



Refugees are evacuated in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, an event in which most countries did not intervene.



Hoping Someone Else Fixes Everyone's Problem

By Shankar Vedantam

Monday, October 22, 2007; A03

Let's say there are 10 houses on your street and a giant pothole develops right in the middle of the block. Everyone benefits if the pothole gets fixed, but that might require multiple calls to municipal authorities and a lot of hassle. Since every resident benefits even if he or she does nothing to solve the problem, each resident has an incentive to sit back and hope someone else will do the dirty work.

This phenomenon, known as the free rider problem, is ubiquitous whenever you have a combination of a public good and the need for collective action. Researchers have thought a lot about how groups can get around the problem.

Recently, a political scientist from [North Carolina](#) got to thinking about whether the free rider problem may explain a conundrum that has bedeviled international politics for decades -- a conundrum that recently reared its head in the news in multiple guises.

The problem, whether in [Burma](#), [Tibet](#), [Armenia](#) or [Darfur](#), is what the world should do when people in a particular country are being oppressed. The most chilling example came in 1994, when the world sat on its hands and watched genocide unfold in [Rwanda](#).

Most countries agree that ending genocide and political repression are important. A couple of weeks ago the [U.N. Security Council](#) unanimously declared its abhorrence for the military clampdown in Burma against Buddhist monks campaigning for human rights and democracy. The conundrum, though, is why such unanimity rarely translates into action that makes any concrete difference.

"Everyone agreeing on something is not sufficient to cause action -- that's the free rider problem," said Stephen Gent, a political scientist at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#).

Gent recently analyzed all civil conflicts after World War II. He found that when the United States, [Britain](#) and other powers unanimously agreed with each other on the importance of some issue, they were

the least likely to actually do anything about it, especially if no private benefit, such as access to oil or territory, was also involved.

Ending genocide, Gent argues in a study to be published in the *Journal of Politics*, is the ultimate public good. Everyone opposes genocide, even if they themselves do nothing to halt it. The free rider problem suggests there will be an incentive for each country to sit back and hope someone else expends blood and treasure to stop the killings.

When countries have intervened to end political repression, Gent finds, there are usually private benefits attached -- the U.S. invasion of [Iraq](#), for example, was not primarily meant to help repressed Iraqis, but to buy America protection against terrorism and a strategic foothold in the [Middle East](#).

The free rider theory provides a novel explanation of why the world regularly fails to halt genocide. Todd Sandler, a [University of Texas](#) economist who studies free rider problems, praises Gent for showing how consensus can counterintuitively lead to inaction when it comes to humanitarian causes.

But Michael Barnett, a political scientist at the [University of Minnesota](#) and the author of "Eyewitness to a Genocide: The [United Nations](#) and Rwanda," argues the problem is not collective inaction, but that most nations do not really care that much about repression in faraway places.

"Yes, they do not like genocide," adds Stephen Krasner, a [Stanford University](#) political scientist. "But, also yes, getting your own forces killed in a far-off place that most of your electorate has never heard of is not likely to win you votes."

Krasner says one problem with Gent's theory is that nations, unlike houses on a block, are not equals. Most countries lack the means to intervene, meaning that if powerful countries do nothing, nothing gets done. Domestic political pressures, he adds, make powerful countries unwilling to sacrifice lives: "That is why dealing with the tsunami was so nice -- no one got killed -- and why Clinton decided that the [U.S. Air Force](#) would fly at 30,000 feet when bombing to get the Serbs out of [Kosovo](#)."

Gent agrees that the extent to which countries care about what happens in other nations, and domestic politics, are factors in whether they intervene to stop a genocide.

And sometimes, he adds, countries take action even when no private interest is at stake, as the United States did in [Haiti](#) in 1994 when it restored democratically elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power. But Gent says the free rider model accounts for these phenomena, too.

"It could be the public good to you is worth more than the cost of intervention," he said. "If your interest in this country is so high you are willing to pay all the costs to get this public good for everyone, you will see unilateral intervention."

In other words, if the pothole is right in front of your house or poses a problem especially for you, you may be willing to fix the problem on your own. Small countries do step up to the plate -- when the problem is at their doorstep. African nations, not major powers, are the ones now sending peacekeepers to halt the killings in Darfur.

What it comes down to is a trade-off between what Gent calls salience -- the connection a country has to another country's problem -- and the cost of doing something. Problems in nearby countries, or in places that share historical or ethnic ties, are like the pothole in front of your house.

Difficult problems in distant lands such as Burma are like potholes way down the block. For such problems, the world simply clucks its disapproval and then does nothing.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company