The History of ASAP

Keith Horton

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I floated the original ASAP proposal in 2009 and, in partnership with Meena Krishnamurthy, made the first efforts at enlisting other academics. My background is in moral philosophy, and I had become convinced that people and governments in rich countries (the 'global rich') are morally required to do much more than they are currently doing to tackle severe poverty in poor countries. The bare fact that given their relative wealth the global rich are in a position to make a major impact on such poverty at relatively little cost to themselves had always seemed to me enough to ground a very strong argument for such action. The fact that the global rich have various forms of connection with the global poor—through international trade and tourism, historically through colonialism and all its evils, and so on—would widely be taken to strengthen that argument further. And the fact that the global rich continue to act in ways that are known to make it harder for the global poor to escape from poverty—by imposing trade rules rigged in their own favour, for example, and by buying resources that warlords have in effect stolen from their own people—strengthens that argument further still. The combined case is overwhelming.

Most philosophers and other normative theorists who research these issues would agree with that conclusion, I believe, though of course they would disagree about the details. That message doesn't seem to be reaching many people beyond academia, though. Most people in rich countries still seem to regard any action taken to tackle global poverty as a matter of charity—admirable, perhaps, but not morally required. The pressure on governments in rich countries to reform policies that worsen global poverty is weak at best. With one or two notable exceptions, moreover, there seems to be surprisingly little attempt by philosophers to get this message about the moral priority of tackling severe poverty out beyond academia. Most publish exclusively in academic journals, focusing on the smaller issues that divide them rather than the larger issues that unite them.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, for it is not generally taken to be part

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of the role of academics to try to change the world. Academics should focus purely on truth-seeking; others may then select any ideas of wider interest and disseminate them more broadly. At least in the case of normative work on global poverty, though, this latter role seems to have been largely neglected. And so there are strong reasons for academics to work harder at disseminating their own ideas, given the moral urgency of the issue. After all, if one's research leads one to the conclusion that the global rich are living in a way that is deeply morally wrong, with consequences that are (without any hyperbole) catastrophic, then surely that ought to be enough to motivate a departure from normal practice.

It was such thoughts that led me to try to find out if other philosophers would be interested in forming a group that would aim at having more impact on global poverty than we were currently having. By working together as a group, I thought, we would be able to have much more impact than if each of us worked independently. We could discuss strategy together and draw on each other's insights, expertise, and connections when determining how it would be best to concentrate our efforts. We could share tasks between ourselves so that contributing to the enterprise did not become too time-consuming for any individuals. And the very existence of the group might catalyse certain individuals who have felt vaguely that they would like to 'do something' about global poverty, but without being able to see what.

1   Early Organising Efforts

With this in mind, I presented a proposal for such a group at a workshop on global poverty in Canberra, Australia in July 2009. The first to show an active interest was Meena, who had already been working on a similar idea. She helped me to develop the proposal and then we sent it out to our networks. We were heartened by the positive response, and particularly by the fact that a number of other philosophers—above all, Thomas Pogge and Paula Casal—showed a willingness to give their time and energy to the project. With these new people came new ideas. The first major innovation was the decision to expand the membership of the group to include academics in disciplines other than philosophy. The advantages to doing so were clear enough, given that many of the issues relevant to global poverty are interdisciplinary, and that using the networks of people from a broader range of disciplines would help to publicise the group's activities more widely. Accordingly, we rewrote the proposal for the group again, and called ourselves 'Academics Stand Against Poverty' (ASAP), a name suggested by Thomas, who now serves as Chair of the ASAP Board.

As if to mock our choice of acronym, progress was initially very slow, but we

gradually moved forward. Our list of interested academics expanded steadily, now including people from many different disciplines. Thomas arranged for the Global Justice Center at Yale University to provide organisational support and some funding. In July 2010 we had our first public event, a workshop on the theme 'How can academics have more impact on global poverty?' at a conference on Global Ethics in Bristol, England. Andrew Williams chaired the workshop and Sabina Alkire, Paula, and Thomas gave presentations, stimulating an interesting discussion. A little later, we got funding from Yale for our first project, an experiment to test the comparative effectiveness of different kinds of philosophical argumentation in inspiring moral concern and action regarding global poverty. John French and Paula worked on the logo and web banner with comments from the Board. We drafted a mission statement and set of aims, and established ASAP as a not-for-profit organisation in the US, with much help from Joy Gordon of the Global Justice Center.

2   Expanding the Network

Most importantly of all, ASAP continued to attract new academics and students, including some—such as Matt Lindauer, Luis Cabrera, and Gilad Tanay—who were to play major roles in the development of the organisation. Gilad, Matt, and Justine Kolata organised the ASAP US launch conference at Yale University in April 2011, and Luis organised the ASAP UK launch conference at Birmingham University in May 2011. Thomas headlined both events, and both were a great success. Attendance was excellent, new ideas were proposed and old ideas improved, and new people emerged, prepared to carry these ideas forward.

We are now endeavouring to put some of those ideas into action. One example is *World Poverty Forum*. It's designed to bring research and expert dialogue on global poverty to a broad public. A second is the *Global Poverty Report*, which aims to identify and articulate a broad overlapping consensus among academics on some of the most important normative and factual claims about global poverty. Gilad is playing the main role in pulling this project together. Matt and Meena are leading a third project, *Moral Motivation and Poverty Alleviation*, which aims to bring together academics working in moral philosophy and the cognitive sciences to discover more effective means of motivating individuals to contribute to measures aimed at tackling global poverty.

Another theme that came forward strongly at Yale and Birmingham concerned certain impediments in the way of academics seeking to have an impact on global poverty, and how an organisation like ASAP might help to overcome them. Many

thought it would be helpful, for example, if such an organisation could facilitate better coordination, collaboration, and mutual support both among academics working on global poverty in different fields, and among such academics and NGOs, governments and multilateral organisations. We are now developing the ASAP website in ways that are intended to serve these ends.

In relation to research, the website will help to make it clear who is working on which poverty-relevant topics around the world and thus allow for more efficient collaboration. In relation to projects, the website will contain information on which projects are in need of what kind of help, and how academics and students can make an effective contribution to them. It will also enable people to fill out a form specifying how they are able and willing to contribute and thus join a database which activist academics can use to enlist their help. This should help academics and students who want to contribute their time, resources and skills to the cause of poverty reduction but aren't quite sure how best to do so. The ASAP website should also allow academics to share their scarce resources (grant-writing expertise, databases, guidance on campaigning and public persuasion, and so on) with one another in an efficient way, as well as to make available to the community of global poverty academics shared resources that will improve our collective impact.

3   Answering the Sceptics

These are some of our current ideas and plans. How much of a difference might we make? Though many are enthusiastic about the project, there have always been some who are sceptical that an organisation like ASAP can have a significant impact on global poverty. A variety of reasons have been put forward for such scepticism. It is sometimes said that academics lack the skills necessary to make such an impact, for example. They write in styles that are technical and obscure, and lack the networking and political skills necessary to influence events. Such claims stereotype academics, though. Some academics write in styles that are technical and obscure and others don't; some have highly developed networking and political skills and some do not, and so on. In so far as we lack the necessary skills, moreover, we can either develop them or collaborate with those who do have them. So there does not appear to be any decisive reason for scepticism from this quarter.

A different reason for scepticism is that academics are said to be too divided to be able to make much of a common cause together. Ours is a profession in which novelty is rewarded: when we publish, we aim to show how we differ and not where we overlap; when we respond it is usually to criticize and not to support. Again, though there is

something in this complaint, it does not appear to present any decisive obstacle. We at ASAP believe that there is in fact much more consensus on what can and should be done to alleviate global poverty than might appear on the surface, and we hope to identify and highlight this consensus. We also believe that lots of academics will be willing to support this effort, given the benefits that might follow. Doing so may enable academics to present a unified front on poverty, which should significantly improve our prospects for achieving a real impact on policy.

More broadly, the claim that academics can't have more impact on global poverty than they are currently having implies that academics are already acting in just the way that has the maximum possible impact. One only has to state this implication, though, to see how implausible it is. There must be steps we can take that would enable us to have more impact, especially if we work together in a coordinated way. And that being so, we should find out what those steps are and put them into practice. I have already indicated some of our ideas, and more can be found on the ASAP website. We are still at a very early stage, though, and welcome new ideas, as well as criticism of our current ideas and suggestions for improvement. So if you have any thoughts, do please let us know.