

## DEBATE

# Charity and Global Solidarity – A Dying Idealism?

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**ABSTRACT**

This opinion piece raises concerns about whether solidarity can remain broad or will narrow to self-interest-driven initiatives, compounded by current aid policies linking assistance to trade benefits and redirecting development funds closer to home.

My Rotary group took on a project supporting the Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development (GECPD) in Somalia, founded by women's rights activist Hawa Aden Mohammed. The project, driven by her vision, emphasized education for girls, addressing inequalities tied to poverty and cultural practices like female genital mutilation. Over three years, we funded a teaching position and covered school fees for underprivileged students. By connecting local and global actions, this effort exemplifies how solidarity can transcend geographical and cultural divides. Working in such initiatives not only contributes to social change but also offers personal growth, underscoring the enduring value of innovative engagement models in an evolving world.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 3 November 2024  
Accepted 26 November 2024

**RESPONSIBLE EDITOR**

Lars L Gustafsson

**KEYWORDS**

Global health, charity, solidarity, development

A few years ago, I was invited to join Rotary in my home community. Like many, I had a preconceived notion of Rotary as a closed circle, primarily of prominent local businessmen who gathered to exchange experiences for mutual benefit. I never imagined that this small Rotary group of twenty-some people, mostly men over 65 and a few strong women, would become a new platform in my retirement for my professional life's project, "global health equality." This, I think aligns with Rotary's vision to "take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves."

This paper is an opinion piece drawing from the above experience mirrored by my commitment to Somalia ever since my involvement during the 1980s and 90s in a primary health care project focusing on maternal and child health supported by the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

Although Swedes are generally generous in donating to national and international organizations, charities like Lions and Rotary report increasing challenges in recruiting new members. This puts the responsibility increasingly on aging members, while younger generations face what's known as the "life puzzle." Reflecting on the future of charity and solidarity in today's society leads us to questions about idealism's place in a rapidly changing

world. It also illustrates a growing trend toward self-interest, even in global contexts. This raises questions about whether society can continue to maintain a broader form of solidarity or if we are shifting toward a narrower interpretation of what is implied by helping others. The "proximity principle" significantly influences both governmental and individual decisions on solidarity. This principle has been adopted to a large extent by the current Swedish government, which links aid to trade exchanges. Aid is primarily directed toward those from whom a financial return can be expected in business deals. The change is also motivated by an ambition to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness. "Solidarity" with those most in need (and farthest away) is less visible in current policy documents. On the contrary, pending proposals suggest that immigrants from certain countries, like Somalia, are now offered substantial financial support on the condition that they return to their home country (and to where they had their reasons for leaving).

The principle is consistently applied and now even includes international research collaboration. Development research, which primarily focuses on partnerships with and on conditions in the poorest countries, "the farthest away," faced significant budget cuts this past spring, with the justification that the funds

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were needed closer to home, specifically Ukraine. As if we could not afford to fund both. This shift reflects a movement away from altruism toward a more self-serving form of support. The “proximity” principle is also at odds with the EU Charter of Fundamental rights, “solidarity” being one of its six basic principles [1].

That older generations continue to carry much of the burden of volunteer work, while younger generations seem to find it more challenging to engage, can have several explanations. Part of it is that time is a scarce resource for many young adults juggling work, family, and other commitments. But it could also reflect a changed view on what engagement and solidarity mean. The future of solidarity may very well be shaped by a combination of altruistic and self-interested motives. Technology and social media have made it easier than ever to participate in or support good causes, opening doors to new forms of engagement. “Crowdfunding,” digital campaigns, and short online volunteer efforts are examples of how solidarity can adapt to modern lifestyles. However, this also means that traditional forms of volunteer work must adapt to survive and attract new generations.

Rotary operates on a “glocal” principle, aiming to work on both local and global projects with the understanding that their content, methods, and results are interconnected. The saying “change begins at home” is truly relevant. In my Rotary group we have implemented several local initiatives, such as ensuring defibrillators are available at various community gathering points, providing extra care for the elderly, and mentoring young entrepreneurs. It is probably less known that, on a global scale, Rotary has, since 1988, funded vaccination programs, contributing significantly to the near eradication of polio.

In my Rotary group, we recognized a pressing issue common in low-income countries, particularly in Africa— young girls’ vulnerability due to poverty and female genital mutilation (FGM), which strips them of basic human rights like education. This concern aligns closely with Rotary’s broader vision of global peace and understanding, particularly in their focus on “Empowering women and girls.”

Education serves as a pathway to the labor market, gender equality, and health and social rights, making it a strategy for empowering girls and young women in societies still governed by traditional and cultural norms. In certain regions, education is also restricted to girls, blocking them from gaining autonomy and perpetuating inequalities. Gender inequality in Somalia, for example, is often rooted in socio-cultural and religious beliefs, with poverty as a critical underlying factor. This disparity in education access, along with the prevalence of FGM, exemplifies extreme gender inequality in the Somali society.

Just as health investments promote peace and development, health and education pave the way for young girls to assert their rightful place in society. The high maternal mortality rate in Somalia is further evidence of neglect and gender inequality. Insufficient health sector

funding, along with the widespread practice of FGM, contribute to high maternal and infant mortality rates. Nationally prioritizing gender equality within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals aims to address these disparities and move toward a more equitable future.

The country’s high vulnerability to instability and climate change has hindered economic and social development. Additionally, entrenched social norms impede the fundamental rights of women and children, especially girls. These norms limit women’s influence in family and community decisions, leading to gender-based violence, early marriage, and FGM.

Through my previous work in rural health research in Somalia during the 1980s and 90s [2], I later connected with the Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development (GECPD) in northern Somalia. This center, founded by Hawa Aden Mohammed, a legal and women’s rights activist, was established when she returned from exile in Canada. Driven by her vision, she successfully persuaded parents and local leaders in Galkayo of the importance of girls’ education [3].

This connection became the foundation of a personal commitment that the Rotary group later developed into a partnership to support GECPD. Over three years, the project aims to sustain and expand educational opportunities for girls, boys, and women, provide support and counseling for women affected by violence, and back GECPD’s efforts to combat FGM. An underpinning goal was also to challenge the notion that Somalia’s instability, inequality, and poverty prevent meaningful cooperation.

After consulting with GECPD’s leadership, we were given a list of their top priorities, with the highest being the funding of a teaching position and covering school fees for the neediest families. Drawing on Mama Hawa’s inspiring story (2), we successfully secured funds from various foundations, and even at birthday celebrations, guests contributed “envelope fees” in place of gifts. By spring 2024, we had achieved a three-year commitment to fund the teacher’s salary (3000 SEK/month) and sponsor 200 school fees at 500 SEK/year each.

Now, three years later, the project has evolved into a true partnership, with regular updates from the center on how the funds are utilized. Teacher Maryam shares photos of “her” children and stories from parent meetings, keeping us connected to the impact of our contributions. Recently, she has submitted an article to SHAJ reflecting her first six months as a teacher at GECPD [4].

We’ve come to see GECPD as a role model institution—a vibrant developmental environment advancing the education of vulnerable girls. It exemplifies how critical engagement is to a nation’s pursuit of human rights, even one facing poverty and other challenges.

I dare to say that this case study shows that mutual understanding can deepen despite distant realities, an insight worthy of sharing in one’s own local community. I see working in charitable projects as both a solidarity act and a chance for personal learning and reflection. While

traditional charity faces challenges today, new forms of engagement that blend self-interest with altruism hold promise. The question is how we can foster such developments, ensuring that solidarity remains vibrant and dynamic in society. And as global needs draw closer, we must never ignore distant ones.

## Summary in Somali

### CINWAAN

Samafalka iyo Wadajirka Caalamiga ah - Fikrad dhimanaysa?

### SOOKOOBID

Qaybtan ra'yiga ahi waxay kor u qaadaysaa welwelka ku saabsan in wadajirku uu ahaan karo mid sii fida ama uu ku soo koobmi doono hindiseyaal dano gaar ah laga leeyahay, oo ay u sii dheer tahay siyaasadaha gargaarka ee hadda ku xidha kaalmada, faa'iidooyinka ganacsi iyo dib u habeynta dhaqaalaha horumarinta ee u dhow degaankooda.

Kooxdayda Rotary waxay qaadatay mashruuc lagu taageerayo Xarunta Waxbarashada Gaalkacyo ee Nabadda iyo Horumarinta (GECPD) ee Soomaaliya, oo ay aasaastay Xaawo Aadan Maxamed oo u dhaqdhaqaaqa xuquuqda haweenka. Mashruuca, oo ay ku dhaqaajisay aragtideeda, ayaa xoogga saaray waxbarashada gabdhaha, wax ka qabashada sinnaan la'aanta ku xiran faqriga iyo habdhaqameedyada sida gudniinka fircooniga ah. Muddo saddex sano ah, waxaanu maalgelinay boos macalinimo; waxaan sidoo kale daboolnay kharashka dugsiga ee ardayda danyarta ah. Isku xirka ficillada maxalliga ah iyo kuwa caalamiga ah, dadaalkani wuxuu tusaale u yahay sida wadajirku uga gudbi karo kala qaybsanaanta juqraafi iyo kuwa dhaqameed. Ka shaqaynta hindisayaashan oo kale ma aha oo kaliya inay gacan ka geystaan isbeddel bulsheed laakiin waxay sidoo kale dhaliyaan korriimo shaqsiyadeed, iyada oo hoosta laga xariiqayo fikradaha hawlgallada cusub ee qiimo waara u leh hal-abuurka adduunka horumaraya.

Lama doonka – Buulalow study. Umeå University, Umeå 1995.

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## Paper Context

This opinion piece questions whether solidarity will narrow to self-interest amid shifting aid policies linking assistance to trade benefits. A Rotary-led project in Somalia supported the Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development, founded by activist Hawa Aden Mohammed, focusing on girls' education and combating inequalities like female genital mutilation. Over three years, it funded a teaching position and school fees for underprivileged students, showcasing how local-global collaboration fosters societal change while promoting personal growth.

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