. I mean you say in the book and I have heard you say elsewhere that some official aid works and that it might even be a good thing overall. But your recommendation, if you want to be certain, is to give money through NGOs and organizations that deliver services directly. Is that a fair summary of your view?

Peter Singer

I think that's a fair summary. I mean a lot will depend on where, what country you are talking about. So if I've given interviews in the United States, for example, I will be fairly critical of the quality of USA for the various reasons.



One, because of the political distortions in the countries that receive it, with Iraq getting by far the most U.S. foreign aid although it's not one of the poorest countries. And also, issues about requirements to buy goods produced in the U.S., which increase the cost of them. And so I think U.S. official aid is probably not highly effective.

If you've heard me giving interview in Sweden as I have because the book's being printed out in Swedish and published there, you will find that I'm respectful of the Swedish program because I think it is better thought out and basically less politically distorted than the U.S. one. And other countries may be somewhat in the middle.

So I think it varies. But generally I would say that my impression is, and it is only an impression, that aid from good NGOs anyway, select the NGOs, is more effective than government aid.

Owen Barder

I have to ask you this because lots of people listening to this are British where you put DFID, the U.K. Department for International Development, in your spectrum between Swedish SIDA and American USAID.

Peter Singer

Well, I think it's probably between the two. And I would think it's closer to the Swedish end of it. I think that the British department has a good one, has a thoughtful one, lots of bright and dedicated people working for us, and less distorted by political considerations, far less than the United States.

There is some favoring of former British colonies, British Commonwealth countries, but as it happens, there is plenty of those that are among the extremely poor nations in Africa and elsewhere. So that doesn't have such a distorting effect. So I think British aid generally does a good job, and besides it is closer to the sort of excellent end of the spectrum rather than the poor end of the spectrum.

Owen Barder

I think they will be pleased to hear that. I – just still on this question of NGOs versus government aid, let's go back to your pond story. Suppose I have done what you have said and I have paid my organization that will in effect provide lifeguards for the pond that I usually walk past. And I now walk through the pond the next day and I am pleased to find that there is my pond and it's now protected by lifeguards and there is nobody drowning.

But then I walk on and I go to a part of the park that I haven't visited before and I come across more and more ponds where not only are there people falling in but there are more people than ever before drowning because the very few lifeguards that used to circulate among these ponds, inadequate numbers of lifeguards have now been all hired away by my organization to protect the pond that I first came across.

And it's kind of a convoluted analogy. But there is a danger in that if you fund NGOs that you pull the resources and the skilled people away from the shared government systems that need to be built up and funded and resourced and staffed, say, that they work for everybody and not just the small numbers of people that the NGOs are serving.

And in a sense, I know that it sounds a bit theatrical, but in a sense that has been happening with government health systems having to compete for money and for doctors and nurses, for government and they are competing with little NGOs who are smaller, less joined-up, often less efficient than the government service would be.

So is there a danger of an unintended consequence that you do good by supporting an NGO but actually what you are doing is undermining the progress that that country is making towards being able to provide that service for everybody?



Peter Singer

Yes, I think that is a real danger and I like the way you used the pond analogy, which is being used by many people in different directions now and one of the things that I love about it is that life can be – it can be used to illustrate a whole lot of different problems and you did that nicely. So yes, there is that danger. And I am not really sure what to do about it, I must admit.

What one would hope is of course that the greater demand for trained and educated people would spur more people to get training and education. And we assume that the talent pool is not so small that it gets totally soaked up by the NGOs and that with training and education there can be more people who can do this in the country.

So – but in the long run even if there is a short-term shortage of trained people to do the work because the NGOs are soaking them up, taking and employing them, but in the long run it will be demand driven. And there will be – the supply will come because people will see that they can get work under reasonable conditions by doing this.

Now that might take some time. But I can't see why that shouldn't happen in the long run as long as the governments still see the need to do this. Somebody else put a slightly different point, which is I guess that not so much of the NGOs are soaking up the talent but that the government is saying, well, the NGOs are doing this, so we needn't do it. And that's another danger to watch out for.

And I would – and I think at some point maybe NGOs have to say to governments, look, we are only here to supplement them, deal with certain issues that you can't or provide extra resources. But if you are not even making the effort to do what you should be doing, what you do have the resources to do, we are not going to be here forever. We are going to go to a lot of places where we can see that the government is doing what it can and making contributions, but still needs our help.

Owen Barder

Most of your pond analogy and your hypothetical situations are a stark choice between saving a life and/or allowing someone to die. But actually of course for a lot of work – development work is about, it's not – I mean some of it is.

And you gave the example of measles vaccines. It is pretty directly saving lives. But a lot of it is about building institutions and capacity and reducing conflict and doing things that are expected to save lives in a more indirect way rather than just fishing a kid out of a pond to stop him or her from drowning.

And Robbie Zuliard [ph] who is at University of Melbourne, who says, Singer rocks; says is it possible to construct an ethical choice that deals with the more difficult but more prevalent situation where we are talking about increasing capabilities rather than strictly saving a person's life that's a more realistic scenario and more relevant.

Peter Singer

Yes, it is and it's very hard to evaluate. I mean you could certainly say in the long run building capacity may do more to help the poor and to save lives than vaccinating kids against measles.

But we would need to know that really. I mean what troubles me and one of the reasons I support evaluation of the kind that GiveWell talks about is what troubles me is – you could put a lot of money and resources into capacity building and you have to wait many years before you find out whether it's really made a difference and maybe it hasn't.

So that worries me in a world where there is such a lot of need, urgent needs that are there right now. And it worries me to put money and resources into something that is long-term and doesn't have clear evaluation to show that it is going to be making a difference.



I've said that we have to experiment. We have to try some of these things. But I don't think – maybe we should try them on a small scale. I don't think we should scale up unless we really have some good grounds to believe that what we are doing is going to bring about the results that we wanted to bring about.

Owen Barder

A lot of the critics of your book argue that one way or another you are asking too much of people, that – essentially that your arguments are very persuasive. But they lead to conclusions for a lot of people that are very difficult to implement in practice because they make people make sacrifices that lots of people are actually unwilling to make.

Does that worry you? Does it worry you that the conclusions, if the conclusions seem implausibly demanding, does that ever make you worry whether the reasoning is correct, whether if it's led to a conclusion that lot of people find counterintuitive that maybe there is something wrong with the argument?

Peter Singer

It doesn't really worry me in the sense there is something wrong with the argument. I think it's not at all surprising that people would find the argument or the conclusion too demanding. We are after all creatures, who have evolved from millions of years of selection of those who look after their own interest and the interest of their offspring. So that's just sort of a biological phenomenon that we tend not to see things from an impartial perspective but we tend to see things from that perspective of thinking of ourselves and our kin.

So it doesn't really make me think, argument is not sound, but of course it does worry me if people are not going to do anything because the argument is so demanding. And that's why the last chapter of the book is there on that scale that we were talking about before. It's on the website.

That's what that's about. It's about trying to say to people, look, just do this, this is not so demanding and yet you will be contributing, not only making a difference to the poor but helping to create a kind of culture of giving, a cultural standard by which people give something that is much more than most people give now, but still not a crippling sum, something that we could easily get used to and find quite acceptable.

Owen Barder

So let me put the opposite argument, which is not that you are asking too much of people but that you are not going far enough. Normally if we conclude that people have moral obligations to do things or not to do them, we pass laws about them. We require that people don't steal or that they don't beat people up.

And we also use compulsory tax to increase the incomes of the poor, for example, or to pay for social services. And yet in this book you don't go that far. You don't recommend that we should make a law requiring people to make the kinds of donations that you say that they have a moral obligation to make.

So what is it about the moral obligation to give money for people in developing countries that means you think it isn't sufficiently important for us to make it a legal obligation?

Peter Singer

No, it's not that it's not sufficiently important. It's that if you try and make something a legal obligation that the public is not ready to accept you don't get good results from it. I mean it's the old stuff about prohibition I guess again, if you make laws that the public don't accept, will be the same, for example, if I tried to legislate that everybody should be a vegetarian. I think that would be a great thing because it would factory farming just like that.

So wonderful, if you could do that, good for animals, good for the environment, good for human health, but you can't do that. You can't – even if somehow you manage to get a majority of parliamentarians who would support it, if they are not at least to some extent representative of the attitudes of the people out there, the electorates, it's not going to be obeyed. People would get around it. It will create a kind of underworld of people who'd break the law and maybe will increase corruption among the police who are supposed to enforce the law. And the government will presumably get voted out at the next election.



So I don't think there is much point in talking about compulsory giving on the sort of scale I am talking about now. If you want to say we should increase the amount of ROIs that is given from the government budget from say you know, when the United States from \$0.18 in every \$100 the country earns to \$0.50 in every \$100 the country earns, yeah, I'd support that, that would be a good thing.

And in Britain I can't remember exactly what it is, in Britain I think it was about \$0.45 or something. So if you could increase it to the level of Sweden where it's nearly, nearly 1%, nearly £1 in every £100 that the country earns, yeah, that would be good too. But I don't think you would go a lot further than that without having so much opposition that it would be counterproductive.

Owen Barder

Peter, as somebody who lives in a developing country and who works in development, I should want to say thank you to you for writing this book. I think it takes some courage to make an argument, which is clearly quite troubling for many people, because it presents so much of a challenge to the way we live our lives.

And in some ways I'd be interested to know whether you think this is right. I think there are parallels between your work and the work of people like Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce who made the case in the 1780s and 1790s that slavery was immoral.

And at the time they began their campaign there was a tiny minority who thought that – who either understood, and thought about the moral arguments or who believed that the economy could function without slavery. And yet in 1807, the Slave Trade Act was passed really as a result of their campaigns.

I know, I am sure you are going to say that you are much too modest to compare yourself to people like Clarkson and Wilberforce. But do you think there is a movement that can be started that will – as the anti-slavery movement did in the 18th and 19th centuries that will change people's attitudes to how we live together on the planet and what obligations we owe to people in developing countries.

Peter Singer

Well, I certainly hope so because any slavery movement is a wonderful example of – encouraging example for anyone who thinks that there is something morally wrong with what's going on and wants to join together with other people to change it because, you described it exactly correctly, they were very small groups at the start, little support, but it grew quite rapidly and was overwhelmingly successfully. So if we could do something like that with global poverty that would be fantastic.

I think we can. I don't really see any insuperable barriers. I mean there are some things we haven't yet talked about like, what do you people often say? What you do about corrupt dictatorial governments. And there will be problems in some countries undoubtedly but there are many countries where that's not a problem where we could be doing more than we are.

So yeah, I think this is something that can be done. I think that a lot of people have already contributed to the thought processes and the ideas. I am just one among several. But I hope that the time is right for these ideas to spread as it was at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century for the anti-slavery movement.

Owen Barder

Peter, thank you. I have been talking today to Professor Peter Singer whose book *The Life You Can Save* is in the book shops now. And I will put a link to it on the Development Drums website. In case it isn't obvious from the conversation it's a very readable, very accessible utterly convincing book. So I highly recommend people to go out and buy it and read it. Peter, thanks for joining me on Development Drums.

Peter Singer

Thanks very much, Owen. It's been really good to talk to you. And thanks for your support and thanks for helping to spread the message.
