



# OVERCOMING Poverty



# Ending Poverty: Three Hopeful Signs

Could we see the end of extreme poverty in our lifetime?

Just two hundred years ago, almost the entire world's population lived in extreme poverty. Today, less than 10 percent do. In the past forty years alone, the percent of people living in extreme poverty has dropped by over 30 percentage points.

In my years of work in Christ-centered economic development, I have had the privilege of visiting places ranging from the small towns in Haiti to remote villages in northern Afghanistan. And I have come to realize that while poverty runs rampant in our world, the situation in so many communities is unquestionably getting better. The depth and complexities of poverty are not hopeless. The Church is on the move.

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## Love in Action

Jesus said that the world would know that we are His followers in how we love (John 13:35). And throughout His ministry, we consistently see His steadfast love and care for some of the most marginalized in society: widows, orphans, foreigners and those living in poverty.

For generations, the Church has recognized the importance of following in Christ's footsteps to love and care for those on the margins. The Church has run toward those in poverty—showing the world what it stands *for* and not only what it stands *against*. Today, there are growing numbers of people and organizations committed to bringing the love of Christ to individuals around the world and empowering whole communities to flourish.

Here are three hopeful trends as the Church addresses global poverty:

### 1 Stand for local leaders.

Our culture is obsessed with superheroes. In ten years, Marvel movies alone have totaled over \$17 *billion* in the box office worldwide. In elementary school, our son loved his Spiderman outfit, and now our youngest proudly wears his Black Panther costume. We celebrate the heroes who risk their lives for the sake of others. Regardless of age, gender, or social class, heroes—both in real-life and on the screen—captivate our attention.

Unfortunately, this hero-centric perspective translated into our early poverty alleviation efforts as well.

BY PETER GREER

email: [president@hopeinternational.org](mailto:president@hopeinternational.org)

website: [www.petergreer.com](http://www.petergreer.com) [www.hopeinternational.org](http://www.hopeinternational.org)

**Peter Greer** is President and CEO of HOPE International, a global Christ-centered microenterprise development organization serving throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Peter has coauthored over 10 books, including *Mission Drift* which was selected as a 2015 Book Award Winner from *Christianity Today*.

When the Church first came onto the scene of global poverty, we were foreigners trying to play the part of the hero. We handed out blankets, donated clothes, painted buildings, and gave out food. Even with good intentions, our short-term-missions trips too often fell prey to paternalistic attitudes as we saw ourselves as the hero of the story.

But in the last few years, there has been a growing realization and repentance for massively underestimating the capacity and competency of the global Church. We've seen how infinitely more capable the global team is to engage in long-term effective poverty alleviation. We've seen the brilliant leadership expertise of people like Christine Baingana—CEO of Urwego Bank, the microfinance institution I worked for when I first arrived in Rwanda. (There is simply no question that she is an infinitely more capable and equipped leader of Urwego than I ever was or will be!) We've seen the incredible knowledge of Jean de Dieu Bizimana—HOPE International's country director in Burundi—and the passion he has to serve the underserved in his community. We celebrate the fathers and mothers, businesspeople and church leaders effecting change in their neighborhoods. We celebrate the expertise and passion of our brothers and sisters around the world who seek to love and serve their communities with excellence. (Since they know their culture, their resources, and their people better than we do, they tend to do the work better anyway.) And we celebrate because the Church is recognizing its identity as a global Church. We need each other in this mission!

## 2 Recognize assets.

Although we might have looked at a person or community in poverty through a needs-based lens in the past, recently we have changed our focus. Instead of seeing “not enough,” we see an individual's assets, skills, and dreams. Instead of seeing “the poor,” we see a mother with a sewing machine, a passion to make clothes, and a firm determination to provide for her children. Instead of seeing a “needy person,” we see a father with a small field, a knack for farming, and a dream to build a home for his family. We see people as the solution.

The greatest Gift-Giver of all time entrusted each of us with unique gifts, skills and abilities. In Rom. 12:6, Paul writes that “we have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.” What a mistake it would be if we didn't recognize them in ourselves and in others!

While in Burundi several months ago, I had the privilege of meeting a construction team who, at the time, didn't have nails for their upcoming project. So, they began to make nails *by hand* by using small scraps of metal. This is but one example of the millions of men and women around the world who, every day, inspire us with their hard work, innovation and resourcefulness.

We celebrate the shift from seeing needs to seeing capacity. We celebrate the resourcefulness, diligence and creativity of our brothers and sisters around the world to transform their communities. We have much to learn from them.

## 3 Champion employment.

It's been said that “the world's best welfare program is a job.” And today, there is a growing cadre of organizations who understand the importance of work.

Jobs for Life is just one of these organizations. With a mission to equip the Church to prepare individuals for meaningful work, Jobs for Life wants to see all people flourish in their work and relationships.

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They understand that work provides dignity, value, and purpose. Work verifies our identity, creates communities, produces jobs, and renews cities. Today, many are without work or underemployed, and this robs them of their God-given dignity and purpose.

In their new initiative *Flip the List*, Jobs for Life seeks to transform the way the American Church fights poverty. Right now, the Church pushes back against poverty by handing out food (62 percent), providing housing (55 percent), and giving away clothing (22 percent). *Only two percent of the Church's poverty-alleviation efforts are geared towards employment.*

Jobs for Life's goal of "flipping the list" is to move employment from the bottom to the top of the list. When the Church focuses on meaningful employment first, provision for food, housing, and clothing will naturally follow as families increase their capacity. *Flip the List* empowers men and women to provide for themselves—replacing a cycle of poverty with one of dignity.

We celebrate that an increasing number of organizations and efforts have been addressing poverty in a dignity-affirming, God-honoring, and jobs-centered way.

## New Approach, Lasting Change

The Church is beginning to combat extreme poverty in a more complete way. It focuses on long-term systemic change and lasting employment patterns, not short-term quick fixes. It emphasizes the importance of partnerships and local champions, not external "saviors" descending to solve the problems of those considered less fortunate. The hope of the gospel is integrated through tangible acts of compassion that have long-term reach.

This is a movement where discipleship, job creation, training, and financial services are building on local relationships to empower communities to break free from poverty.

"Poverty does not belong in a civilized human society," Nobel Prize Winner Muhammad Yunus said, "Its proper place is in a museum." As the Church continues to stand up for local leaders, identify skills and assets, and champion employment-based solutions, we may realize that the end of extreme poverty is much closer than we think.

# Defeating Poverty: What Doesn't Work

*This article first appeared in the July/August 2011 edition of Mission Frontiers under the title: A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out*

In the decade following the collapse of communism, churches operating in post-Soviet Ukraine could once again practice their faith openly and freely. Yet they faced great need: With the economy in shambles, laypeople struggled to find work and provide for their families. Some churches in the United States stepped forward to meet the needs of their Ukrainian brothers and sisters and rebuild their

church communities, but they quickly came to realize that good intentions don't always translate to sustainable results.

## A hand up, not a handout

An active member of a church based in Lancaster, PA, Jeff Rutt, founder of HOPE International, joined several delegations his church sent to Ukraine to deliver shipments of food, clothing, and other supplies to a sister church in Zaporozhye, Ukraine.

On one of these trips, a Ukrainian pastor pulled Jeff aside and described the effect of the aid on his congregation: Although he was grateful for the help, the shipments had depressed local initiative, as many vendors within the church and community could no longer compete with the free shipments of supplies. Instead of inspiring a spirit of generosity and giving, the shipments had created a sense of dependency on foreign aid.

He said, "We need a hand up, not a handout."

After realizing the need for solutions that came from within the community and emphasized the God-given skills and dignity of the local congregation, Jeff began offering small loans and business training to church members, and HOPE International—a Christ-centered microfinance network now serving over 300,000 clients in 15 countries around the world—was born.

## Symptoms and solutions

Rutt and his fellow church members had good intentions from the start, but in overlooking some key symptoms of poverty, they limited the effectiveness of their ministry. In the West, poverty is almost exclusively viewed as a lack of material wealth, characterized by insufficient food, money, clean water, and medicine. When over 60,000 people living in material poverty were asked to define poverty, however, they did not use such straightforward terms. Researchers Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett of The Chalmers Center for Economic Development said, "They tend to describe their condition in far more psychological and social terms. Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation,

and voicelessness.” While Jeff and his church were meeting material needs, their assistance actually intensified the psychological and social symptoms of poverty.

If the symptoms of poverty are not as clear-cut as they seem, then neither are the solutions. An accurate diagnosis precedes an effective course of treatment, not only in medicine but also in economic development. Before we attempt to solve the problem of poverty, we must first understand three factors that contribute to the problem:

both to fix her home and to send her children to school. Abraham Lincoln once said, “You cannot build character and courage by taking away people’s initiative and independence. You cannot help people permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.”

In 2005, I traveled to Afghanistan with HOPE International and saw firsthand the damage done when we decide to help those in poverty by “doing for them, what they could and should do for themselves.” After decades of war, even remote regions within Afghanistan had grown accustomed to outside aid. When a group of donors, pastors, development practitioners, and I were helicoptered into a remote Afghan village, we were paraded around by elders who showed us their “needs.” They led us to a community center with minor water damage to the roof. Outside this building, an elder with a full beard waved his finger at me saying, “You must fix this!” He—  
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## **Belief that solutions come externally:**

In Haiti, a HOPE staff member met a mother who said she had no desire to fix her dilapidated home. The worse her home looked, the better her chances of receiving foreign aid—

the village who were eager to show us their needs—had become dependent on outside aid, a dependency handicapping their long-term initiative to break the cycle of poverty. We must recognize the inherent gifts and talents of the poor to begin to transform communities and the landscape of poverty from within.

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## 2 Ignoring the benefits of business:

According to Bill Easterly in *The White Man's Burden*, since 1970, Africa has received over \$3 trillion in aid, but many of the countries' growth have stagnated—even plummeted. Despite trillions in aid, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa still rank at the bottom of poverty indexes such as the World Bank's Doing Business report and the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). Good intentions too often ignore what has historically been shown to create wealth: job creation.

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Since the 1980s, extreme global poverty has been reduced from 52 percent to 10 percent, primarily through commerce and industry created in countries like China and Brazil, which are now dominating world markets. Business is revolutionizing the world to end extreme global poverty as none of our collective outside efforts and aid have achieved.

As the global church seeks to alleviate spiritual and physical poverty, we often overlook one of our greatest resources—our businesspeople. Although there has been an uneasy alliance between business laypeople and church leadership, business is vital in poverty alleviation efforts.

## 3 Disconnecting proclamation from demonstration:

Poverty is not only physical but also innately spiritual. Historically, the Church has lost credibility and impact when it propagated the lie that we could disconnect our proclamation of the Gospel from our demonstration of the Gospel. It's time to end this deadly dichotomy. We cannot address hopelessness and brokenness without rejoining our words and our deeds. Only the Good News of Jesus Christ's redemptive work on the cross coupled with acts of compassion brings hope for restoration of relationships—with God, with one another, with ourselves.

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Journalist and self-proclaimed atheist Matthew Parris wrote in *The Times of London* that—as much as he hated to admit it—he saw the importance of Christianity in development work. Growing up in Africa and returning years later, he saw that aid and relief work alone weren't enough. Christianity brought about true heart change: "The [African] Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world—a directness in their dealings with others—that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall." In his article, Parris shares how the truths that Christianity teaches—that mankind has inherent worth and dignity—are the key difference in escaping poverty.

Like Matthew Parris, I came to my own realization in Africa that if microfinance institutions (MFIs) and aid work are only meeting material needs, they may increase income, but they won't catalyze life transformation. While managing a microfinance institution in Rwanda, I met Florian, who later became my guard, gardener and friend; however, sometime later, I discovered that when I left my

house, he would enter to steal money and other items from my guests, using both the money he earned and stole for alcohol. Through this experience, I recognized that Florian's increased income wasn't changing him: Unless his heart was changed, his increased income did not benefit him.

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Contrasting Florian is the story of Milán Tapia, an entrepreneur, accomplished seamstress and activist in the Dominican Republic. Born in *el campo*, or in the country, she knew material poverty as a child. Through a small business loan from Esperanza International, HOPE's partner in the Dominican Republic, she began a sewing business making school uniforms; successful, she employed several workers, but she testifies her life didn't change until she was introduced to Jesus Christ by her loan officer. Transformed by the love of Jesus, Milán was ready to make a difference in her community: With her business profits, she founded Tu Hogar Cristiano (Your Christian Home), a school for disadvantaged children in her community. Today 400 children attend Milán's school. One woman's changed heart and economic situation resulted in hundreds of changed lives in one Dominican community.

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## A true fact

The Church today is poised to make a lasting impact on global poverty and we need a big vision for what God might do in our lifetime. Already, we have seen tremendous developments in the areas of health care and poverty reduction. Polio decreased by 99 percent, from an estimated 350,000 cases in 1988 to 483 cases in 2001; in the last eight years, the number of children dying of measles has decreased by 78 percent; and in the past six years, malaria rates have been cut in half. As poverty has been cut in half in the last 20 years—in large part through job creation and business—we see that it is possible to alleviate global poverty as never before. The question is whether or not the global Church today will believe that it is possible to see significant physical and spiritual restoration—and then work passionately, wisely and selflessly to see Thy kingdom come. 

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