

**Saving Which Children How? The Importance of Cultural Capital in Youth-Focused
International Aid and Development**

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Abstract

This review discusses the book Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire by Emily Baughan. In the book, Baughan documents and discusses the first 100 years of the Save the Children Fund, which was established in the United Kingdom in 1919. In this article, I review the book in the context of the Community Capitals Framework, paying particular attention to the importance of cultural capital. I argue that one of the major shortcomings of Save the Children was the willful ignorance of and, at times, the purposeful destruction and elimination of the cultural capital of the communities, families, and children they were serving. I discuss the consequences of ignoring and damaging cultural capital and provide examples of how, rather than being only a historical problem of large and complex organizations such as Save the Children, some current scholars and practitioners continue to neglect and harm cultural capital in their own community development work.

Keywords: Save the Children, cultural capital, international development, international aid, Community Capitals Framework.

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Saving Which Children How? The Importance of Cultural Capital

Save the Children, established in 1919 by politically active (some might say radical) and relatively privileged British women as a response to the destruction of World War I, is now a global charitable organization with an operating fund of nearly 950 million US dollars (Save the Children, 2021a). By their own reporting, in 2021 the organization responded to over 100 emergencies in more than 80 countries and supported 183 million children in 120 different nations (Save the Children, 2021b). While many people around the world would likely say that today Save the Children is one of the most successful, well-known, and ethical global charities, this has not always been the case. As University of Sheffield historian Emily Baughan makes clear in her history of the organization, Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire, it took decades for Save the Children to establish a non-political, non-colonial, and ethical foundation (Baughan, 2022).

In her book, Baughan deftly and directly describes and discusses the early history of the Save the Children Fund (SCF), which grew out of the concern that various liberal-left leaning British citizens (most of them women) shared for European children who had been impacted by the First World War. For example, one of the early predecessors of SCF was the “Rubber Teats for German Babies Fund” which aimed to raise money to provide mothers in Berlin rubber nipples for baby bottles they needed to feed their infants. Baughan explains these early influences on SCF as well as the Fund’s role in the fledgling but ultimately doomed League of Nations and in the development of the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child. By focusing on the first one hundred years of SCF’s work, she also highlights the Fund’s shift to focusing on children outside Europe (particularly in Africa) and its role in protecting children in times and places of war.

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Baughan's skill as a writer and her willingness to honestly investigate all aspects of the Fund's early practices (and, to the Fund's credit, their willingness to make available to Baughan their records and documents - even those that when interpreted by modern standards lead to unflattering conclusions) makes for an interesting and engaging book. In addition to Baughan's retelling of the factual history of SCF's first hundred years, she also identifies various important ideologies and themes that directed the decisions of its early leaders. One of those major themes, and perhaps the one most relevant to scholars and practitioners of contemporary community development, is the way in which British cultural and social values so strongly dominated the Fund's decisions and practices. As Baughan makes clear, the early leaders of SCF had explicit goals of supporting British imperialism, 'civilizing' children (that is, making them more 'British'), and directly tied the value of children to their future ability to engage in the labor market and create capital for society.

This early version of internationalism from the SCF, condescending and patronizing by design, focused on children as the objects of charitable support and intervention and "claimed a special role for Britain, as the parent and provider for the 'world's children'" (Baughan, 2022, p. 49). In the pursuit of fulfilling this role, leaders and volunteers who were engaged in humanitarian work hoped for a future Europe of cooperating nations full of productive and healthy workers. In this view, children were seen as the "raw material" for that future Europe, while children who would not develop into productive and hardworking citizens were often ignored and rejected by humanitarian charities.

By taking this view, SCF was able to justify (at least to itself) practices such as removing Russian children from their families during the Bolshevik revolution and subsequent famine of 1921-1923 and sending them to live either with families in other countries or in institutions such

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as orphanages and boarding schools. Until the increase in popularity after World War Two of psychoanalytic theories, and attachment theory in particular (Bowlby, 1969; 1973), the belief was that removing children from their families in such a way was not only not harmful but would benefit the children (and more importantly, capitalistic societies) by more directly supporting the children's development into productive citizens and laborers.

The patronizing and colonial approach that SCF and similar organizations used in the decades between the World Wars was reinforced when the Fund began to focus on saving children in Africa. SCF took seriously their role to save African children (and children in other British colonies) because the Fund saw this as vital to protecting the British Empire. Saving the children during this time was strongly motivated by the desire to keep the Empire intact and continue producing laborers that would feed the economy of Britain. As James Ford (1939) argued in writing during this time, much of the concern that philanthropists had for children in Africa was strongly tied to concerns about increasing the economic productivity of the colonies. One of the tactics that the SCF employed to justify their saving of African children was the argument that because African mothers engaged in parenting practices that were foreign and strange for British people, the African mothers were thus too ignorant to know how to raise their own children. With this justification in place, SCF's leaders, workers, and volunteers had little qualms about inserting themselves into the lives of African children, often removing them from their families.

The practice of assuming that non-British (and later, non-American, non-Christian, and non-White) approaches to parenting and family life were insufficient, ignorant, and harmful provided justification for SCF to continue engaging in condescending and colonialistic practices well into the 1960s and 1970s. Baughan does an excellent job documenting this overtly

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colonialistic ideology, and does it in a way that should lead contemporary scholars and practitioners of community development and aid (whether domestically or internationally focused) to examine their own practices and behavior for remnants of colonialistic, imperialistic, and processes that potentially damage cultural capital.

The community capitals framework (CCF) describes the resources that each community has as seven different types of so-called capital (Flora & Flora, 2008; Green & Haines, 2002; Pigg et al., 2013). Some of these types of capital, such as social capital, have received significant attention in scholarly and popular literature (e.g., Putnam, 2000). Other types of capital, such as natural capital (Talmage et al., 2022) are currently receiving more deserved attention. Cultural capital, which has previously been discussed in the economic (Thorsby, 1999) and sociological (Bourdieu, 1987) literatures, refers to the worldviews, traditions, and values that a community share and that provide meaning and wellbeing in community members' lives (Ashdown et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the importance of cultural capital in community development, and especially international community development, has too often been ignored (Ashdown & Buck, 2018; Ashdown et al., 2021).

Because hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each year on international development and aid (Deloffre, 2016; explorer.usaid.gov, 2018; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2016; Myers, 2016; Save the Children, 2016), it is vital that scholars and practitioners of community development ensure that their work avoids issues such as cultural imperialism, neo-capitalism, and white saviorship (Ashdown & Buck, 2018). While reading Baughan's book, it is easy to recognize that for many of SFC's first 100 years the organization was not only unconcerned about protecting the cultural capital of the children and families they were working with, but was actively (and often purposefully) damaging (at best) or destroying and eliminating

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(at worst) local communities' cultural capital. In fact, Baughan so clearly and completely documents and describes the damage SFC inflicted on communities' cultural capital that it can be tempting to assume that such egregious practices are a historical artifact that no longer occurs. Unfortunately, scholars and practitioners continue to engage in culturally imperialistic and neo-colonialistic practices that cause severe damage and even destruction to the cultural capital in the communities where they work.

For example, Berry (2014) documents various practices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) functioning in the highlands of Guatemala that damaged cultural capital as well as put people's individual well-being and health at risk. Foreigners participating in a short-term medical mission were providing medical treatment, such as lice-killing shampoo, to local community members even though the people receiving the treatment could not understand the written instructions on the containers because they were in English. High school-aged missionaries (sometimes also called voluntourists - people who travel to a community or country other than their own to engage in community development and service; Ashdown & Buck, 2018) 'prescribed' aspirin to community members for a range of reasons, and it was unclear if the recipients understood what they were being prescribed and by whom.

Often, the purpose of proselytizing missions, such as those often undertaken by Jehovah's Witnesses or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (i.e., Mormons), are explicitly designed to damage or eliminate certain aspects of a community's cultural capital by convincing community members to abandon current beliefs and practices for new ones (though not often described so bluntly). This is almost never the goal of modern community development or aid organizations. Baughan makes clear in her book, however, that in the not-so-distant past many organizations such as the SCF did in fact explicitly state their intentions to dismantle the cultural

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capital of the communities they claimed to be serving and supporting. However, just because the goal or purpose of the development work is not explicitly imperialistic in nature does not mean it does not damage cultural capital.

While there is little doubt that the intentions of short-term missionaries and voluntourists are positive and usually pure, good intentions in community development work is not enough - the outcomes and consequences must always be a net positive for the communities (Talmage & Gassert, 2020). When determining whether the outcomes for a community are positive, the impact of development and aid programs on the cultural capital of the community must be included in the equation (Ashdown et al., 2021). Unfortunately, many people who engage in community development and aid work - including highly educated and trained scholars and professionals - are not very good at critically analyzing their motivations and honestly evaluating the outcomes of their work. Too often, the desire to perceive their own work in a positive light makes it difficult to sincerely explore whether or not that work is damaging cultural capital and the individual well-being of the community members.

For example, a member of a professional organization for international researchers to which I also belong recently sent various messages (via an email listserv) to the entire membership of the organization about some work she was conducting in a country other than her own. While the goals and intentions of her work and the NGO she founded were likely important and laudable, her process was extremely problematic. She had never visited this country before, and did not travel there with or conduct her work with local collaborators or institutions - the organizations she teamed with were themselves foreign entities or run by foreigners. She assumed that she would be able to simply implement procedures and practices that had worked

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in her home country in another place without much adjustment to incorporate local cultural capital and worldviews.

She was only in the country for two weeks, but uncritically reported that her trip was a great success, having convinced herself that she and her practices had had a great impact on the local communities. She claimed they had “directly impacted” nearly 400 people and indirectly impacted 3,000 more (without any accompanying empirical evidence). As problematic as her practices and procedures was the tone of the messages she sent to the professional organization’s listserv. Unfortunately, the tone of the emails was paternalistic and condescending, dripping with cultural imperialism and white saviorship (Straubhaar, 2014). Clearly, what likely started as a well-intentioned idea to apply her expertise and the resources of her NGO in order to help communities she believed were in need (apparently without first determining if the communities themselves felt they were in need) ended in an offensive example of neo-colonialism and damaged cultural capital.

It is disheartening and discouraging to witness the parallels between my colleague’s behavior and communication and that of many of the early leaders and volunteers of Save the Children as described by Baughan in her book, as one would hope that current professionals had learned important lessons from the past. It is clear that in more recent decades, Save the Children has made significant changes in their procedures and practices to avoid damaging the cultural capital of the communities, families, and children they serve. Baughan documents these changes well, and they can serve as important lessons and ideas for other organizations and professionals who hope to engage in community development and aid that not only respects but protects and supports the cultural capital of receiving communities.

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However, as the published literature (e.g., Berry, 2014) and the emails of my colleague make clear, there remains significant work to be done on recognizing the importance of protecting cultural capital when engaging in community development work. It is incumbent upon everyone engaging in community development scholarship and practice to learn about and understand the cultural capital of the communities where they work, especially if they are working in a community other than their own. If, as Baughan illustrates, an organization as large and complex as Save the Children can make important progress in this area, so can each of us as individual scholars and practitioners.

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