**An Argument and Some Responses: Refutation in the “Real World”**

**Overview:** Below you will find a brief argument (the usual length of an op-ed piece in the NY Times, where Nicholas Kristof has a regular column) and the first few “NYT Picks” from the 172 comments from readers that were posted online when this first appeared in print. If you have more time, you can find a wealth of other responses at this URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html>

You can find more discussion of this issue—including Kristof’s discussion of the blowback he got for criticizing a movement by college students to ban sweatshops, including quotes from college students’ refutations of his column. Just click on the icon that looks like a dialog bubble from a cartoon strip. In this case it will have “172” in it—the number of total responses.

<https://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=sweatshops>

**What to look for:** As you read the refutations from readers (pasted in below Kristof’s piece), consider the following: **what grounds does each have for disagreement**? Some have moral objections; some challenge the depth of Kristof’s knowledge of the situation; some offer additional information that conflicts with Kristof’s; some challenge his use of language; some interpret the data differently. There’s quite a range. Notice also **how each argument handles summary/paraphrase/quoting** of Kristof’s argument (or at least of the one point the other writer wants to address). And notice **what support is offered** to flesh out the other writers’ own thesis statements.

**Multi-modal version:** For a really powerful video version of this: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/1231545255329/a-dirty-job.html>

Where Sweatshops Are a Dream

[Nicholas Kristof](https://www.nytimes.com/column/nicholas-kristof) JAN. 14, 2009

Photo



*PHNOM PENH, Cambodia*

Before Barack Obama and his team act on their talk about “labor standards,” I’d like to offer them a tour of the vast garbage dump here in Phnom Penh.

This is a Dante-like vision of hell. It’s a mountain of festering refuse, a half-hour hike across, emitting clouds of smoke from subterranean fires.

The miasma of toxic stink leaves you gasping, breezes batter you with filth, and even the rats look forlorn. Then the smoke parts and you come across a child ambling barefoot, searching for old plastic cups that recyclers will buy for five cents a pound. Many families actually live in shacks on this smoking garbage.

Mr. Obama and the Democrats who favor labor standards in trade agreements mean well, for they intend to fight back at oppressive sweatshops abroad. But while it shocks Americans to hear it, the central challenge in the poorest countries is not that sweatshops exploit too many people, but that they don’t exploit enough.

Talk to these families in the dump, and a job in a sweatshop is a cherished dream, an escalator out of poverty, the kind of gauzy if probably unrealistic ambition that parents everywhere often have for their children.

“I’d love to get a job in a factory,” said Pim Srey Rath, a 19-year-old woman scavenging for plastic. “At least that work is in the shade. Here is where it’s hot.”

Another woman, Vath Sam Oeun, hopes her 10-year-old boy, scavenging beside her, grows up to get a factory job, partly because she has seen other children run over by garbage trucks. Her boy has never been to a doctor or a dentist, and last bathed when he was 2, so a sweatshop job by comparison would be far more pleasant and less dangerous.

I’m glad that many Americans are repulsed by the idea of importing products made by barely paid, barely legal workers in dangerous factories. Yet sweatshops are only a symptom of poverty, not a cause, and banning them closes off one route out of poverty. At a time of tremendous economic distress and protectionist pressures, there’s a special danger that tighter labor standards will be used as an excuse to curb trade.

When I defend sweatshops, people always ask me: But would you want to work in a sweatshop? No, of course not. But I would want even less to pull a rickshaw. In the hierarchy of jobs in poor countries, sweltering at a sewing machine isn’t the bottom.

My views on sweatshops are shaped by years living in East Asia, watching as living standards soared — including those in my wife’s ancestral village in southern China — because of sweatshop jobs.

Manufacturing is one sector that can provide millions of jobs. Yet sweatshops usually go not to the poorest nations but to better-off countries with more reliable electricity and ports.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Top of Form

I often hear the argument: Labor standards can improve wages and working conditions, without greatly affecting the eventual retail cost of goods. That’s true. But labor standards and “living wages” have a larger impact on production costs that companies are always trying to pare. The result is to push companies to operate more capital-intensive factories in better-off nations like Malaysia, rather than labor-intensive factories in poorer countries like Ghana or Cambodia.

Cambodia has, in fact, pursued an interesting experiment by working with factories to establish decent labor standards and wages. It’s a worthwhile idea, but one result of paying above-market wages is that those in charge of hiring often demand bribes — sometimes a month’s salary — in exchange for a job. In addition, these standards add to production costs, so some factories have closed because of the global economic crisis and the difficulty of competing internationally.

The best way to help people in the poorest countries isn’t to campaign against sweatshops but to promote manufacturing there. One of the best things America could do for Africa would be to strengthen our program to encourage African imports, called AGOA, and nudge Europe to match it.

Among people who work in development, many strongly believe (but few dare say very loudly) that one of the best hopes for the poorest countries would be to build their manufacturing industries. But global campaigns against sweatshops make that less likely.

Look, I know that Americans have a hard time accepting that sweatshops can help people. But take it from 13-year-old Neuo Chanthou, who earns a bit less than $1 a day scavenging in the dump. She’s wearing a “Playboy” shirt and hat that she found amid the filth, and she worries about her sister, who lost part of her hand when a garbage truck ran over her.

“It’s dirty, hot and smelly here,” she said wistfully. “A factory is better.”

*I invite you to visit my blog,* [*On the Ground*](http://www.nytimes.com/ontheground)*. Please also join me on* [*Facebook*](http://www.facebook.com/kristof)*, watch my* [*YouTube videos*](http://www.youtube.com/nicholaskristof) *and follow me on* [*Twitter*](http://twitter.com/nytimeskristof)*.*

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Refutations/Responses from Readers\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Note:** to find these (and more) readers’ responses yourself, just click on the icon that looks like a dialog bubble from a cartoon strip. In this case it will have “172” in it—the number of total responses.

**Martin** New York [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=14)

Mr. Kristoff, no one can refute what you are saying, since it is based upon first hand knowledge and not ideals not yet tempered by reality.  
  
In 1968, when in my twenties, I had a heated discussion with a woman then in her 60's at a school I worked in about Castro's regime in Cuba. She asked me if it is more important for people to eat or be free. I answered that both would be preferable, but if I had to choose, I would choose eating over voting. I also told her that I would prefer learning to read and seeing a doctor over voting too. She somehow found this shocking.  
  
As I get older, I think of the options you pose as a choice between different levels of Hell. Is this the best we can do in 2009? Is this to be considered progress and the fruits of modernity?  
  
Your choice seems to be between being a self employed human scavenger competing with rats for society's left overs, and being essentially an indentured servant or serf in a factory. This is a very harsh and deplorable reality.  
  
It is very sad that political movements in many poor countries have taken the form of religious violent fanatic fundamentalism or religious escapism. My first thought upon completing this column was Marx's axiom "religion is the opiate of the masses." I wish that social movements among the poor could have a more sane ideological foundation than religious fundamentalism or militaristic tribalism. It seems pathetic that the only choice for millions of poor is between scavenger and serf. This may be the truth, but it should be unacceptable to civilized people everywhere.  
  
Is this the best we can do as a specie? To paraphrase Shakespeare, "Something is rotten in the state of the world."

**Brian Kern**

Hong Kong [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=24)

It's probably best to stop using the word "sweatshops" in your advocacy. Indeed, I hope you're right that it turns most people off-- it should.  
  
The problem is that we've got a WTO that doesn't consider labor standards and basically no comparable international mechanism to effectively regulate labor standards. That puts workers all too often at the mercy of capital which can move much more freely across borders than labor. So it's an unequal playing field.  
  
The way to correct it is to ensure that people can earn a living wage in the country where they live, and you need an international mechanism to do it so that capital can't play workers in, say, Bangladesh, off workers in Thailand or Cambodia.  
  
So "sweatshops" no; dignified work, yes.  
  
In itself, it's really not so hard to get right-- the missing component is the political will, and that is indeed a very hard nut to crack in a day and age when business (as well as pro-capital, pro-business ideology) holds much more sway over the majority of the world's governments-- from the U.S. to China to Cambodia-- than labor does.  
  
Take a look at the cost of the average running shoe, for instance. The labor cost is about 5% of the price. The brand-name profit is 13%. Increasing the worker's share to, say, 8 or 9% would make a huge difference to the worker without meaning a substantial reduction in profit for the US-based running shoe company.  
  
There's enough to go around, but since corporations are obligated by law to maximize profits for shareholders, you can't count on them to make the changes-- the changes need to be political.  
  
The choice needn't be between garbage dump and sweatshop; whatever the choice, it should be dignified work.  
  
And by the way, the situation of the garbage pickers in Steung Meanchey is a bit more complex than depicted in the article. It's related to the difficulties of making a living in the countryside, to land seizures, to government corruption, to monopolization of natural resources by a small circle of elites, to lack of democracy, to post-conflict issues involving displacement and resettlement. In other words, international forces can and should play a much more positive than they do now but many domestic changes need to occur in order for the garbage pickers of Steung Meanchey to disappear.  
  
And one more thing: If you're interested in helping, support Center for Children's Happiness ([www.cchcambodia.org](http://www.cchcambodia.org)), a very worthy organization that takes kids from the dump and gives them a home and education.

**Lance** Port-au-Prince, Haiti [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=60)

As an American owner of an electronics factory in Haiti, I'm afraid I don't agree with your suggestion that Obama should not press for minimum standards at "sweatshop" factories in the third world. The option of simply moving to Malaysia where a slightly higher rate of automation will compete with the sweatshop owner in (say) Vietnam is not that easy. Au contraire, rather than lose his business, the Vietnamese sweatshop owner may elect to take a bit out of his own income... say, start driving his fuel-efficient Toyota instead of the Mercedes... maybe even forego construction of that palatial estate next to the lake in favor of putting in extra lighting and cleaning up the workers' toilets in his "sweatshop". Don't get me wrong, I fully appreciate the main thrust of your column.  
  
Our plant in Haiti, by the way, pays an average of close to $5.00 per day including fringes, not sweatshop but still a scandalously low salary by U.S. standards, yet we are competitive with the Far East. Our Haitian workers actually dress up to come to work, and seeing their pride in simply having a regular job would astonish most Americans.

**D. Van Amburg** Phoenix, AZ [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=75)

I spent a year working in India on telecom projects. Many things I observed struck me as things most westerner's would at least 'cluck at' in a superior way or even decide needed a good 'crusade' to fix. They would be wrong in every case.  
  
Chandigarh, India is a unique planned city. Each square 'block' is designed to have housing, industry and shops allowing residents to virtually live the bulk of their lives within that square mile or so. The shops are all concentrated in a 'strip mall' on one corner of the block. They consist of a long building with many narrow shop spaces closed in by a metal 'garage' door. These are virtually identical to storage units we rent to store our excess 'stuff'. The door is open during the day and closed at night. In front of these shops is a covered concrete walkway perhaps 10' wide that is crowded with overflowing wares from the shops during the day and with people sleeping at night. We used to visit one of these where a small 7/11 type shop stayed open late.  
  
One night we were walking to the store past a long row of people sleeping with only inches between them. A light beside one of the sleepers caught my eye. I realized it was a cell phone. It seemed inconceivable to me that a person having to sleep on the sidewalk would have a cell phone.  
  
The next day I asked around figured out this person was likely selling calls on to others. There are no pay phones in India that I saw, but rather small shops have traditionally offered use of phones for a fee. This required the investment in shop space and a phone line. With the advent of cell service people could now set up shop for fraction of the cost with just a cell phone. This was small business entrepreneurship at its finest.  
  
Another example of the cultural and marketplace differences was symbolized by a backhoe we drove past everyday on the way from the hotel to the work site. It never moved although it seemed relatively new and in working order.  
  
The new phone companies were all having to install fiber optic cables throughout the town to connect to the cell towers. In the West, this would involve dozens of backhoes and Ditchwichs digging and back filling the trenches to install the cables.  
  
In India I never saw one of these machines at work. Instead there were hordes of people at work with what appeared to be a wide single ended mattock with about a 3-4' handle. These were used for breaking soil and lifting it out of the ditch. It all looked like a very inefficient and exploitative system. Actually, this put large numbers of people who would otherwise be forced to beg to work. India has huge numbers of people who are lifted out of absolute poverty into the cash economy by this sort of job.  
  
As to efficiency, India's underground infrastructure dates from water systems installed hundreds of years ago through 'modern' gas, electric, sewer installed anywhere from the days of the British to today. 'As built' records are inconsistent, incomplete or non-existent. A backhoe would be impossible to use here without breaking something every few feet. The use of large numbers of low paid workers is far more efficient and less destructive.

We Westerners find it too easy to point out the inequities of 900 million poor vs. the 1% of India's population which has wealth worthy of hedge fund managers or Bill Gates. We ignore the 100 million Indians who have moved into the middle class through a reverence for education and hard work. Parents in India inspire, cajole and force their children into the best education they can afford. Kind of like we did as recently as the 50's.  
  
A telling culture shock is visiting book stores in India. It is a revelation when you note that the entire fiction section of a store the size of a typical Barnes and Noble would fit into the space taken by a medium sized Coke machine. The rest of the store is entirely devoted to textbooks, reference books and self-study books. And there is no shortage of bookstores. They are as easy to find there as in any American city.  
  
There are many other examples of good, practical solutions to poverty and ignorance I discovered while working in India, the Philippines, Singapore and other parts of the world. Solutions which Westerners are far too ready to misunderstand, ignore or sneer at.

**KC** New York [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=90)

When I saw the headline, I was excited to read the article. However very quickly I realised that you have missed the point all together.  
  
I work for an organisation that is promoting better standards and it is more than an experiment. There is hard data and personal testimony of factory managers and international buyers who can attest to the fact that this approach is working for economic and social development ends as well as generating bigger profits for companies.  
  
Sweatshops don't pay people - it borders on forced labour and in the very least exploitation. And you get what you pay for: poor quality, high-defect rates, unmotivated workforce, high rates of turn-over, theft of material, absenteeism and violence, on both sides.  
  
Sweatshops do not advance the next generation. It is people's desire to create a better life for their children that motivates an individual to work hard and make that happen, in spite of the sweatshop mentality. I wonder if those people losing jobs here in the US will accept or work hard at a professional job for half pay of what they formally were paid - and to tell them there are many who will take your place if your don't is not a justification for such treatment. Poverty creates social unrest. You are clearly well educated, please revisit your national and personal history.  
  
I invite you to come to see first hand the work that is being done in Cambodia, in Vietnam, in China, in Jordan, in Lesotho, in Uganda (pick a country, we are happy for you to see this first-hand). Not as a development tourist but as a curious and skeptical professional with the aim of understanding better the implications of what is being done. Using throw way comments or anecdotal information provided by your guides or factory managers longing for home is not very rigorous and allows for mistaken conclusions. Please review the professionally captured and independently analyzed data. We encourage you to speak with development professionals who are doing this work day in and day out. Please don't take comments from someone over drinks after work, who is longing for their home that is many miles away, as justification for perpetuating ill treatment of people.  
  
I think you would be surprised to see, when a real cost accounting is done, that providing people with a better wage, thereby giving them dignity and self-worth, does not negatively impact on the bottom line. On the contrary, better pay means better workers, higher productivity, less defects higher profits. This is not a dream but the reality.  
  
Are you willing and able to challenge your assumptions? I think you would be surprised.

**Alex Nading** Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua [January 15, 2009](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/opinion/15kristof.html#permid=91)

Dear Mr. Kristof,  
This is a provocative piece, but I think you create a false impression by juxtaposing garbage scavenging work with "sweatshop" labor.  
  
I do social research here in Nicaragua, and I have worked closely with both scavengers and maquiladora workers. In my case, I have heard workers describe both scavenging and maquila work as a "last resort." Women--and it's predominantly women between ages 18 and 30--who work in maquilas enjoy the benefits and the steady salary of maquila work, but eventually the suppression of labor organization, repetitive stress injury, or simply the demands of family life (pregnancy, domestic problems) pull them away. I have met few former maquila laborers who want to go back, and of course many of those who quit for personal reasons or were dismissed for trying to organize have been blacklisted and have not been welcomed back at any of the "free trade zone" factories in the country.  
  
Placing factories in areas with large, predominantly young populations certainly helps keep production "labor intensive," but the benefits have a definite ceiling. If wages don't go up with inflation (and they haven't here), and if the work is only slightly more tolerable than informal piece work (e.g. taking in washing, selling home-cooked food), I don't see a great long-term benefit for the community. Third world cities, which as another commentator on this thread suggested, are filling up with dispossessed rural people, contain a surplus of both labor, which means that there is always competition for places in maquiladoras. But people should not have to choose between eating and collective bargaining, whether they work in maquilas or dumps.  
  
As for dumps, I think you underestimate the fact that garbage scavenging, like maquila work, is labor that helps sustain the global economy. There's a reason that the people you met got money for plastic, aluminum, etc. There is a large and very volatile world market for those materials. When the economy boomed (i.e. before August of 2008), scavengers were getting record prices. Some in Nicaragua were earning just as much or more than maquiladora workers, but the larger brokers and middle-men were really the ones cleaning up. Here in Nicaragua, when scavengers tried to organize and agitate for rights both to materials and to prices, they were accused by government and commentators as not being "real" workers. As your observations make clear, however, scavenging is hard, sweaty work. What you haven't recognized is that it's more similar to maquila work than to animal-like foraging. Scavenging may look unbearable and de-humanizing, but it is deeply social and economic. Garbage scavengers from Nicaragua to Cambodia are savvy participants in a misunderstood sector of the world economy, and they deserve to be treated as laborers, supported in their efforts to organize for fairer prices, and recognized for the benefits they provide to growing urban societies. The fact that there are a few steps between the collection of the plastic bottle and the creation of polarfleece or stainmaster carpet should not blind us to the fact that scavengers are participants in the global production system.  
  
The similarities between scavengers and factory laborers merit another column because both groups of laborers are implicated in the complex and often ambiguous development questions facing concerned world citizens such as yourself.  
  
Since you are on Facebook, I'll point you to Africa Recycles, a project that is trying through finance to give people more control over the recovery of plastic bags and thus make them recognized players in this overlooked economy.