AVOIDING HARMFUL OVERREACH WHEN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICAN INVESTMENTS*

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The protection of human rights in African investments is not only a live issue, but one that can only grow in importance as U.S.-African economic relations evolve. At the same time, the over-emphasis of rights may counterproductively scare away legitimate investors and stymie growth. While best practices must be encouraged, a suffocating paternalism must be avoided.

To illustrate why careful balancing is so needed in Africa, it helps to look first at Bangladesh. On April 24, 2013, Rana Plaza, a building housing five garment factories that supplied major U.S. apparel companies,1 collapsed and killed more than 1,100 people. A panel review found that “Rana Plaza [had] collapsed due to blatant violation of the building code, the use of substandard material and the operation of heavy machinery including generators on the upper floors.”2 It is also alleged that the owners and operators required workers – who made only $38 per month, less than a quarter of China’s minimum monthly wage – to go into the factory despite cracks appearing the day before on the building’s outer wall.3

The official U.S. reaction to Rana Plaza was far from harsh. Bangladesh’s GSP export benefits were suspended, but the GSP program as a whole expired per its terms shortly thereafter, and


3 Id.
the U.S. and Bangladeshi governments almost immediately set about to come to terms. Meanwhile, at a Senate hearing little more than a month after the collapse, a State Department official blandly observed that “[i]n the past two decades, Bangladesh has made remarkable development progress, in part because of the growth of its ready-made garment sector. Despite the benefits the industry has brought, however, the tragedies at Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions [a 2012 fire] have made clear that significant challenges remain.” The official went on to note that Secretary of State Kerry had, in his discussions with his Bangladeshi counterpart, framed the matter as one of protecting Bangladesh’s “brand.”

Had Rana Plaza been located in a suburb outside Accra rather than outside Dhaka, the response would have been quite different. Rather than see it as an isolated and all-too-typical industrial accident in the developing world, the U.S. media would have assailed U.S. complicity in the horrors of an industrializing Africa that had been pristine and innocent. Advocates of the Global


5 Anis Ahmed & Ruma Paul, More than 100 Die in Garment Factory Fire, the Deadliest in Bangladesh’s History, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR (Nov. 25, 2012), http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2012/1125/More-than-100-die-in-garment-factory-fire-the-deadliest-in-Bangladesh-s-history (observing that “[w]orking conditions at Bangladeshi factories are notoriously poor, with little enforcement of safety laws, and overcrowding and locked fire doors are common”).


7 Id. Assistant Secretary of State Blake’s prepared testimony used terms such as “goal,” “urged,” “pressed,” “hope,” “advocacy,” “engaged,” and “organized a conference call,” which convey a gentler tone than that of Assistant Secretary of State Carson when testifying about Nigeria. See source cited infra note 10.

8 A useful example of official U.S. paternalism in respect of “proper” African economic development is the Obama Administration’s Power Africa program,
which is tilted (at least in its featured elements) toward “clean” energy and helping Africa “develop newly-discovered [oil and gas] reserves responsibly.” See Off. of the Press Secretary, Fact Sheet: Power Africa, WHITE HOUSE (June 30, 2013), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/30/fact-sheet-power-africa. Such a prescriptive approach, as aesthetically pleasing as it may be to Western policy elites seated in comfortable offices electrified mostly by coal, is not aimed at enabling the large-scale industrial development that pulled the United States, and more recently China, out of agrarian poverty. See Spencer Swartz & Shai Oster, China Tops U.S. in Energy Use, WALL ST. J. (June 18, 2010, 12:01 AM), http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB100014240527037037205736712533150310 (noting that China’s energy “milestone . . . reflects both China’s decades-long burst of economic growth and its rapidly expanding clout as an industrial giant”). The Western elite preference for clean energy over actual development in Africa is further illustrated by a UNEP report’s consideration of the problem of energy in Sub-Saharan Africa as involving the “need” to shift from carbon-heavy sources to “sustainable options.” UNEP FIN. INITIATIVE, FINANCING RENEWABLE ENERGY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES 38 (2012), available at http://www.unepfi.org/fileadmin/documents/Financing_Renewable_Energy_in_subSaharan_Africa.pdf. Such an elevation of Western “clean hands” policy preferences over the rapid if imperfect alleviation of human suffering finds a mirror in Western qualms over the genetic modification of the Anopheles mosquito, which carries the malaria-causing Plasmodium parasite. The Anopheles mosquito thoughtlessly conducts a nearly Rwanda-level genocide every year in Africa, annually slaughtering among its victims around 600,000 children. The lead author of the relevant GM study nevertheless felt bound to observe that all ethical, social and legal concerns over the use of a genetically-engineered mosquito in a country willing to give it a trial also will have to be satisfied. Meeting these concerns requires significant community engagement and intellectual and emotional ownership of the technology by the end-users and stakeholders. I don’t know how long this could take, but it won’t be fast.

Liat Clark, Genetically Modified Mosquito Designed to Avoid Malaria Spread, WIRED.CO.UK (June 13, 2012), http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-06/13/genetically-modified-mosquitoes (quoting Professor Anthony James from University of California, Irvine). To elevate a mosquito over more than half a million dying children is the nadir of moral preening. A useful thought experiment here is to imagine the reaction in Bethesda or Kensington if malaria started killing prep-schoolers and parents were told by (malaria-free) outsiders that they had to slowly nurture an “intellectual and emotional” consensus about whether to introduce the GM-modified mosquito. It is safe to say the consensus would not only be instantaneous, but accompanied by angry demands for immediate and large-scale implementation. To understand still better just how different Western and African experiences, priorities and timetables often are, compare Tom Frieden, Number of U.S. Malaria Cases Highest in 40 Years. Have We Forgotten What It Takes to Prevent It?, HUFFINGTON POST (Oct. 31, 2013, 3:07 PM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-frieden-md-mph/number-of-u-s-malaria-cases_b_4181924.html (noting that malaria, which was aggressively wiped out in the United States decades ago - by means now deemed environmentally unacceptable - is contracted through international travel and now kills only five Americans per year) with Malaria, WORLD HEALTH Org., http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs094/en (last visited Nov. 6, 2013)
South would have produced articles and conferences bemoaning the ceaseless exploitation of African workers.\(^9\) Congressional hearings would have heard testimony not about safeguarding Africa’s “brand,” but rather about how harshly U.S. officials had chided their African counterparts.\(^{10}\) (The fact that even troubled Nigeria has a better “brand” than Bangladesh on important metrics would be blithely ignored.)\(^{11}\) There would have been calls to


\(^{10}\) See, e.g., Anastasia Lloyd Damnjanovic, U.S. Dept. of State, State’s Carson Says U.S. Supports a “Stable, Prosperous” Nigeria, U.S. AFRICA COMMAND (July 12, 2012), http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Article/9071/states-carson-says-us-supports-a-stable-prosperous (noting that Asst. Sec. of State Johnnie Carson testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the corruption, abuse and “inability of the [Nigerian] government to address the needs of the people, to grow the economy and to generate jobs” had generated mass hopelessness and assisted the rise of the Boko Haram terrorist movement). The tonal difference between Mr. Carson’s testimony and that of Mr. Blake about Bangladesh is striking (see supra notes 6-7 and accompanying text), especially considering the fact that Bangladesh has troubles and metrics comparable to, or worse than, those of Nigeria. See infra note 11 and accompanying text.

impose stringent labor conditions in investment treaty negotiations with African countries, despite the fact that the United States does not impose such conditions on existing partners like Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the “development aid” industry would discuss with its enablers in the federal bureaucracy and congressional committees how “aid” studies and capacity-building programs could promote the adoption and enforcement of better African labor and building codes.

Meanwhile, more general Western reactions to such a dirtily industrializing Africa would hardly be complimentary. There would be articles about the effects of soot on wildebeest, the disruption of picturesque traditional communities, and the ruination of landscapes by highways and suburban housing tracts. In short, the West would mourn the loss of “National Geographic Africa,” the Rousseauian love of which has inspired so many official U.S. efforts to protect Africa from the standard dislocations and tradeoffs of economic development.

The long reach and oppressive atmosphere of Western paternalism in Africa quietly drives off many legitimate U.S. investors. It is one thing to face a militant labor movement, for

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14 See, e.g., supra note 8 and accompanying text (discussing the Obama Administration’s Power Africa initiative, which reflects Western notions about “clean” energy sourcing that wealthy Western communities would never accept for themselves).
example in South Africa.15 It is quite another to deal with a Western presumption that simply employing Africans in a Western-style industrial enterprise is exploitative.16 Since Western commentators tend to view African workers not as tough proletarians like their Bangladeshi counterparts,17 but instead as helpless Conradian natives,18 it is far easier for U.S. investors to avoid public-relations headaches and site industrial investments in brownfield Asian locations rather than in Africa. Conscientious U.S. firms thus counterproductively leave a desperate continent to the tender mercies of U.S. and foreign (particularly Chinese) operations more interested in profits than in ethics.19

The answer to stifling Western paternalism is not the abandonment of Africa. It is instead to advance Africa’s economic interests rather than the whims of Western elites with more certainty than sense. For example, the U.S. Government displays a certain cognitive dissonance when it decries “inexpensive labor” (a key competitive advantage for Africa),20 as well as declining wages

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17 See Ahmed & Paul, supra note 5 (reporting that after the Tazreen fire, “[m]ore than 300 factories near the capital shut for almost a week earlier this year as workers demanded higher wages and better working conditions”). Unionization is by no means unknown in African industry. See Okeowo, supra note 16 (discussing the role of the Mine Workers Union of Zambia in a violent labor dispute between Zambian miners and Chinese owners).

18 See, e.g., sources cited supra note 9.

19 See Okeowo, supra note 16; *Equatorial Guinea Profile*, BBC NEWS AFRICA (June 25, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13317174 (stating that Exxon Mobil was found to have paid large sums to President Obiang’s family in one of the world’s most abusive and corrupt states).

in the global apparel industry dominated by China and Bangladesh, while at the same time bragging that the Third-Country Fabric Provision of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) “is crucial to the continued survival of Africa’s textile and apparel industry. It has not only generated hundreds of thousands of jobs in sub-Saharan Africa, but it has also helped American retailers reduce their costs, diversify their supply chains, and provide greater low-cost apparel options for American consumers.” So which is it to be – expensive labor or reduced costs? When 153,276 businesses compete worldwide to produce apparel, it is silly for the U.S. Government to expect that high margins will exist to pay for high hourly wages.

A sensible alternative to official protests against economic realities is to increase demand for African labor and thereby drive up wages. This can be done by attracting massive U.S. private investment across all sectors. To achieve this, the U.S. Government and others would be wise to advise and assist U.S. investors in respect of local laws, practices, and procedures concerning labor, health, and the environment. When the present vacuums of risk in these areas are reduced to quotidian details, businesses can develop solid plans that lead to success and to the prosperity of African workers. That is how everybody wins.

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21 Id. See also Ahmed & Paul, supra note 5 (“Bangladesh has around 4,500 garment factories and is the world’s biggest exporter of clothing after China, with garments making up 80 percent of its $24 billion annual exports.”).
