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## **Book Review:**

Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*  
(West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998)

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In April 1994, a genocide began in Rwanda that resulted in the deaths of up to one million people. Shocked by the unimaginable level of violence in this small country once perceived as an African "model of development," academics and development workers have generally turned to traditional explanations of conflict in search of answers. In *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, Peter Uvin, an associate professor at the Watson Institute for International Studies, director of the Development Studies Program at Brown University and former aid worker in Rwanda, adds his perspective by challenging the so-called "standard" explanation of the genocide, which he considers insufficient. Uvin's main contribution to the debate lies in his study of the "structural violence" that characterized Rwandan society, and how the substantial foreign development aid that poured into the country unwittingly abetted this phenomenon that ultimately led to genocide.

Uvin goes beyond the "standard" explanation for genocide in his analysis of Rwanda: economic crisis, political challenges to the regime, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) invasion, increased international pressure for democratization, and an increase in hate propaganda by certain groups. While Uvin certainly does not endeavor to diminish the significance of these factors, he perceives them as insufficient explanations due to their short-term nature. These factors ignore the deeper social problems that are, according to Uvin, the true seeds of genocide. The essence of Uvin's thesis centers on the importance of structural violence in a society.

Structural violence refers to societal structures and processes that "needlessly and brutally limit people's physical and psychological capacities." In such a society, one group finds itself totally excluded to the benefit of another, and Uvin convincingly argues that such a society existed in Rwanda. First, he looks at poverty and inequality by using data on undernutrition, ultra-poverty, land and income disparity and government-imposed immobility to refute traditional claims that Rwanda was a highly egalitarian country. He then addresses the way in which the sociopolitical system, based on the preferential treatment of one group by the colonizing Europeans encouraged the exclusion, and subsequent impoverishment, of the other group in Rwandan society. Hence, through institutionalized prejudice and humiliation, the elite used psychological tactics to disempower the marginalized group. Uvin stresses the fact that this did not end with colonial era, that in fact it became the norm for Rwandan society. This exclusion led to feelings of humiliation, anger, and frustration among the oppressed group that eventually led to acute violence directed by an individual or small group against another.

How does this acute violence become genocide, a form of violence that engulfs an entire population? Uvin argues that the racism inherent in Rwandan society, manipulated by the elite, gradually turned localized violence into a national phenomenon, an act of genocide. Thus, Uvin carefully notes that aggression resulting from a structurally violent society may remain acute without turning into genocide in countries that do not exhibit such extreme forms of entrenched racism. The potential for further violence, however, must not be ignored.

Uvin is particularly interested in the direct and indirect relationships between development aid and the processes of structural violence. "When societies disintegrate into violence, racism and hatred, what does development mean?" Although development projects did have a positive impact on a small portion of the population, much of the aid did not affect those in greatest need because it was often distributed to those who already enjoyed preferred treatment. This failure became more dramatic when, in the years preceding the genocide, development and emergency aid to Rwanda increased, along with government control of it, allowing the elite to use these resources for their own benefit while excluding the "other" group, thereby feeding the structural violence in society.

Uvin then considers whether or not the development community was aware of the impending genocide and concludes that it must have been at least conscious of an increase in general tension and violence. Had it acted upon this information, the international community might have helped to deter the imminent genocide. For example, aid agencies could have promoted "positive conditionality," in which aid resources "are used to strengthen the social and political conditions." In defense of the aid community, Uvin concedes that the level of violence was simply unimaginable. This should not, however, excuse the aid workers from having continued with "business as usual" while tension was obviously escalating. Despite the rise in human rights violations, racism, fear, and insecurity in Rwandan society, many aid agencies did not consider "that the development assistance mission ought to be, or could be, fundamentally rethought...as the situation unfolding in Rwanda was outside [their] mandate or capacity to intervene." Uvin finds fault with the well-intentioned development enterprise for turning a blind eye to events unfolding in society.

*Aiding Violence* also considers the role of civil society and ecological resource scarcity (high population growth, little arable land, and erosion). Although Rwandan society was characterized by a high number of non-governmental organizations and churches, data comparing the quality versus the quantity of institutions suggest that an effective civil society never truly existed. Uvin disputes the theory that the mere existence of a civil society encourages pluralism, stability, and progress; rather, in Rwanda, the civil society did not stop the processes of exclusion that ultimately led to genocide. Uvin goes on to debunk the popular argument that competition for scarce ecological resources was a primary cause of the genocide. Rather, the author suggests that the roots of the genocide were multi-causal, with resource scarcity playing a role along with other social and political factors.

In the final chapter, Uvin reflects upon the role, past and future, of the aid community in areas characterized by structural violence. Surprisingly, Uvin does not seek to formulate a “consultant list of recommendations,” explaining that the requisite changes are simply too fundamental to be reduced to a list. He does, however, directly address the inherently political nature of development. The foreign development aid directed toward Rwanda essentially supported a state system that promoted the exclusion of one group. In 1989-1990, official development aid accounted for 11.4 percent of Rwanda’s GNP. Thus, development aid helped to maintain and even encourage the structural violence that dominated Rwandan society. The conclusion drawn from this observation is that the aid community should have reconsidered its mission when faced with the disintegration of society in Rwanda. In order to prevent a similar scenario from taking place in the future, Uvin recommends an expansion of the development concept from simply an analysis of economic growth to a discussion of structural violence and the ways in which this expanded concept can be implemented.

The links that Uvin ties between development aid and the violence that occurred in Rwanda in 1994 are astonishing. His extensive research combined with strong personal feelings for Rwanda and its people produce a highly applicable and reflective work. Uvin is clearly passionate about his subject—years of working in Rwanda left him with many friends and colleagues, many of whom were killed or displaced during the genocide. After being part of the development enterprise and seeing how easily it could become implicated, he seeks to ensure that development agencies open their eyes to the social and political impact of their work.

This book is an excellent source for practitioners and scholars in the international development community, as well as individuals who study conflict prevention and management. The analysis of what could otherwise have been a complicated argument is quite accessible, even to a reader with little field experience. However, one area for improvement in the final study is the lack of specific and anecdotal examples of how structural violence affected society. Uvin admittedly notes the lack of such micro-information, due to an absence of available data. However, several of his points of discussion, such as the level of racism in society, would have been strengthened by personal anecdotes or details. Several of the footnotes contain interesting information concerning his own experiences as a participant in the development community in Rwanda and neighboring Burundi. For example, one footnote reads:

A former student of mine wrote angrily about “the technical assistants...who transform the region in a veritable holiday colony and delect themselves in an insolent tourism on project funds under the angry looks of the hungry farmers.” Having done it myself – and always having felt uncomfortable under the scrutinizing looks of the locals who passed the high, guarded metal fence around my Swiss chalet ... (with hot shower, refrigerator, CD collection, garden, parking for my car) – I must admit that this description is not too far from reality.

Uvin clearly possesses a wealth of personal experiences from which all readers could benefit.

In writing *Aiding Violence*, Uvin joins an active current debate in the development community concerning the unintended (and often negative) consequences of development aid by suggesting that the good will and intentions of aid agencies may sometimes be as harmful as they are beneficial to the intended beneficiary populations. In the end, however, Uvin does not advocate a withdrawal of development aid. He seems to truly believe in the capacity of development aid, albeit a redefined development model with a sense of understanding of the structures (often violent) that may be in place in a society. Uvin strongly advocates redirecting the management and implementation of development assistance. The tasks ahead for development agencies are obviously not easy to achieve; however, Uvin believes such changes are the only option.