

## Book Review: Ending Global Poverty: Four Women's Noble Conspiracy by Constantine Michalopoulos

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### Recommended Citation

Uneke, Okori () "Book Review: Ending Global Poverty: Four Women's Noble Conspiracy by Constantine Michalopoulos," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 96 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol96/iss4/5>

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**Michalopoulos, Constantine. *Ending Global Poverty: Four Women's Noble Conspiracy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020. xv + 304 pages. Hardcover, \$40.00.**

Poverty has been a scourge on the quality of life of millions, particularly in the developing world. Ending poverty remains a formidable challenge for the global community. In 1997-98, four women who became ministers in charge of their governments' policies of international development took on the challenge of ending global poverty. This book is a narrative of the cooperative and leadership efforts of Clare Short (United Kingdom), Hilde Johnson (Norway), Eveline Herfkens (Netherlands), and Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (Germany), who collaborated to challenge the establishment policies of international institutions. The ministers became known as the Utstein Four (or U4), named for the Norwegian Abbey, where they formalized their collaboration in 1999. Their *motto*, a "Conspiracy of Implementation" served as a compass in their passionate commitment to end global poverty. To achieve their objective, they collaborated in the implementation of their development programs and in global institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, UNDP, OECD, EU, G8, etc., where decisions affecting the poor are made.

The U4 highlighted trade policies and a heavy debt burden as major hindrances to development in the poorest countries. Their first focus was ending the debt problem of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). They stressed making World Bank/IMF policies more pro-poor, as well as reforming development cooperation to be a genuine partnership. Specifically, they emphasized using Budget Support as an instrument of development assistance, instead of the traditional project-based intervention. At their inaugural Utstein Abbey Meeting (July 25-26, 1999), the Development Ministers focused on the following issues: Better coordination of economic assistance, debt relief and increased aid flow, coherence of aid with trade policies, and actions by developing countries to improve governance, reduce corruption and implement better

poverty-reducing policies. Also, they raised the profile of empowerment of women issues globally by focusing on girls' education. However, efforts to increase coherence between developed countries' trade and aid policies towards developing countries did not succeed as they expected. The U4's radical commitment to promote development clashed with vested interests in their own countries. For example, those with personal stakes in the export industry in Norway and Germany opposed untying aid. Nonetheless, to the credit of the U4, the G8 Cologne Agreements permitted HIPCs to obtain debt relief easier and faster, on the *proviso* that countries receiving debt relief would increase spending on social programs designed to facilitate poverty reduction. In fact, the U4 mantra was "Money saved from debt relief should be used in health, education and other social sectors" (p.114).

The U4 requested the Auditor-Generals in their Development Ministries to consider standards for aid provided in the form of budget support, strengthening developing countries' institutional capacity, and strengthening the anti-corruption campaign, including money laundering. As they put it, "Corruption is stealing from the poor.... It is morally reprehensible" (p. 107). The most lasting contribution in this area was the establishment of the Utstein Anti-Corruption Resource Center in Bergen, Norway. In promoting Budget Support, the U4 stressed that "Improved understanding that ending poverty required collaborative efforts between donor and recipient, with partners in the driver's seat setting their own priorities" (p. 133).

Among the U4's achievements, while they did not originate the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), they used it as a vehicle to articulate aid program objectives, including the emphasis on achieving universal primary education. The MDGs, particularly in health and education, became an essential structure for discussing development, as the U4 exerted pressure for the goals at the G8 and United Nations. Given that conflicts devastate people's lives, particularly those of

women and children, leading to extreme poverty, all U4 countries contributed to the passing of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for the participation of women in peace processes. Sexual violence, oftentimes deployed as a weapon of war, was included in the definition of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Put succinctly, “Empowering women so that they can get out of poverty requires fundamental changes in society and culture, politics and economies” (p. 165). Furthermore, Johnson and Herfkens encouraged major industrialized countries to increase their Official Development Assistance (ODA). They argued that “For poverty to come down, total ODA must go up” (p. 144). The U4 maintained that no user fees should be charged for primary education, as they prevent poor children’s access. To this end, the World Bank ditched this requirement for its support.

In retrospect, was there a real improvement in the lives of millions of poor people around the world? To what extent did the climate of international cooperation and the efforts of the U4 contribute to this improvement? The answer to both questions is in the affirmative. First, the world witnessed increased globalization, as well as impressive growth in output and trade. For example, the economies of China, India, Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa grew impressively in the 2000s. Second, the debt relief program for HIPC’s contributed to a substantial reduction in resources being devoted to servicing debt; instead, such savings were channeled to social programs. Third, the “MDGs brought about the most successful anti-poverty movement in human history” (p. 214). Fourth, untying aid: The U4 consistently argued that bilateral aid funds should be used to obtain goods and services from the most competitive source globally, without restricting procurement formally or informally to the donor. Fifth, with the goal and commitment to end poverty and achieve the MDGs, aid funds would help lift people out of poverty. Sixth, through their leadership, the U4 placed development policy issues more squarely on the agenda of European countries. Most

importantly, the U4's greatest contribution was in promoting approaches and policies that streamlined economic assistance.

With due respect to the U4, the world is a better place in many respects than it was twenty years ago. What is more, the global population living in absolute poverty is about 10 percent today, the lowest in human history. What lessons can we glean from the U4 experience? First, the U4 were most effective when they spoke with one voice. Second, *Ending Global Poverty* is a tale of women's empowerment and leadership. Lastly, the U4 promoted global programs even when there were at variance with their countries' narrow national interests. Development economist Constantine Michalopoulos scored a winning homerun with this publication!

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