

Helping Well

Article Summary: Recent rapid growth in world missions activity aimed at alleviating global poverty, and extreme poverty in particular, raises the question: *Are these efforts effective?* Are we really helping the poor when we give a hand out instead of a hand up? Well known stories of dependency, waste, fraud, and corruption dissuade many from giving to support these efforts. Yet some organizations make an incredible impact – these organizations are known for “helping well.” The goal of their efforts is to bring *transformational, sustainable* changes in basic living conditions, and in the process, develop the self-sufficiency and new capacity in poor communities to address future problems on their own. Employing *best practices for transformational development*, these organizations take a comprehensive, long-term approach – working *alongside* the poor, insisting upon their full participation and ownership, *empowering* them to lift themselves out of extreme poverty for good. In supporting these types of organizations, donors can enjoy the assurance that their gifts do indeed make a lasting, real difference in the lives of the world’s poorest people.

Helping Well

Our Father's call to serving the least and the last is not a call to blind, unengaged stewardship; on the contrary, it is a call to a stewardship that is exercised prayerfully and responsibly. Our Father has blessed us not only with financial resources to share, but with the heart to share them compassionately and the intellect to share them in ways that have an impact – for the poor and for His kingdom. So far, so good; we wish to make a lasting difference – one of the critical distinctions between the wise and foolish servants in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. We rightly concern ourselves with *effective giving*..... yet, this is precisely where we begin to have difficulty; such difficulty, in fact, that we may tragically choose to remain on the sidelines.

Waste (or worse....)

Extreme poverty is complex. Our understanding of the interplay between the spiritual, political, cultural, environmental, and economic factors that produce extreme poverty has come slowly, often as a result of failed efforts and unintended consequences. Many of us are aware of the horror stories in which organizations' well-intended efforts – and donors' gifts – have yielded unintended results:

- corrupt governments, institutions, and individuals that divert relief or development funds and materials to enrich themselves
- dysfunctional bureaucracies and infrastructures that serve to prevent the deployment of the resources required to solve problems
- poorly considered efforts that fail to account for downstream needs and/or upstream factors – e.g., machinery or generators that lie rusting in fields for lack of maintenance or because of disruptions in fuel supply
- poorly considered efforts that address symptoms without treating the underlying problems – e.g., school buildings that lie unused because children spend the bulk of each day hauling water from miles away or searching for something to help feed their families.

Even worse, we have found that our efforts and dollars have sometimes worked to **keep the destitute trapped in their poverty**: In our rush to provide *things* and to *do for* (which are, of course, inherently unsustainable approaches), we have often fostered **dependencies** that serve to actually prevent the poor from changing their lives and communities for the better.

It is no wonder, then, that many of us stay on the sidelines, frozen into inaction or stymied by cynicism: Who wants to give sacrificially when the gift doesn't make any real difference, is wasted, or worse – it hurts those we wished to help?

Fortunately, the story doesn't end here – there is good news, full of hope and assurance for those who wish to answer God's call to truly make a difference in the lives of the least and the last. Based on decades of experience, hundreds of highly professional organizations devoted to serving the poor in Christ's name have collectively learned what it takes to turn the tide on extreme poverty. That is, they have identified, developed, and refined a set of *best practices* that look beyond immediate need, aiming instead at holistically *transforming* entire communities for the long term.... in a word, *helping well*.

Helping Well – Goals

The distinguishing feature of extreme poverty can be summed up as hopelessness. The desperately poor have learned from long experience that no matter what they do, no matter how hard they try, they cannot improve their situation. In a very real sense, there is a near-total disconnect between effort and results. This lack of freedom to make meaningful choices is what it means to be “trapped” in extreme poverty. Hopelessness is not a deficiency in character on the part of the desperately poor; rather, it is the nature and cruel result of being trapped by circumstances upon which they can have no impact. Simply put, the desperately poor have no meaningful options for improving their situation. To live without hope is dehumanizing, a tragically far cry from what our Creator means for each and every one of us.

The end goal of helping well is transformation at a community level. Rather than simply providing the poor with the things they lack, *helping well* seeks a community-wide transformation which *empowers* the desperately poor to have an ongoing positive impact on their circumstances. Transformation, in the context of working with communities trapped in extreme poverty, *means developing an underlying self-sufficiency* and building capacity for addressing changes in resources and needs over time. In a self-sufficient, transformed community, people have been empowered, individually and collectively, to identify their resources, needs, underlying problems, and possible solutions, and to take meaningful action to improve their situations in physical, social, and spiritual spheres.

What are some of the circumstances, or hallmarks of extreme poverty, that can be improved as a result of transformation in a community?

- dangerously unsafe drinking water
- dangerously inadequate sanitation and hygiene
- crippling malnutrition
- low-yielding and/or unsustainable agricultural practices
- lack of basic health services and medicines
- lack of basic educational opportunities
- absence of economic opportunities (skills, jobs, etc)
- deforestation, with its attendant effects on water, soil, and fuelwoods
- AIDS, and the destitute widows and orphans it produces
- mistreatment and lack of opportunities for women
- slavery and human trafficking
- little or no access to the Gospel

The results of transformation are real and sustainable changes in the nature, condition, and circumstances of the entire community. Underlying these changes is a newfound awareness of their ability to have an impact on their own lives and on the life of the community. A transformed community, then, *knows, and is powered by, hope*. And this hope, in its turn, burns brightly as a beacon for all of its neighbors to see.... and to share.

Helping Well – Best Practices

So, the old adages about the comparative worth of hand-outs versus a hand up prove true, with transformation being the result of a compassionately and intelligently applied hand-up. Based on decades of hard won experience, many highly professional organizations who serve the desperately poor in Christ's name have learned what it takes to lend a hand up *with the most effectiveness* – that is, they have identified, developed, and refined a set of *best practices* aimed at transforming communities trapped in extreme poverty.

As we set out to examine these best practices, it is important to recognize that we often (if unintentionally) bring a God-complex to our work with the poor that deforms our own spirituality and deepens the poor's sense of inferiority and shame. The truth is that where transformation is the goal, we serve only as His agents. God is not absent from these communities; He has been working there since the beginning. *Only God can bring true transformation*. This is foundational to all of the best practices which follow: Our role is one of being used by God to come along side these communities, working together with them as we seek, in His power, to help them on the road to *transformation*.

Best Practices -- In Concept:

Best practices for helping well could be described as holistic, comprehensive, long-term, and relational. Where community-wide **transformation** is the end goal, these four qualities are foundational prerequisites to **helping well**.

Best practices are **holistic** in the sense that they go beyond the material, or physical, realm to address social and spiritual concerns as well. This is appropriate, because the problems characteristic of extreme poverty extend beyond the material dimension: as previously noted, one of the distinguishing features of extreme poverty is hopelessness, and the feelings of voicelessness, inferiority, and shame that accompany it. Accordingly, solutions must extend beyond the physical dimension and deal with the social and spiritual as well. When one considers the amazing extent to which we have been created and crafted for relationship – with God, with each other, with ourselves – then it becomes clear that, in order for transformational change to occur, all three spheres (physical, social, and spiritual) will require attention.

Best practices for helping well also seek to be **comprehensive**. Given the complexity of extreme poverty, it is critical to address the full breadth of factors which may be in play in a given community if transformation is to occur. In addition to the more obvious needs or problems, careful consideration must be given to seemingly unrelated factors (both upstream and downstream) in order for sustainable solutions to be achieved. Put another way, we

must be diligent in thoroughly searching for and addressing related issues and root causes, rather than treating isolated surface symptoms only. In an example cited earlier, we may build a school to “solve” an education problem, only to discover that the children are unable to attend because they have to spend a large portion of each day hauling water for their families. Some of the factors that must often be considered in a comprehensive approach include educational opportunities, safe drinking water, malnutrition, sanitation and hygiene, agricultural practices, health services, economic opportunities, deforestation, AIDS, and gender discrimination.

Best practices which seek transformational, community-wide change are inherently **long term** in nature. Such sweeping change simply cannot be achieved over a period of a few weeks or months. Often, the term of a holistic, comprehensive project which seeks to help well will turn out to be between seven and fifteen years. Given the complexity, breadth, and depth of the changes desired, and the relationship building necessary to bring them about, a long-term commitment is required if true transformation is to occur. Real growth takes time. To attempt to short-cut the process is to compromise the results, most particularly in the sense of producing change that turns out to be only temporary, instead of self-sustaining.

Best practices are also highly **relational** in nature. Best practices for helping well take full advantage of the human resources in a community. This begins with the understanding that the poor themselves often have important insights into the factors contributing to their poverty, as well as the interplay between them. And, since participation and ownership must be nurtured in order to produce lasting change in physical, social, and spiritual arenas, relationship building becomes key to a successful effort. Truly effective community transformation is a people driven process, rather than a dollar driven project. This requires an investment in human capital. Likewise, transformational change which respects the people it seeks to help is a community driven process, not an agency (outsider) driven project. This, again, requires a diligent and intentional investment in genuine relationships with those we would seek to help.

As we will see, the highly relational nature of best practices comes to the forefront when working for transformational change on a community-wide basis; that is, relationship building *permeates* the process of helping well because of the premium placed upon **full participation** on the part of the poor, from beginning to end.

Best Practices -- Application:

As has been noted, following a best practices model for bringing transformational change is a **community driven process**. Consider, for example, an agency or missions group which comes to a poor community with a *preconceived* vision, intent on *fixing*, providing *things*, and imposing *their* solutions to address *their* predetermined notion of the problems, all the while using *their* methods for *their* reasons. Would not such an approach serve to reinforce this community’s sense of voicelessness, powerlessness, shame, and inferiority? Have they empowered these people, or deepened their dependency? Have they built capacity? How will this community respond the next time they are faced with a problem? And finally, would you suppose that any change achieved would last for long after the agency or missions group has left?

By contrast, consider an agency or missions group that, in developing and implementing an assistance program in a desperately poor community, insists that the project be community driven, from the very beginning. Using an asset-based approach which uncovers, recognizes, and utilizes individual and community strengths as a first step not only affirms dignity as it combats attitudes of powerlessness, inferiority, and shame – it also sets the tone for all of the work to follow. Rather than *doing for*, the agency *works alongside of* the community to help guide and facilitate the process, identify and develop leaders, and provide carefully chosen and agreed upon resources. The community's involvement in the process is carefully cultivated throughout, beginning with the initial appraisal of resources, needs, and causes, to the design and planning of solutions, including all decision making, and finally the implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment phases. Indeed, in the best practices model, *nothing* happens without the full participation of the community. With this comes **ownership** in the project and its outcomes, which is key to producing sustainable results.

In contrast to approaches that emphasize handouts of resources and labor, which often serve only to create destructive dependencies, the impact of a participatory approach, and the sense of **ownership** that it fosters, is a true hand-up. With active participation and ownership comes **empowerment**, as hopelessness gives way to a sense of their own ability to effect change. The community's **capacity** for initiative, responsibility, evaluation, decision making, and action is strengthened. *Note that ownership, empowerment, and capacity building, while important means to project ends, are a legitimate end in themselves. This is the essence of transformative, sustainable change.*

Choosing Wisely

As always, the question comes back to us: What, then, ought we to do?

For those who wish to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of the least and the last, who stand ready to give to the work of those who work for transformative change in desperately poor communities, the question becomes: *What do these best practices for helping well mean for our giving?*

Helping well, and the best practices model upon which it is based, *provides a lens* through which to evaluate the work of parachurch organizations and church long-term missions, for the purpose of deciding whose work or projects to support with our sacrificial giving. Looking for evidence of best practices can help us to gauge the potential impact of our gifts. We do this not to give ourselves self-congratulatory pats on the back; rather, we seek to exercise our stewardship privileges with *intelligence, responsibility, and compassion*.

Looking for evidence of best practices is not as hard as it might seem. Best practices for helping well are in no sense proprietary, nor are they the purview of a select and secret few organizations or missions. There are literally *hundreds* of parachurch organizations, and many church-based long term missions projects, with proven track records in helping well; you may already be aware of several. To find these organizations, a good first step is to review their promotional materials, which are easily accessible via their websites. In doing so, keep an eye out for signs of *helping well*:

- *key words/concepts like community driven development, sustainable, self-sufficient, community participation and ownership, empowerment, capacity building, etc*
- *an orientation towards transformational change*
- *a long term, holistic approach that addresses the full range of issues impacting the communities they serve*
- *a commitment to addressing underlying causes, not just surface symptoms*
- *a commitment to lending a carefully designed hand-up, and avoiding dependency-creating handouts*
- *a priority given to a guidance role that identifies, respects, and fully utilizes the abilities and resources of individuals and the community as a whole*
- *a priority given to relying on indigenous peoples for local leadership*
- *a pervasive focus on community participation, ownership, empowerment, and capacity building*
- *an insistence upon community partnership throughout the processes of developing project goals and plans, implementation, and ongoing evaluation and adjustment*
- *a priority given to developing local leadership and community resources in their everyday work*
- *a visible commitment to going about their work with the poor in Christ's name, to working along side the local church wherever possible, and to proclaiming and showing the Love of Christ for all peoples.*

Once you've found the organizations or projects that both capture your heart and help well, you can give with the assurance that your support will indeed **make a lasting difference** for the least and the last. Indeed, your gifts are both productive and needed: helping well can't happen without financial support. Helping well – the breadth, the long-term nature, the relationship building, the coaching and facilitating, the empowering, and the resources needed to put a community on the road to transformation – all these depend upon our desire to make a lasting difference and our willingness to share.

Our Lord stands ready to bless and to multiply....

Endnotes:

- See the articles [Trends in Effective Giving](#) and [Top Organizations – Sources & Criteria](#) for further discussion of the right questions to ask when choosing organizations to support with your gifts.
- Appendix: [Short Term Missions & Helping Well](#) looks at church-based short term missions through the lens of helping well.
- To see a great example of helping well, watch World Vision's video [Transforming Lives](#) (17:22)
- To read a great example of helping well, read *Tending To Eden* (chapters 1-6), by Scott Sabin, Judson Press, 2010.
- For more information on the subject of helping well, particularly the relief/rehabilitation/development cycle, read *When Helping Hurts*, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, Moody Publishers, 2009.
- Visit our [Top Organizations](#) page for a well-researched list of parachurch organizations with demonstrated track records in helping well.

This article may be viewed on the web at www.GiversByDesign.org/Effective-Giving

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