

When Helping Hurts

How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... And Yourself

by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert

This was the second week of small-business training class held in St. Luke's Church, deep in the heart of a slum in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. Elizabeth, the director of women's ministries for a major Ugandan denomination, had kindly agree to help me test the biblically based small-business training curriculum that I was writing, so we ventured into the slum every Monday. Elizabeth started today's class by asking, 'Has God done anything in your lives as a result of last week's lesson?' A rugged lady raised her hand and said, 'I am a witch doctor. After last week's lesson, I went back to church for the first time in twenty years. What do I do now?'

Elizabeth firmly ordered her, 'Go and get your herbs and medicines, and we will burn them up right here on the floor of the church!'

After running home, the witch doctor marched to the front of St. Luke's Church and dropped her bag of herbs on the floor. She then confessed publicly, 'I have a demon living inside me who drinks 50,000 Ugandan shillings (approximately \$27 U.S.) of alcohol per day. I feed him through the profits from my witchcraft business. My specialty is keeping husbands faithful to their wives. Some of my best customers are in this church. But I forsake my witchcraft and become a follower of Jesus Christ.'

Elizabeth lit a match and dropped it onto the bag of herbs, 'The demons will leave if we burn the herbs,' she said. When Elizabeth finished praying, she hugged the witch doctor and said, "From now on, your name will be Grace.' It was a dramatic event, but the drama wasn't over.

Many weeks later, Elizabeth and I trudged through the slum to visit Grace's house. After a ten-minute walk, we entered Grace's one-room shack, Grace was lying on a mat on the dirt floor and writhing in agony. A plate with a few morsels of food covered with fleas was the only other thing in the place. Grace could not lift her head and could barely whisper. Grace had developed tonsillitis. Because she was poor and has HIV, the local hospital refused to treat her. Desperate for relief, Grace paid her neighbor to cut out her tonsils with a kitchen knife. We are in the very bowels of hell, I thought to myself.

'I am afraid she will die of an infection. Can we get her some penicillin?' I asked, feeling quite helpless.

'Yes we can, but we'll need 15,000 Uganda shillings, about eight dollars U.S.,' Elizabeth said. I immediately reached into my pocket and handed

Elizabeth the money. Elizabeth and her driver went to the nearest pharmacy and bought the penicillin for Grace.

A week later I could hardly believe my eyes when Grace walked through the door of St. Luke's for the next session of small-business training class. I believe Elizabeth and I probably saved Grace's life with the penicillin that day.

What did I do wrong? How could I have hurt the poor in the process of trying to help them? We cannot answer these questions in a sound bite, which is the reason we are writing this book. After laying some groundwork, we will return to the case of the witch doctor in a later chapter.

Defining poverty is not simply an academic exercise, for the way we define poverty – either implicitly or explicitly – plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that poverty. If we believe the primary cause of poverty is A, then we will primarily try to B.

- A) A lack of knowledge – B) Educate the Poor
- A) Oppression by Powerful People – B) Work for Social Justice
- A) The Personal Sins of the Poor – B) Evangelize and Disciple the Poor
- A) A lack of Material Resources – B) Give Material Resources to the Poor

Bryant Myers, a leading Christian development thinker, argues that in order to diagnose the disease of poverty correctly, we must consider the fundamental nature of reality, starting with the Creator of that reality. Myers notes that the Triune God is inherently a relational being, existing as three-in-one from eternity. Being made in God's image, human beings are inherently relational as well. Note that human life is not all up for grabs! God designed humans to be a certain thing and to operate in a certain way in all of these relationships.

- A) Relationship with God – This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flowing out of this one. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches that human beings' primary purpose is 'to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.' This is our calling, the ultimate reason for which we were created.
- B) Relationship with Self – People are uniquely created in the image of God and thus have inherent worth and dignity.
- C) Relationship with Others – God created us to live in loving relationship with one another. We are not islands!
- D) Relationship with the Rest of Creation – The 'cultural mandate' of Genesis 1:28-30 teaches that God created us to be stewards, people who understand, subdue, and manage the world that God has created in order to produce bounty.

Because the four relationships are the building blocks for all human activity, the effects of the fall are manifested in the economic, social, religious, and political systems that humans have created throughout history.

- A) Poverty of Spiritual Intimacy – denying God’s existence and authority; materialism; worshipping false gods and spirits
- B) Poverty of Being – god complexes; low self-esteem
- C) Poverty of Community – self centeredness; exploitation and abuse of others
- D) Poverty of Stewardship – loss of sense of purpose; laziness/workaholics; materialism; ground is cursed

Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings. Stop and think: If poverty is rooted in the brokenness of the foundational relationships, then who are the poor?

Due to the comprehensive nature of the fall, every human being is poor in the sense of not experiencing these four relationships in the way that God intended.

One of the major premises of this book is that ***until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good.***

And now we come to a very central point: ***one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically poor – their feelings of inferiority and shame.*** The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates –albeit unintentionally – that we are superior and they are inferior. In the process we hurt the poor and ourselves. And here is the clincher: this dynamic is likely to be particularly strong when ever middle-to-upper-class, North American Christians try to help the poor, given these Christians’ tendency toward a Western, materialistic perspective of the nature of poverty.

Our efforts to help the poor can hurt both them and ourselves. In fact, this story illustrates, very often the North American church finds itself locked into the following equation: (Material Definition of Poverty + God-complexes of Materially Non-Poor + Feelings of Inferiority of Materially Poor = Harm to Both Materially Poor and Non-Poor).

Poverty alleviation is the ministry of reconciliation: moving people closer to glorifying God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. Material poverty alleviation is working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of

glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.

There are two key things to note in this definition. First, material poverty alleviation involves more than ensuring that people have sufficient material things: rather, it involves the much harder task of empowering people to *earn* sufficient material things through their own labor, for in so doing we move people closer to being what God created them to be. Second, work is an act of worship. When people seek to fulfill their callings by glorifying God in their work, praising Him for their gifts and abilities, and seeing both their efforts and its products as an offering to Him, then work is an act of worship to God. On the other hand, when work is done to glorify oneself or merely to achieve more wealth, it becomes worship of false gods. How we work and for whom we work really matters.

The goal is to see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to bring glory to God. *These things tend to happen in highly relational, process-focused ministries more than impersonal, product-focused ministries.*

Not all Poverty is created equal. A helpful first step in thinking about working with the poor is any context whether the situation calls for **relief**, **rehabilitation**, or **development**. In fact, the failure to distinguish among these situations is one of the most common reasons that poverty-alleviation efforts often do harm.

'Relief' can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. There is a need to halt the freefall, to 'stop the bleeding,' and this is what relief attempts to do. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance – often material – to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time. The Good Samaritan's bandaging of the helpless man who lay bleeding along the roadside is an excellent example of relief applied appropriately. **'Rehabilitation'** begins as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working *with* the tsunami victims as they participate in their own recovery, moving from point 2 to point 3. **'Development'** is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved – both the 'helper' and the 'helped' – closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In particular, as the materially poor develop, they are better able to fulfill their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their

families with the fruits of that work. Development is not done **to** people or **for** people but **with** people.

One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make – by far- is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention.

Many of the people coming to your church for help will state that they are in a crisis, needing emergency financial help for utility bills, rent, food, or transportation. In other words, they will state that they are at point one. Is relief the appropriate intervention for such a person? Maybe, but maybe not. There are several things to consider.

First, is there really a crisis at hand? If you fail to provide immediate help, will there really be serious, negative consequences? If not, then relief is not the appropriate intervention, for there is time for the person to take actions on his own behalf.

Second, to what degree was the individual personally responsible for the crisis? Of course, compassion and understanding are in order here, especially when one remembers the systematic factors that can play a role in poverty. But it is still important to consider the person's own culpability in the situation, as allowing people to feel some of the pain resulting from any irresponsible behavior on their part can be part of the "tough love" needed to facilitate the reconciliation of poverty alleviation. The point is not to punish the person for any mistakes or sins he has committed but to ensure that the appropriate lessons are being learned in the situation.

Third, can the person help himself? If so, then a pure handout is almost never appropriate, as it undermines the person's capacity to be a steward of his own resources and abilities.

Fourth, to what extent has this person already been receiving relief from you or others in the past?

How do you spell 'effective relief'? S-e-l-d-o-m, I-m-m-e-d-i-a-t-e, and T-e-m-p-o-r-a-r-y.

1) Doing Relief and Rehabilitation, Developmentally.

- Ensure participation of the affected population in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the assistance program.
- Conduct an initial assessment to provide an understanding of the disaster situation and to determine the nature of the response.

- Respond when needs of an affected population are unmet by local people or organizations due to their inability or unwillingness to help.
 - Target assistance based on vulnerability and need, and provide it equitably and impartially.
 - Aid workers must possess appropriate qualifications, attitudes, and experience to plan and effectively implement appropriate assistance programs.
- 2) The Poison of Paternalism: Avoid Paternalism. Do not do things for people that they can do for themselves. Memorize this, recite it under your breath all day long, and wear it like a garland around your neck. Every time you are engaged in poverty-alleviation ministry, keep this at the forefront of your mind, for it can keep you from doing all sorts of harm. Paternalism comes in a variety of forms:
- Resource Paternalism
 - Spiritual Paternalism
 - Knowledge Paternalism
 - Labor Paternalism
 - Managerial Paternalism

Now that you have determined whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is the correct intervention, what do you do next? It seems like the next step would be to ascertain the needs of the individual or community in order to determine the best way to help. In fact, many ministries do begin this way, conducting a 'needs assessment' by using an interview or a survey to determine what is wrong and the best way to provide assistance. This 'needs-based' approach has merit, for diagnosing the underlying problems is essential to formulating the proper solutions. However, starting with a focus on needs amounts to starting a relationship with low-income people by asking them, 'What is wrong with you? How can I fix you?' Given the nature of most poverty, it is difficult to imagine more harmful questions to both low-income people and to ourselves? Starting with such questions initiates the very dynamic that we need to avoid, a dynamic that confirms the feelings that we are superior, that they are inferior, and that they need us to fix them.

For these reasons, many Christian community development experts have discovered the benefits of using 'asset-based community development' (ABCD) as they seek to foster reconciliation of people's relationships with God, self, others, and creation. ABCD is consistent with the perspective that God has blessed every individual and community with a host of gifts, including such diverse things as land, social networks, knowledge, animals, savings, intelligence, schools, creativity, production equipment, etc. ABCD puts the emphasis on what materially poor people already have and asks them to consider from the outset, 'What is right with you? What gifts has God given you

that you can use to improve your life and that of your neighbors? How can the individuals and organizations in your community work together to improve our community?' Instead of looking outside the low-income individual or community for resources and solutions, ABCD starts by asking the materially poor how they can be stewards of their own gifts and resources, seeking to restore individuals and communities to being what God has created them to be from the very start of the relationship. Indeed, the very nature of the question – What gifts do you have? – affirms people's dignity and contributes to the process of overcoming their poverty of being. And as they tell us of their gifts and abilities, we can start to see them as God does, helping us to overcome our sense of superiority; that is, our own poverty of being.

In contrast, needs-based development focuses on what is lacking in the life of a community or a person. The assumption in this approach is that the solutions to poverty are dependent upon outside human and financial resources. Churches and ministries using a needs-based approach are often quick to provide food, clothes, shelter, and money to meet the perceived, immediate needs of low-income people, who are often viewed as 'clients' or 'beneficiaries' of the program. Pouring in outside resources is not sustainable and only exacerbates the feelings of helplessness and inferiority that limits low-income people from being better stewards of their God-given talents and resources. When the church or ministry stops the flow of resources, it can leave behind individuals and communities that are more disempowered than ever before.

In summary, ABCD has four key elements:

- Identify and mobilize the capabilities, skills, and resources of the individual or community. See poor people and communities as full of possibilities, given to them by God.
- As much as possible, look for resources and solutions to come from within the individual or community, not from the outside.
- Seek to build and rebuild the relationships among local individuals, associations, churches, businesses, schools, government, etc. God intended for the various individuals and institutions in communities to be interconnected and complementary.
- Only bring in outside resources when local resources are insufficient to solve pressing needs. Be careful about bringing in resources that are too much or too early. Do this in a manner that does not undermine local capacity or initiative.

The creation-fall-redemption motif outlined in chapters 2 and 3 provides a biblical foundation for thinking about both the nature and relationship of assets and needs in poor individuals and communities. As creation includes 'all things,' extending beyond the natural world into culture as a whole. Our basic predisposition should be to see poor communities - including their natural resources, people, families, neighborhood associations, schools, businesses,

governments, culture, etc. – as being create by Jesus Christ and reflective of His goodness. Hence, as we enter a poor community, there is a sense in which we are walking on holy ground, because Christ has been actively at work in that community since the creation of the world! This should give us an attitude of respect and a desire to help the community residents to discover, celebrate, and further develop God’s gifts to them. And that is exactly what ABCE is all about.

There are three common approaches to ABCD:

- Asset Mapping – A better term for this approach may be ‘asset inventorying,’ since the strategy primarily uses individual or group based interviews to catalogue the assets in a particular community. Although this all sounds rather mechanical, this approach has potential power as a starting point for developing empowering relationships.
- Participatory Learning and Action – PLA uses a variety of group based exercises to engage and energize community members in thinking about their community’s history, assets, survival strategies, and goals. The processes are designed to affirm the community members’ knowledge and skills in order to empower them to take greater ownership of their futures.
- Appreciative Inquiry – Similar to Asset Mapping and PLA, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) focuses on what is right and good in a community’s past as a means of creating a more positive future. The AI approach to ABCD asks poor individuals and communities to consider the questions in the four-part process:
 - Discovery – What gives life? Finding the best of what is. (Appreciating.)
 - Dream – What might be? What is God calling for? (Envisioning impact.)
 - Dialogue – What should be? The ideal? (Co-constructing.)
 - Delivery – What is working? How increase it? (Sustaining.)

A Participatory Continuum

Mode of Participation	Type of Involvement of Local People	Relationship of Outsiders to Local People
Coercion	Local people submit to predetermined plans developed by outsiders	DOING TO
Compliance	Local people are assigned to tasks, often with incentives, by outsiders; the outsiders decide the agenda and direct the process.	DOING FOR
Consultation	Local people's opinions are asked; outsiders analyze and decide on a course of action	DOING FOR
Cooperation	Local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities; responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process	DOING WITH
Co-leading	Local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create appropriate goals and plans, to execute those plans, and to evaluate the results	DOING WITH
Community Initiated	Local people set their own agenda and mobilize to carry it out without outside initiators and facilitators	RESPONDING TO

We have covered a lot of ground since the introductory chapter to this book. Recall from the chapter that I gave eight dollars to Elizabeth, a Ugandan church leader, so that she could buy penicillin to save the life of Grace, the ex-witch doctor. I later realized that I might have done an enormous amount of harm to St. Luke's Church and its pastor, to the refugees in the small-business class, and even to Grace herself. Consider now all that we have discussed thus

far. Why might it have been a mistake for me to pay for the penicillin? How might I have done harm in the process of trying to help? What would have been more effective strategy for assisting Grace? As you consider these questions, never lose sight of the goal: reconciling relationships is the essence of poverty alleviation.

Grace was clearly in need of relief. Lying in agony on the floor of her shack, she was unable to help herself and needed somebody to provide assistance to her. But was I the best person to provide such relief? Remember a key relief principle we learned in chapter 4: *Respond when needs of the affected population are unmet by local people or organizations (or family members) due to their inability or unwillingness to help.* I never even considered this principle when reaching into my pocket for the eight dollars to pay for the penicillin. Relief was the right intervention, but I was not the right person to offer it.

I failed to consider the local assets that already existed in this slum, assets that included small amounts of money, a church, a pastor, and the social bonds of the one hundred refugees attending the small-business class. The truth is that there was more than enough time to walk back to the church, where the small-business class was still assembled, and ask the participants what they could do to help Grace.

Of course, handing over the money was so much easier and so much faster than asking the refugees to assist Grace; and therein resides the problem of many poverty-alleviation efforts: the North American need for speed undermines the slow process needed for lasting and effective long-run development.

Why does all this matter? Grace desperately needed relationships in the community in general and in St. Luke's Church in particular. Her former way of life had created many enemies, and, being infected with HIV, Grace was going to need solid support structures as time wore on. In fact, Grace needed to have her poverty of community alleviated if she was going to have any chance for long-term survival.

But I may have done harm to more than just Grace. My failure to identify and mobilize local assets may have hindered the development of those assets. For example, St. Luke's was a poor church struggling to minister in a poor community. My eight dollars removed a chance for St. Luke's to be what the Bible calls it to be: the body, bride, and fullness of Jesus Christ in this slum. I denied St. Luke's to be 'salt and light,' I joined decades of North American evangelicals in communicating that the 'mzungu' – the powerful, rich, educated white person – was the 'salt and light.'

And what about the pastor of St. Luke's Church? Imagine being this pastor, preaching faithfully week in and week out to small crowds and earning a highly uncertain salary. And then one day the circus came to town in the form of a 'mzungu' with a compelling small-business-training curriculum. The small-business classes draw bigger crowds than your Sunday morning worship services, and news is traveling that demons are even being cast out in these classes. And then when the newest member of your church, an ex-witch doctor, gets sick, the mzunga ringleader of the circus pays for her to get the medicine she needs. In fact, by the time you learn that Grace was sick, she has already recovered! And then the mzunga ringleader gets on an airplane, leaving you in the dust as you pursue the day in and day out grind of ministry. I may have undermined the pastor of St. Luke's Church. I did not realize it at the time, and I did not intend to do this. But I may have done so nonetheless.

Finally, there were the refugees themselves. Their eyes had grown wide and their faces had brightened throughout the small-business course. The message of the gospel was so freeing and empowering to them. For the first time they understood that they were created in the image of God and had inherent value and worth. Even if others saw them as being from an inferior tribe, the Creator of heaven and earth did not see them this way. They had gifts and abilities and could be stewards over their lives and communities, and in doing so they could glorify God Himself! Except, of course, that the first time a problem arose – how to minister to Grace – the mzungu took it upon himself to solve the problem, undermining every message that had been taught in the course.

The point here is not that outside resources are always a bad idea. Indeed, North American Christians need to be giving more, not less, money to help the poor. But how that money is given and to whom it is given is crucial. We need to look for ways to give money that builds up local organizations and that truly empowers the poor. My eight-dollar gift failed to meet this standard.

All content of this document is solely from the book "When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... And Yourself" by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert