

RAISING LOCAL RESOURCES



Do No Harm

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Medical people have a basic guideline for the treatment of patients: “Do no harm.” I have often thought about that when dealing with cross-cultural situations. I know by experience that it is easy to do harm, especially when living and working in a cultural situation very different from one’s own. It is embarrassing to think back over some of the mistakes I made simply because I did not know that the “side effects” of my desire to help might be negative.

One aspect of the dependency syndrome is that when we try to be helpful we can actually do harm without realizing it. When I speak or write about this, I sometimes get a response something like this: “I had no idea that what we were doing could have that kind of impact on those we are trying to help.” I will provide an example to illustrate this.

A church in North America has a burden for those in need in Africa. A short-term team from America or England visits East or West Africa on an exploratory trip looking for some meaningful way to become involved. As often happens, they encounter an African pastor who has an idea for an income-generating project that simply needs funding. What a wonderful opportunity—helping people who already have the idea, as well as the personnel and the desire to get something done. From the perspective of the pastor in Africa, this is a blessing from the Lord—people are offering to provide the one thing he does not have, which is start-up capital. The American church believes they have found a worthy investment.

Assume for a moment that this income-generating project is to make and sell

clothing or some other service. The people with the ideas and willingness to work now have a financial partner willing to make it happen. But there are several things that the well-meaning outsiders might not know.

One of these is the potential for church leaders to become sidetracked by running a business that diverts them from their primary calling of evangelism and discipling believers. In Acts 6 the apostles found that they needed to delegate to others so they could “turn over responsibility and give attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:7).

But, something else may be happening that well-meaning outsiders do not see. They may not realize that the funds they are providing for believers to operate a church-run business are giving an unfair advantage to some people in the community while others do not get such help. Let’s assume that it is the clothing business I mentioned above. How would you feel if you were a non-church member in that community with a clothing business who did not have access to the capital that comes from overseas? You own your own sewing machine and operate a small business trying to make a living for your family.

Now along comes a new competitor—a church-run business funded with capital from overseas. That new competing business gets cloth, sewing machines and money to pay laborers while you have none of those things available. It would be as if a foreign government came into a community in North America and subsidized a major industry that put thousands of people out of work—essentially killing small

business initiative on a large scale. Yes, a few people in the church now have employment, but others in the community cannot compete with the power provided by the outside resources which the church now has available.

A more serious problem happens when a church project competes with the private business of a church member. If I am a church member struggling to run my own business and committed to paying my tithes and offerings to the congregation where I worship, how will I feel about going to Sunday services and putting money into a collection for a church that is funding my biggest competitor? It simply would not seem to be fair. Surely there must be an alternative to this kind of unfair competition led by the church and funded by outsiders. The good news is that there are alternatives.

Thankfully we are beginning to see in some places “village savings and loan societies” and some micro-loan projects designed to mobilize local resources and avoid the negative consequences of outside funding. In addition, the manner in which many such groups are organized means that competition is reduced through cooperative efforts, allowing all boats in the harbor to rise together. It is a spirit of cooperation rather than a spirit of competition that makes this a wholesome process.

Admittedly, it takes more time and effort to mobilize local resources than it does to simply write a large check. But experience has shown that when done appropriately, there can be long-term positive impact, rather than a short-term “fix” which may result in harmful consequences. f