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The “Arab Spring” that has recently taken over the headlines brings one question to my mind: should a Western construct called democracy be planted in a non-Western culture, where the prerequisites of that construct (the thought development, experimentation, etc.) are absent? Western democracy developed over centuries and was a torturous, never-guaranteed process that led, step by step, to a certain formation of rights and privileges called “democracy.” Can we really bypass that process and yet expect the end result to happen? What kind of democracy is really being birthed in these countries?

We could ask the same question with regard to missions in general. Should a Western form of church be planted in a non-Western culture, where the prerequisites of that church (the particular history and theology, etc.) are absent? We would say “No.” We have come to see that it is more desirable for a church to forge an identity within its own particular history and theology, rather than to adapt that of another culture. We would also add that *if* a Western form of church is planted in a non-Western culture, it, like the non-Western democracies mentioned above, would be a weak, superficial version of the original thing (which in some cases would be good). Once again, you cannot ignore the process and expect the same result.

Well then, let’s ask the same question with regard to poverty. Should Western solutions to poverty be planted in a non-Western culture, where the prerequisites of those solutions (science, technology, etc.) are absent? Stated differently, aren’t all Western solutions to non-Western problems like poverty inherently limited because they lack the internal process

that makes the end result possible? Is it not fair to suggest that until there is an internal process that leads to internal solutions, our work will most often be negligible? In some ways, the developing world is like a wishful-thinking graveyard with broken-down and abandoned projects once thought helpful littering the landscape—a row of latrines that are never used here, a neglected farming compound there.

A key characteristic of a healthy community is its ability to solve the problems it faces in a way that enables or sustains the well-being of the individuals in that community. For those of us who live in places with clean drinking water right at the tap, we may take for granted that our community had the necessary resources and abilities to determine that a lack of clean water was a detriment to our well-being and did something about it. It’s not just a one-time thing either. When the next problem comes up, our community has the ability to find and implement a solution. Sure, there will be mistakes and failures along the way, but the existence of the process gives hope for the community.

This ability to find solutions is often lacking in impoverished communities. That’s why Western approaches to meeting needs for those communities rarely leads to long-term, positive impact. The need has been met without the community going through the problem solving/decision making process, leaving the community still dependent on outsiders to do it for them when the next problem comes along.

For example, let’s say my community failed to supply clean water. Outsiders with good intentions might happen by and determine that we need a well

dug to supply us with clean water. So they pull in with their equipment, and before you know it we have clean water. The problem is we were left out of the process. We needed to be the ones to determine the priority clean water should have. We needed to be the ones to search for possible solutions. We needed to be the ones to determine how it would be paid for and how it would be maintained. We needed to be the ones to discover, sometimes through painful experience, who in our community had the ability to administer such a project.

To understand the problem, it is also important to note how impoverished communities ended up this way. Most of them did have the internal processes to solve problems at one point in their history. In many cases the responsibility to find solutions was usurped by outsiders, often violently. For example, in much of the developing world it was the colonial powers who took over the task. For decades colonial powers managed the process that identified problems and solutions to them. They decided where roads, hospitals, and schools would be built. By the time they returned power, the next generation of the indigenous population had lost much of the ability of their ancestors to lead that process.

The point is that when addressing poverty, solutions must have people development at their core. Throwing money at the problem will not work and will often make matters worse. Going back to an idealistic past will not work either because it fails to address the new world in which they find themselves. Impoverished communities must learn from their history, see how others are solving problems, and then be empowered to determine what will be their way in the future. Do we have the patience to trust the process? ²f