

Raising LOCAL Resources

by Glenn Schwartz

Where does your help come from?

According to Psalm 121 (NIV) the answer to the question in my title is, “My help comes from the Lord” (verse 1). What a wonderful privilege for all of us to have as our provider the Maker of heaven and earth (verse 2).

For my purpose here, I would like to ask the question in a slightly different way. In terms of cross-cultural missionary work or community development I would like to ask: “From how far away does appropriate help come?”

For the past several days I have been participating in a conference of rural development specialists who work in some of the most needy parts of Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. It has been inspiring to hear story after story about the success they are having in mobilizing local resources for the work they are doing. Even where they acknowledge that outside resources are needed, one after another spoke about the importance of keeping outside resources to a minimum in favor of discovering and mobilizing local resources.

This led me to reflect on the question: What is the best source of help to meet a need? On page 145 of my book entitled *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement*, I introduce what I call the principle of “geographical proximity.” By this I am advocating that the best resource is that which is nearest to the need. This is important for two reasons. First, the local source might be the most culturally appropriate and acceptable. One only has to consider the issue of importing western “yellow maize” into parts of Africa where “white maize” grown locally is much more acceptable.



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A second advantage of mobilizing local resources is that the blessing of being the provider goes to the local giver, not to an unknown donor far away. Think about your own needs. If some unknown person far away would step in every time you have a need, then they—not those close to you—would get the blessing. It is worth reflecting on just who receives the blessing for giving.

In my writing about geographical proximity I recommend that if one part of a country needs assistance during a drought (for example), that the best source of help is another part of the same country that might have excess grain to share. If a whole country is in need, another nation nearby might be able to help. If one region of a continent needs help, other regions of the same continent should be the first to help. Unfortunately, sometimes the need is met from global resources because that is in the best interest of the farmers (or donors) far away who have excess grain at their disposal. When this happens, nearby resources are too often disregarded. I recognize that in times of extreme crisis, the resources that can be most quickly mobilized should be given priority. But even then, the global resources might take the longest to be delivered.

Several years ago part of East Africa was in crisis. Churches in both Zambia and South Africa provided assistance by sending plane loads of relief supplies to East Africa. Africa helping Africa has one important implication: the blessing goes to people in Africa! How often have needs been met from global resources when they could have been met from within the country, region or continent?

Those of us who speak about avoiding or overcoming unhealthy dependency have sometimes been accused of being selfish and stingy—only wanting to keep things for ourselves. What about turning the argument around? Those who insist on doing the giving from global resources may be depriving others of the blessing of giving that they would otherwise be theirs. Or is it that those with the global resources want to keep the blessing for themselves—at the expense of those who could help with local resources if they were given the opportunity to do so?

We must take care that sympathy for the far-away donor who needs to give does not drive the dependency syndrome. I suggest that true compassion cares for both the dignity of the recipient and those nearby who could help if they were given the opportunity. 🌐

I welcome interaction from those who wish to exchange ideas. My e-mail address is glennschwartz@msn.com.