

[Worrying about Oxfam](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Sunday 22 June 2008



I do worry about Oxfam at times you know. Yes, I know their hearts are in the right place, I know they mean well. But they do seem to come up with some very strange ideas about how to make the world a better place. Here's Duncan Green, their head of research, talking about the challenges of the future, climate change, resource constraints [and all](#) [3]:

We do not yet know if Darwin or Gandhi will be the genius of the age of scarcity - whether we are facing the survival of the fittest or effective global co-operation.

Leave aside all the other oddities of his argument and concentrate just on that Gandhi part: that he was advocating or a proponent of effective global co-operation. It's certainly true that he was big on the rhetoric of how we should all live together in peace (an idea that it's really rather hard to object to) but actual co-operation, not so much. For if we look at his economic policies he thought it right that India should remain largely a country of village farmers. That each household should create its own cotton cloth rather than suffering the alienation of their labour in the factories. Further, that India itself should be self-sufficient in all its production. That imports were a bad thing, home production a good one, even if more expensive or of lower quality.

Indeed, Gandhi specifically rejected the greatest form of effective global co-operation that we know of, the market. A brief look around the room you are currently in will show you that millions of humans have co-operated to produce the humdrum items in it. It might be miners in Chile (and their support of mining equipment engineers in the US and other places, the rubber plantations for the tires and so on) which have produced the copper that makes your very computer work: or the silicon design engineers in California, or, well, if you haven't read [I Pencil](#) [4] please do to get the point. I'd add one small bit from my own business life: anyone and everyone who has a halogen bulb in their kitchen (I'm told this is all the rage these days) is co-operating with a group of Kazakh uranium miners and the work they did in the 1990s, for that's where the magic pixie dust that makes such bulbs work comes from. Indeed, just about anyone who has used a street light in the past decade has been co-operating with that group.

If we actually want global co-operation (and I certainly am convinced that we do) then we very much do not want Gandhi to be our role model: far from it. Rather Adam Smith in fact, for it was indeed he who first laid out the basic principles by which not just millions, or hundreds of millions, but billions of human beings do indeed co-operate: in that global marketplace.

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