

The Power of a Good Yank

If *Mountains Beyond Mountains* introduced me to the extent of the effects of colonialism on the Global South today, then *Bending the Arc* was my first exposure to the perpetuation of biological racist ideologies through open dialogue on the international development stage, particularly within the last half century. One particular quote felt like a punch in the chest: “If you’ve ever been to one of *these* countries, you realize that their ability to screw up a program stems all the way from the top down.” My naivete and anachronic instincts made it difficult to process that policymakers had said something so obscenely discriminatory and untrue in an international political forum, and in the last few decades at that. Accordingly, perhaps equally as poignant as the lack of access to treatment for diseases like MDR TB and AIDS in developing countries as shown in the movie is the way that **People of Color have been forced to fight for their humanity on a global scale in order to gain access to that treatment**. I was struck by the Cange patients’ declaration “We are indeed poor, but just because we are poor does not mean we are stupid!” *Bending the Arc* made a lot of pieces fit together for me. Have you ever stopped to think, doesn’t the Partners in Health method seem sort of... intuitive? Why is it just within the last fifty years that the field of global health has made the shift to training up local community health workers to build up sustainable systems in their countries of origin? After all, don’t we see the problems in the places where we are from better than anyone? The documentary triggered these questions and quickly led me to one obvious and somewhat soul-crushing response. If the individuals who hold international economic and political power believe the people of “the country of Africa” to be “dumb” and uncivilized so deeply as to assert that they don’t have watches, how could they support a vision in which people in the Global South recruit and train community health care workers? How could policymakers believe that with access to the right tools, communities are best equipped to help themselves?

Despite these challenging revelations, the overall message of the documentary was not one of despair. It was a message of the hope and progress of the Rwandans, of the Haitians, of the Ecuadorians, and of people and public health professionals across the globe toward robust, decentralized systems that deliver the health treatment and educational tools to which **all humans are entitled**. I am learning from Paul Farmer, Agnes Bingawaho, Jim Kim, Ophelia Dahl, Dr. Joia Mukerjee, and so many others that hope and sheer will are perhaps even more infectious than ebola and HIV. As I have begun my journey in the studies of public policy and human rights this semester, I have started to become a bit disillusioned. We exist in convoluted, problematic, and inefficient local, state, national and international political systems, and on top of that, there is no legal enforcement of human rights as listed in the Universal Declaration of 1948. In our polarized political landscape, gridlock is making it nearly impossible to get anything done within our national borders, let alone in terms of aid to developing countries. In spite of all of this, global partnerships like those executed by Partners in Health have been able to make change at both the international and community levels.

Towards the beginning of the documentary, Paul and Jim Kim divulged their revelations and inexperience. At one point, Paul wryly admitted, “I didn’t know how to build a hospital.” He discussed the temptation of diffused responsibility and the lethal delay it causes. *Bending the Arc* humanized the work of Partners in Health that Tracy Kidder failed to do - perhaps because it wasn’t his intention - in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The documentary made it clear that public health improvement requires wilful, passionate

people who are committed to developing expertise in order to make sustainable, community-based change. The expertise need not be there (no one is born an expert, after all) if they are ready to learn via research, listening, and collaboration. The sheer success of the results - for example, a 90% drop in the prices of MDR TB drugs after Dr. Jim Kim's negotiations with the World Bank - speaks for itself. Bending the Arc gave me hope. Perhaps what Dr. King said really is true, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Perhaps in order to make real progress toward a more equitable world, we must only give that arc a good yank. However, the will required to do so is not to be underestimated.