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OPINION

## Singing About Fighting Poverty, Slightly Off-Key

Concerts to help the poor are fine, but too bad no one sounds a note about freedom. That's the path to prosperity.

By **WILLIAM EASTERLY**

Oct. 2, 2014 7:35 p.m. ET

Two crowds gathered on opposite sides of the world last weekend. The first crowd was for the celebrity concert in New York's Central Park featuring Jay Z, Beyoncé and Carrie Underwood, fighting against global poverty. The second crowd consisted of citizens of Hong Kong who are still staging a sit-in protest, fighting for their freedoms against a recent decision in Beijing to deny them previously promised free elections for Hong Kong's own government.

The sad thing is that the crowd for the first cause in Central Park showed little awareness or sympathy for the cause of the second crowd in Hong Kong.

For this longtime observer on economic-development efforts, it's frustrating to see how resistant those who care about poverty are to also caring about oppression. There is a kind of apartheid in economic-development efforts in the West that perceives people in the Rest as only having material needs, but not also having aspirations to realize their rights. The view is tragically misguided, because prosperity and liberty are inextricably linked.

Those who focus on global poverty don't bestir themselves about the Hong Kong demonstrators because Hong Kong citizens already enjoy material comfort. Yet Hong Kong is more prosperous than the rest of China precisely because of its relative freedom from Beijing's interference; how safe is that prosperity if China now interferes much more?

Many believe that the discussion of poor countries should focus only on poverty, not oppression, without considering whether the second might contribute to the first. Thus the development establishment of celebrities, policy wonks and aid agencies is eloquent on material poverty—with China even hailed as a poverty eradicator—while remaining silent on freedom, as in Hong Kong, where China is the enemy of democracy and individual rights.



Pro-democracy demonstrators gather in front of embattled leader CY Leung's office in Hong Kong on Thursday.  
AFP/GETTY IMAGES

So we saw at the Global Citizen Festival in Central Park, Jay Z's duet of "Forever Young" with Beyoncé mixed in a line: "We are gonna end extreme poverty by 2030, fact." Carrie Underwood helpfully clarified that "this festival is a hopeful opportunity for all of us to help see an end to extreme poverty." World Bank President Jim Yong Kim took the stage to declare: "It is my job to end poverty by 2030." (Voice in the crowd: "I love you Jim.")

Mr. Kim praised China's government on a July 8 visit to Beijing, after meeting China's current autocrat-in-chief, Xi Jinping. Mr. Kim touted "our common commitment to ending poverty." He credited the Chinese government for the "incredible feat" of lifting "half a billion people out of poverty in the last 30 years"—China, he said, "can become a model for many other countries."

His visit followed up on a World Bank initiative that Mr. Kim had announced on a trip to China in November 2012 to spread "practical knowledge from China's successes in reducing poverty" to other countries. He cited a World Bank report that related China's poverty outcomes to the "wisdom, strength, and determination of the Chinese leadership."

The progress against poverty in China is obvious, but whether China's government deserves to be held up as a development model is not so clear. For instance, who gets to decide whether mainland Chinese citizens should be content with improved standards of living and so few protections against the frequent violations of their rights by their own government?

Extreme poverty in China has been reduced over the past few decades precisely because Beijing permitted the freedoms of a market economy to infiltrate a communism-blighted society. If the regime's repression now worsens, count on the end of the country's high growth rates.

There should at least be a debate, but Mr. Kim and the World Bank are silent on these matters—as are most other aid agencies and their celebrity supporters. In fairness, the bank and other aid agencies may feel that they cannot criticize autocrats in countries where permission is needed to operate in

the fight against poverty.

Yet freedom is arguably central: first, as an end that people want for themselves, and, second, as the most well-proven path to escaping poverty. Consider among others North America, most of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Chile, where the answer to poverty was economic and political freedom. It is time that celebrity fighters for material economic development started also singing the praises of liberty.

*Mr. Easterly, a professor of economics at New York University, is the author of "The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor" (Basic Books, 2014).*

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