

# Editorial Comment



## Poverty, Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Rick Wood, Editor, *Mission Frontiers*

**W**e've all seen them, awful pictures of little children with emaciated bodies, video scenes of long lines of desperate parents seeking help for the children they love at some overrun clinic in some desolate, fly-infested area of Africa or Asia. Or perhaps you have seen stories about the people living off of the garbage piles in Manila or Tijuana. It breaks our hearts. We all wish that something could be done to "fix" this problem and stop the suffering. We feel helpless against such overwhelming need. Is there anything that can be done? Does the Church of Jesus Christ really have the solution to this problem?

There are many believers who feel that caring for the poor is one of their highest priorities as an expression of their faith. Others say that church planting and discipleship must take priority. Perhaps God has called us to do both in ways that reinforce each other. But how do we go about helping to raise people out of poverty? We see one generation after another grow up and die in poverty with very little change. Is it even possible to make a difference?

### **Money Is Not the Answer. Aid Is Not Enough.**

There are many voices inside and outside the Church that say, "We just need to be more generous." But is this really the long-term answer? If everyone in the "developed world" were to give the poor 10 percent of their income, would this solve the problem? Would trillions of dollars collected in the West and shipped off to Africa make any long-term difference in overcoming poverty? It hasn't so far.

As Peter Greer of Hope International reports on page 7, it is estimated that over three trillion dollars has been donated to Africa since 1970. In the process the economic growth rates of many African countries have plummeted. If generosity was all that was needed, should not the three trillion dollars have been enough to at least make a dent in the poverty problem in Africa? Yet things have actually gotten worse. Should we continue to send money in the vain hope of someday making a difference or do we need to rethink our approach?

### **Empower the Poor to Find the Answer**

Regardless of how good our intentions are, without the essential foundation of biblical character all efforts to overcome poverty will fail—no matter how much money is sent. When it comes to poverty, a lack of money is not the cause of the problem, and tons of cash is not the solution. There is nothing wrong with helping people through a desperate situation, and we should do all we can when lives are in imminent danger, but we must focus our efforts on what helps people get *out of poverty*—not keep them continually dependent on outsiders for their survival.

The strategies employed to help the poor must encourage and support the individual and community efforts of the poor to change their own situation. No amount of outside aid and outside solutions can replace local initiative. No amount of hard work by outsiders can replace the ongoing hard work of the local people in creating jobs and starting their own businesses. The local people have to be empowered to take responsibility for their own lives

and be given the spiritual tools, business skills and freedom that can enable them to lift themselves out of poverty. Is there a role for outside help? Yes, but it has to be centered around changing lives from the inside out, not simply putting expensive band-aids on the situation that will eventually wear off. The healing and transformation must come from inside. We can help in this process, but we cannot and should not do it for them.

### **The Church Has What the Poor Need Most**

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, the authors of the marvelous book, *When Helping Hurts*, explain on page 16 that poverty ultimately derives from the Fall of man and the four broken relationships that have resulted. These are with God, with others, with ourselves and with creation as a whole. These broken relationships have affected all of us, but for the poor they have become a crushing burden that Satan has used to convince the poor to believe a lie and keep them in poverty.

Scott Todd explains on page 17 that the poor have internalized the lies, "Give up! You don't matter. Nobody cares about you. Look around you: Things are terrible. Always have been, always will be." These are the lies of fatalism, victimhood and powerlessness. They have lost the hope that they or anyone else can change their situation. They have come to believe that no amount of hard work can change their circumstances. These lies must be defeated in order for the poor to get out of poverty, and they can only be defeated by presenting them with the truth of God's love and power through Jesus Christ—just what the Church is best able to provide.

As we establish Church Planting Movements within every people, we will encounter the poor and the lies that have kept them in bondage. As they come to Christ and begin to believe the Truth, they will have the power to defeat these lies and to lay the spiritual foundation from which they can raise themselves out of poverty.

In order to overcome poverty and stay out of poverty, all of us, including the poor, must be committed to doing what is right in the eyes of God—living by biblical principles. When we do, we build up what Ken Eldred calls *Spiritual Capital*, which is essential for any economy to flourish. See page 11.

Biblical principles such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness etc. are essential for an economy to work. The foundation of successful economies is the trust that is built through honest interaction between people. If you destroy trust between people in a society through dishonest transactions and corruption, the economy will decline. The poorest countries on Earth are often riddled with corruption and violence at every level of a society, from the government on down. The biblical character traits that make a prosperous society possible come from lives transformed by Jesus through an effective discipleship process.

Ken Eldred gives the following example: “If one sells something with true weights and measures, then he has completed an honest transaction and has added spiritual capital to his and the nation’s account. However, if one fails to fulfill his commitment to replace any defective products he sells, then he has proven untrustworthy and dishonest and has withdrawn spiritual capital from his and the nation’s account.”

“This has profound implications on the development, success, and culture of an economy.... (including our own). There’s a relationship between economic prosperity and the pervasiveness of biblical values in the culture. Douglass North won

a Nobel Prize in economics for demonstrating which ‘institutions’ in a society characterize successful economies. He proved that the trust factor, when pervasive in a society, is one of the ‘institutions’ that lead to a better economy.”

Without a moral structure based on biblical principles, short-term self-interest becomes the prime motivation, and people will lie, cheat and steal to get what they want instead of doing the hard honest work that builds the trust and spiritual capital that makes successful economic interaction possible. Transformed lives are the foundation upon which any society can build an economy and overcome poverty.

But economic growth does not come automatically when people commit their lives to Jesus. People need training in ordinary basics like personal money management, how to run a business and good work habits. This should be part of our discipleship too as we plant churches. Church planting should lead to economic growth among the poor. If it doesn’t, then something is wrong.

With a combination of effective discipleship and practical, locally-based economic solutions the poor can come to believe that they can do all things through Christ, including raising themselves and others out of poverty. They can then create their own wealth and not be dependent on outsiders for their survival.

### Financial Partner Update

Last time I introduced a new initiative to encourage our readers to financially support the work of *Mission Frontiers* through a monthly gift of \$15 or a yearly gift of \$180. I promised to keep you posted on our progress. We had 14 donors the last time I wrote. In just the three weeks that the previous issue of *MF* has been out at this writing, we have added 18 more partners for a total of 32. We are looking for 1,500 donors, so we have a long way to go, but we are making progress. Please consider joining our support team. f

# Seven Forms of Poverty

Robby Butler

## Not all poverty is created equal!

The Bible recognizes three forms of poverty:

- *Physical Poverty*: With food and covering we are to be content (1 Ti 6:8), while lack of these creates suffering typical of physical poverty. When the saints in Jerusalem suffered famine, Paul urged the Corinthians to share with them (2 Co 8:13–14).
- *Poverty of spirit*—The ONE form of poverty God requires and rewards: Humility, faith (Ja 2:5), and reliance on God (Ex 22:27). This grows so much more readily in physical poverty than amidst abundance (1 Ti 6:17) that the Bible often identifies those with such spiritual qualities as “the poor” (Lk 4:18, 6:20; Mt 5:3). As we “remember” the poor (Ga 2:9–10), we must embrace God’s priority on cultivating their “poverty of spirit,” and our own.
- *Voluntary Poverty*: Christ became poor for our sakes, so we might show the same grace to others (2 Co 8:9). Our attitude should be like that of Jesus, who emptied Himself to serve (Php 2:3–7).

Various forms of *Artificial Poverty* can distract us from *Physical Poverty*:

- *Projected Poverty* develops when we imagine ourselves unable to do without something (electricity?), then conclude those without it are poor (Ja 2:15; Pr 30:8–9).
- *Provoked Poverty* occurs when those with limited material resources encounter others with something they don’t have (electricity?) and conclude they are poor for not having it (De 8:10–14).
- *Perceived Poverty* is the more localized cousin of *Provoked Poverty*—covetous discontent despite having enough, because others in my community have more (Ex 20:17, De 5:21).
- *Pretend Poverty* is the show put on by those who have concluded their most lucrative occupation is stirring the compassion of others (Ti 3:14; 2 Th 3:10).