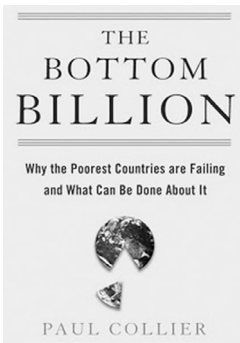


JOHN CLEMENTS

Book Review



Paul Collier

The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It

New York; Oxford University Press, 2007

\$15.95

Collier is an economist and certainly no mis-siologist. However, like Dowden's text, this provides some impressive and potentially useful background understanding for anyone working among people belonging to the countries of the 'bottom billion.' These countries are those who are not growing economically and have no immediate prospect of significant economic growth. It is no longer a matter of a billion rich people facing a poor world of 5 billion. Now, around 5 billion live in countries that are developing, "often at amazing speed." The other billion is "falling behind and often falling apart" (3).

Collier's analyzes why the poorest countries are failing. There are four traps into which countries in the 'bb' are prone to be caught. The operative word is trap since the great difficulty is getting out, since the effect is cyclical and, to make matters worse, one trap can easily lead to another. The cost to the country, its neighbors, and the global economy of countries caught in these traps is enormous.

The four traps are: (1) the conflict trap (civil war, coups); (2) the natural resource trap; (3) landlocked with bad neighbors; and (4) bad governance in a small country. All of the 'bb' countries have been in one or another trap: 73% have endured civil war; 29% are dominated by politics of natural resource revenues; 30% are landlocked, resource-scarce, and have bad neighbors; 76% have been through a period of bad governance and poor economic policies (79).

While these could arguably be claimed as blinding glimpses of the obvious, Collier explains the extensive economic research analysis that lies behind the identification of these traps, to carefully and accurately explain anomalies such as why the enormous income from oil revenues rarely benefits countries in the 'bb'. Colliers analysis covers the role of globalization, which Collier helpfully identifies in terms of three major strands: trade in goods; flows of capital; migration of people. BB countries are negatively effected by all three.

Escaping from the traps is not impossible and Collier's analysis leads inexorably towards a set of responses that the global community can make. However, he is clear:

We cannot rescue them. The societies of the bottom billion can only be rescued from within. In every society of the bottom billion there are people working for change, but usually they are defeated by the powerful forces stacked against them. We should be helping the heroes. So far, our efforts have been paltry: through inertia, ignorance and incompetence, we have stood by and watched them lose (96).

Collier then examines four instruments and their most appropriate use, on behalf of 'bb' countries (with some surprising ideas): (1) aid; (2) military intervention; (3) laws and charters; (4) trade policy for reversing marginalization.

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