Paul Collier: Rescuing the bottom billion

Collier, Paul. 2007. *The Bottom Billion:*

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Collier's *The Bottom Billion* begins with an intriguing and provocative,premise that guides subsequent analysis: the development community and the international public as a whole have been focussing on the wrong group of poor societies. More specifically, he argues that it is the "bottom billion" (those billion people who live in the most extremely poor countries, most of which are in Africa and Central Asia) about whom the international community should be concerned. Collier argues that these societies living in "fourteenth century conditions" are suffering from one of four traps: the conflict trap; the natural resource trap; the trap of being landlocked with bad neighbours; or the trap of bad governance in a small country (3). At first, these particular features seem somewhat random, but the statistical analysis that follows, much of which Collier has done himself or with colleagues, indeed corroborates his assertions that these are very important characteristics for extreme poverty.

Collier further argues that these countries are often trapped in these situations for decades, and that lifting them beyond the periodic limbo of extremely slow growth is a task that requires several key changes to the international development framework. Perhaps predictably, Collier toes the party line when he suggests that the real issue is the bottom billion's lack of growth and that therefore the real task is to get those countries fair access to world markets at the right time. He asserts, "the failure of the growth process in these societies simply has to be our core concern, and curing it the core challenge of development" (11).

Overall, Collier's argument is innovative, persuasive, and well-researched. His ability to build complex models linking economic to social and political characteristics of these bottom billion societies is a valuable and inventive Paul Collir's contribution to the literature on why development has gone wrong in so many places. Any attempt to quantify the effects of civil war, natural resource endowments, regional placement, and bad governance on a society's economic growth and development is courageous, given the difficulty of such an endeavour.

In attempting this task, Collier brings many original components to our concept of underdevelopment, all of which appear to be supported strongly by data. His discussion of failing states is one such example; although the concept of a state whose government (and thus law and order) has collapsed is not novel in the political science literature, Collier's use of the idea to explain why economies collapse correspondingly is quite interesting.

Additionally, Collier diagnoses some serious problems within the development bureaucracy itself; views that he readily admits may be ill received. Like William Easterly, he believes that the international aid devices are not properly structured and that they should be more flexible to context and transferable to other countries. According to Collier, they must be more agile and willing to accept risk when disbursing money (as risky situations are those with the biggest payoff when properly executed). He also suggests, again similar to Easterly, that the professional structure of these institutions inadvertently positions aid more like a business endeavour than a collective support instrument. Career success in aid institutions is based on the disbursement of money, and no one wants their career trajectory to be predicated on measurable success in utterly intractable development situations. Brave statements for him to make, and entirely necessary if the international system is to use its money effectively.

Collier's statements about the need for the West to take responsibility in situations of humanitarian need and collectively intervene militarily might also be controversial; however, it is clear that, through his analysis, Collier has come to understand the pervasive need for holistic efforts to avoid letting any more societies slip into the bottom billion (or fail to escape should the chance presents itself). The book's firm advocacy for just but free trade between the bottom billion and the developed world also falls along these lines; his concern for the headless heart of the international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the public that oppose free trade, which he believes to be an important component of growth and thus the lift out of extreme poverty, is measured yet convincing (156). The lament that many NGOs and most of the public do not understand trade policy does seem to ring true in many cases.

His diagnosis of the issues is well thought out, however it is the proposal of solutions that is most heartening. His suggestions are firmly focussed on the practical, advocating ideas such as the independent service authorities, the promulgation of international charters establishing policy procedure to be used in multiple countries, the re-thinking of international trade to allow market access for the goods of the bottom billion, and the re-structuring of the aid paradigm. There is also a pervasive thread of collective responsibility, which he lays out most poignantly in the book's conclusion. He appeals directly to the reader — a powerful while unexpected tactic. Openly telling readers that just because their work may not be concerned with development does not mean they are off the hook, Collier reminds individuals: "you are a citizen, and citizenship comes with responsibilities . . . It is the responsibility of all citizens to prevent us from sleepwalking into another avoidable catastrophe that our children would have to face" (176).