Among the many challenges associated with globalization, eradicating poverty stands out as both extremely urgent and ethically complex. While it is clear that what we want is a significant lessening of death and disease due to poverty, how this can be achieved and who is responsible for carrying it out are far less clear. The enormous gap between the rich and poor indicates that a redistribution of wealth from the former to the latter would make the world more just, but this fact, taken on its own, is not very illuminating. It is only when we turn to the task of hammering out a concrete solution that we can begin to see, and to work through, those issues that stand in the way of instantiating global justice. Among them are fundamental questions about the obligations of nation-states and other international actors, the nature and purpose of their interactions, and the most desirable shape of international institutions. The resolution of these background issues is by no means a simple undertaking, but the urgency of the problem demands that we take them up as they arise—keeping in mind that, ultimately, we are after practical strategies for addressing the problem. In what follows, I will explain and criticize what I call ‘the institutional view’ of poverty relief, and sketch out an alternative that both avoids its main defect and relies on a less ideal conception of international relations. My own view focuses on the kind of improvements that would be required for conventional international aid to acquire the legitimacy and accountability that it now lacks.

The Individual View vs. the Institutional View

In the philosophical literature, there are two standard approaches to the problem of global poverty. The first is exemplified by the work of Peter Singer, who maintains that as individuals we have a moral obligation to give generously to organizations such as Oxfam in order to prevent harm caused by extreme poverty. We might call this ‘the
individual duty view. By contrast, philosophers such as Thomas Pogge and Andrew Kuper suggest that we should support a systemic or ‘institutional’ solution to global poverty. The institutional view directs our attention away from the acts of individuals and toward the institutional rules to which all individuals and states are subject. On this view, global poverty is both caused and perpetuated by political and market institutions that are badly slanted in favour of powerful nation-states. The argument for this claim goes, roughly, as follows: Historically, powerful states have used their military and economic strength to shape the way interactions take place at the global level. They have ‘made the rules’, so to speak. Under the current rules, many poor countries fare quite badly. Only if there were no feasible alternatives that could avoid this outcome could these rules be justified. However, there are feasible institutional alternatives under which poor countries would fare much better. As such, the perpetuation of the status quo amounts to the coercive imposition of an unjust order on poor countries, by affluent ones. Pogge sums this up nicely when he says:

Citizens and governments of the affluent countries—whether intentionally or not—are imposing a global institutional order that forseeably and avoidably reproduces severe and widespread poverty. The worse-off are not merely poor and often starving, but are being impoverished and starved under our shared institutional arrangements.¹

According to this view, institutions are at the root of the problem and so institutional reform is clearly the solution. While there are potentially very many alternative arrangements that would improve the lot of poor countries, I will restrict my focus here to the one suggested by Pogge himself. He calls his alternative scheme the ‘Global Resources Dividend’ (or GRD). It would work like this: those people who make extensive use of the planet’s resources would compensate those who, involuntarily, are able to use very little. For instance, a $2 per barrel GRD tax on crude oil could be instituted, which would be payable to a central fund. The countries from which the oil is extracted would pay the tax, but the extra cost would ultimately be passed on to end users in the marketplace. The funds collected by the central fund could then be redistributed such that they are ‘maximally effective