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Leadership of Humanitarian Organizations Working in Less Developed Countries: A Best Practices Analysis

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Abstract

Many people from the developed world, who intend to help the poor in less developed countries, actually end up doing harm by creating more dependence, demonstrating ignorance of the local culture, not understanding the importance of long-term relationships, and offering solutions to problems without ever getting input and buy-in from those they intend to help. There is very little published research in scholarly journals regarding how those from the developed world can best approach humanitarian relief and development work in the developing world. In this qualitative analysis using a collective case study design, humanitarian relief and development organizational leaders share best-practices that focus on the following recommendations: 1) Empower and develop the indigenous people, 2) Focus on long-term relationships and partnerships with the indigenous people, and 3) Work on understanding the local culture.

Introduction

It is clear that there are many people who live in developing nations that lack the resources and services that people in the developed world take for granted. Examples of these include an abundant and readily available food supply, safe drinking water, access to appropriate sanitation and hygiene resources, free public education, shelter from the elements, and access to necessary healthcare (WHO, 2016; Larson, Minten, & Razafindralambo, 2006; Das, Hammer, & Leonard, 2008).

When those in the developed world become aware of the plight of people in less developed countries, many feel compelled to help. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples throughout history of people with good intentions who end up creating more dependence and actually causing harm to those whom they intended to help (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

There are many case reports of people sending items to meet short-term needs (e.g., clothing, shoes, medications, toys for children, etc.), but less of a focus on getting at the root causes of poverty and actually partnering with those in developing nations to do the hard work to help them break out of their current cycle of poverty (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009). It is imperative that those organizations that work in developing nations have a clear understanding of best practices from other people and organizations that do this type of work with integrity and respect. It is of particular importance that leaders of humanitarian relief and development organizations take the time to understand the culture and people whom they intend to serve so that true empowerment and sustainable progress can be made (Oliphant, 2016). The goal of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding from experienced humanitarian relief and development organizational leaders regarding these issues. As the lives of fellow human beings are at stake in the developing world, this type of work cannot be approached lightly.

Literature Review

Background

A review of the literature regarding best practices for humanitarian relief and development organizations to follow when working in less developed countries is surprisingly lacking in research-based scholarly sources. There is a smattering of articles from peer reviewed journals that peripherally pertain to this subject, but most of the information that is available comes in the form of books written about the plight of the poor and various approaches to humanitarian work focused on poverty alleviation.

Corbett and Fikkert (2009) attempt to clarify the true origins of poverty in the developing world as they feel that too many of the interventions that are tried by outside humanitarian groups are only treating a symptom of the underlying “illness” and/or the aid organizations completely “misdiagnose” the problems and the interventions end up being ineffective or even harmful (p. 54). The authors promote a paradigm where the wellbeing of each person is significantly based on the health of four different relationships. They feel that if any of these relationships is broken, it can lead to various forms of poverty. The different forms of poverty are outlined in the following table:

Who Each Person Should be in a Positive Relationship with to Avoid Various Forms of Poverty	The Type of Poverty that Occurs if This Relationship is Broken
God	Poverty of Spiritual Intimacy
Self	Poverty of Being
Others	Poverty of Community
Rest of Creation	Poverty of Stewardship

(Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 61)

When discussions occur about people who have made an amazing impact in the world because of their efforts to help the poor, physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer’s name is often mentioned. His work in Haiti has received widespread publicity and was first extensively documented in the book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* (Kidder, 2003).

Kidder (2003) documents Farmer's intense belief that the poor deserve access to quality healthcare and respectable living conditions. Farmer's tireless efforts to promote those concepts are coupled with his struggle to recognize that achieving complete success in obtaining those results might not be possible. Despite the challenges that must be overcome, Farmer believes that society must push forward and not give up the fight to create a new reality where the perils of poverty are finally eliminated. Farmer confronts the apathy of the wealthy of the world and their lack of engagement in working towards poverty alleviation for all (Kidder, 2003).

Since Farmer's work in Haiti began long before the devastating earthquake there in 2010, it is not surprising that Farmer became involved in the post-earthquake relief effort and wrote about that experience in his book, *Haiti After the Earthquake* (2011). In this book he looks at the history of how Haiti became the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere through multiple political and economic circumstances and how the devastation of the earthquake only exacerbated the existing problems. Despite a massive influx of relief dollars after the earthquake, much in Haiti remains mired in the effects of chronic poverty because the fixes for the acute problems caused by the quake did little to address the chronic issues that had been brewing for generations. This book provides one more voice among many about how poverty will never be eliminated without understanding and tackling the deep-seated issues that cause societal poverty to occur.

Before beginning an analysis of best practices in humanitarian development efforts, it is important to understand who is actually doing humanitarian work around the world. Bock (2011) describes that humanitarian work in developing nations may be done by one or more of the following groups:

- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are private organizations that tend to have a presence in-country and may have close partnerships with the local people. These may be small organizations or very large, such as CARE, Save the Children, and Catholic Relief Services. Some NGOs are faith-based such as the Mennonite Central Committee and others are secular.
- Donor governments often work through an agency that is funded by the donor country, such as the US Agency of International Development (USAID) and there are also multilateral organizations such as the United Nations' Development Program.
- Contractors who tend to be hired for specific projects and are rarely focused on engaging with the local population, NGOs, or other local civic groups.
- Academic institutions may have faculty or students engaged in studying local issues in the developing world and may lend professional expertise to NGOs and others in the form of serving as consultants or project managers for various innovative solutions that are being implemented.

Best Practices in Humanitarian Relief and Development Efforts

Sohail, Cavill, & Cotton (2005) showed when NGOs partnered with local community groups and municipalities to work on upgrading and maintaining vital urban infrastructure, that combination resulted in more sustainable results than when NGOs failed to create such partnerships and functioned independently. This concept of outside groups partnering with

local groups in the developing world was indicated in multiple sources as an ideal arrangement.

The poverty that exists in developing nations often has an impact on access to healthcare, which is generally worsened by a shortage of qualified healthcare providers. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended that partnerships be created between NGOs and local medical facilities and providers, ideally coordinated through the respective country's Ministry of Health, to improve access to care (Olusanya, 2007). This again provides evidence that outside organizations working in developing nations are most effective when they attempt to understand the local needs and integrate services whenever possible (Olusanya, 2007).

In addition to partnerships, Corbett and Fikkert (2009) advocate for developing long-lasting and meaningful relationships with people in the developing world so they can work together to understand the root causes of their poverty and find appropriate solutions that are culturally appropriate and have buy-in from the relevant local stakeholders. Without a deep understanding of the local culture obtained through prolonged cultivation of trusting relationships, it is unlikely that outside individuals or organizations would ever create effective and long-term poverty alleviation solutions (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

Stearns (2010), the President of World Vision U.S., clearly approaches his philosophy about poverty alleviation and humanitarian work from a Christian conceptual framework. He uses many Biblical examples from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ about how, if one is to be a true Christian, one must care deeply about the plight of the poor, widows, orphans, and other marginalized groups and believe in the inherent value of each person. He would say that this concern for those often-oppressed people-groups must also be a call to action. He places a heavy emphasis on each person's responsibility to be part of the solution and how we must never ignore what is happening to our fellow human beings in the developing world. He warns about the all-too-common scenario, which finds many Americans caught up in the pursuit of comfort and the elusive American dream, while "our neighbors" in the developing world are suffering.

Economics expert William Easter (2013) tackles the problem of poverty in the developing world from a more secular viewpoint than either Corbett and Fikkert (2009) or Stearns (2010), but many of his conclusions dovetail nicely with the other authors. He advances the belief that only a model of economic development and poverty alleviation that respects the individual rights of poor people will be capable of having the desired effect of ending poverty around the world.

Inappropriate Practices in Humanitarian Relief and Development Efforts

As previously discussed, partnerships between those in developed and developing nations are considered a best practice, but the work of Pallas and Urpelainen (2013) looked at some of the dynamics that come into play when an NGO from the developed world (commonly referred to as the North) and NGOs from the developing world (the South) attempt to work together. The authors describe the unequal power dynamics that are often in play, as the Northern NGO tends to be in a place of greater power than their Southern partners. This may lead the Northern NGO to drive the agenda of their partnership, potentially disregarding the Southern NGOs input on the issues at hand and possible solutions. Corbett and Fikkert (2009) describe this as, "The poison of paternalism," (p. 115).

Pallas and Urpelainen (2013) point out how different motivations and operational styles may affect these partnerships. They say if the Northern NGO is heavily outcomes focused, they may push hard to get a result and then leave the area after the first big victory. Conversely, they describe Northern NGOs that might be heavily focused on participation. These NGOs may be involved with their Southern partners for a prolonged period, but the outcomes of their efforts may not be particularly impressive.

Corbett and Fikkert (2009) describe numerous examples of poverty alleviation attempts done poorly that actually led to harm for people in the developing world. When good-intentioned attempts at helping go poorly, the harm that occurs is typically in the form of actually increasing the dependence of the poor, damaging their already low self-esteem by perpetuating their need for handouts, or removing potential business opportunities for local individuals by flooding a community with free donated items within the same commodity line (e.g., putting a local dressmaker out of business by distributing free donated dresses) (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

Easterly (2013) points out that many attempts at poverty alleviation are focused on treating symptoms and not the underlying causes of poverty. Easterly focuses on the political oppression that has created many of the problems that manifest as poverty in the developing world. He outlines a long history of technocratic approaches to dealing with poverty that often ignores the rights and culture of the people who are suffering from the manifestations of poverty (Easterly, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

The construction of this study was influenced by both humanistic and Judeo-Christian conceptual frameworks that clearly place an inherently high value on every human being regardless of any defining characteristics or demographic variables. Ideally, those who are born into circumstances with significant resources will be compelled to partner with those in less fortunate circumstances to ensure that all people are able to reach their full potential.

Methods

A collective (or multiple) case study design, as described by Creswell (2014), was the framework that was used for this research project. A collective case study approach was determined to be the most applicable as it allowed the researcher to explore the same issues from the points of view of the leaders from three different organizations that do humanitarian relief and development work in less developed countries. Each of the organizational leader's comments was first explored for internal themes and then those themes were compared amongst the leaders to look for thematic similarities or differences in their approach. These findings were then compared to what has been described as best practices in the literature.

When potential candidates were being considered for inclusion in this study, a priority was placed on leaders who represented organizations whose values appeared to be consistent with those identified in the literature as representing best practices for humanitarian relief and development organizations.

Examples of best practices from the literature that were used during the study participant selection process included the following: 1) An emphasis on creating partnerships and developing long-term relationships with those in developing nations based on a deep belief in the value of all people (Sohail, et al., 2005; Olusanya, 2007; Pallas & Urpelainen, 2013;

Corbett & Fikkert, 2009; Stearns, 2010); 2) An appreciation for the value of unique qualities found in each culture (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009; Stearns, 2010; Kidder, 2003); 3) An inherent belief in the rights of all people to self-determination and an avoidance of paternalism (Easterly, 2013; Corbett & Fikkert, 2009; Kidder, 2003; Pallas and Urpelainen, 2013); 4) A belief that all people groups can be self-sustaining if they are given the tools to succeed (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009; Easterly, 2013; Kidder, 2003; Stearns, 2010; Olusanya, 2007; Sohail, et al., 2005).

Evidence that an organization endorsed the previously described best practices was based on a review of the organization's website, available written documents produced by the organization, testimonials from those who had worked with the organization and personal interactions between the researcher and the organization's leaders. Purposeful sampling was utilized as this study was not intended to analyze a wide variety of random organizational leaders to determine who was using best practices and who was not, but rather to confirm whether leaders who represented organizations that appeared to subscribe to many of the best practices recommendations found in the literature, do in fact abide by such an operational framework. It was further hoped that the study would provide a more developed narrative of their experiences that could inform others hoping to do similar humanitarian work in developing nations.

Three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were recruited for inclusion in this study and leaders from all three agreed to participate. Two of the leaders represented two different organizations that work in the Caribbean nation of Haiti (designated as Mr. B. and Ms. M. respectively) and the third leader's organization has a primary focus in the East African nation of Uganda (designated as Mr. U.).

The purpose of the study and study protocols were reviewed in detail and each participant was given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions as needed. Informed consent was obtained and participant confidentiality was assured.

Each interview was designed to follow a semi-structured format. This method was selected so that it could be assured that a core group of questions would be asked of all participants, but that the interview format would have enough flexibility to explore any concepts introduced by the participants throughout our discussions.

Interviews ranged in length from approximately 25 minutes up to a maximum of 55 minutes. Each interview was recorded using two different audio recording devices to create redundancies in case of a potential malfunction of one of the devices. A professional transcriptionist generated very high quality renderings of our discussions that included all references to laughter or other audible occurrences beyond simply the spoken words. Each transcribed interview was coded and similar codes were grouped together to help form themes that emerged from the interviews based on the streamlined codes to theory process described by Saldana (2013).

Once all interviews had been coded, the codes were analyzed as a total group to ensure consistency of terminology. During the early review process, there were occasional variances noted in code terminology used to capture the same basic concept. These variations were modified to reflect similar phraseology throughout the coding process.

In total, 187 statements were analyzed from the three interviews. Fifty-seven different codes were used to categorize the content of those statements. Three themes emerged as the most

prominent and recurring, with all of them being mentioned multiple times by each of the participants. Those three themes will be the focus of this analysis.

Results

As the transcripts were analyzed, codes assigned and themes identified, it was interesting to note that certain ideas were put forth with great regularity by all of the participants. These themes were consistent with the best practices recommended throughout the reviewed literature and included the following:

- | |
|---|
| 1) Empower and develop the indigenous people. |
| 2) Focus on long-term relationships and partnerships with the indigenous people. |
| 3) Work on understanding the local culture. |

Theme #1: Empower and Develop the Indigenous People

Each of the three organizational leaders clearly indicated that empowerment and development of the indigenous people was the number one priority of their respective organizations. Mr. U., the leader who works extensively in East Africa, described his feelings about empowerment and development as follows:

We do community-based drinking water systems throughout Uganda as well as through our second steps programs we do other catalyst projects that are aimed at poverty alleviation. Primarily we are a water development organization although we do apply our same models into some secondary projects, but it's all about focusing on transforming communities stuck in poverty and helping them to strengthen internally and organically that helps transform that.

Empowerment is a huge priority for us. I mean for our organization and the values that we have, it really is about empowerment and working ourselves out of the job that is absolutely one of our end goals. We would love to be completely unnecessary and so with that, you know everything we do is not just about meeting a need. If it were really just about providing clean water, it would make a lot of sense to just go into business doing this. We could make a lot of money and keep people dependent on our service, and just roll with that. There is a supply and demand environment for that kind of commodity; I mean there are a lot of people doing big business in water these days.

So part of what that looks like is employing and really bringing into the decision-making process of our organization the national population. So making sure there are Ugandans, it's not just our crew going out and doing work, it's the people administrating decisions in Uganda that are Ugandan. So I think that's one part of it. But all the time there is a fog that we can't see through because of the cultural divide and yet we have to recognize we are serving another culture that is on the other side of that fog. So we have to go into that trusting and relying on what we can learn and listen to from the other side. I think it's a big step to say what is it. Are we just going to send a bunch of Americans over there to administrate the other side of this, or are we going to actually empower?

The development model that that becomes is asset-based community development, which is the belief that there are already assets in the community. So we embrace that wholeheartedly for many reasons.

One of the options we are looking at long term is—is there a point where this organization goes from being a primarily US-based entity, a legal 501(c)(3) here, as primary place of existence for the organization—the corporation—or is there a time in the future where this really becomes primarily a Ugandan-based NGO where the board of the organization becomes primarily Ugandan?

Because that's part of our conversation. That's a reflection of that value of ultimately what does the handoff look like? Because that would make sense that at some point this becomes just a place to draw expertise, tools, techniques, and resources and things, but it's to support a vision that's led and implemented on the other side.

Mr. U. had a particularly fascinating way of describing the supportive role he wants his organization to play in the life of the East African people he intends to serve. He described it as follows:

Oftentimes, in the moments where we are not holding the reigns at all in a situation, we are really taking direction, intelligent direction from local partners. Those are some of the best moments for us as an organization because we are basically saying we are here to submit ourselves to a culture and a community and we are not looking to drive you, we are looking to add value.

Honestly, [this is] one of the best analogies that we talk about within our organization (maybe because one of the people on our staff is an English teacher this seems to come up). But if you look at language when you are writing something, we are not supposed to be the subject and the predicate. We are not supposed to be the noun and the verb of the statement of Uganda. We are supposed to be the adjectives and adverbs, the supporting and enhancing vocabulary. We are not supposed to ever be the subject and the verb. If we displace that, it's a problem. To take it a little nerdier into the grammatical analogy, God forbid we ever become a dangling participle, which is a modifying phrase that has lost sight of its subject. Yeah, but that idea that if we look at it as writing a story, the story of a nation, if in the statements that are made by these people's lives and we displace that subject and noun, that's a problem.

The two leaders whose respective organizations carry out their work in Haiti also shared similar sentiments. Ms. M. describes her feelings about empowerment and development as follows:

Yes, empowerment is our number one priority. Well, as far as building the homes, the teams do help, but the Haitians actually build their own homes. To train them on how to live so disease doesn't spread, all of those things, it all goes along with the house building—believe it or not. Teaching them to build housing that is earthquake proof, because of what they went through, and to teach them the idea to have clean water and to know sanitation and sewage and that kind of thing. Each part of that to make a healthy community, not just hand them a house.

In the medical area as far as empowerment goes, we want to train the medical staff down there to be able to provide the care for the children when we are not there. Even thinking along the lines of when they have something wrong with them not just to blow it off and think, "Oh, I am just going to be sick," but to actually go to the clinic or hospital or whatever is a big shift for their thinking about empowerment. Even having them come up with this solution on their own and you just kind of guide them there.

Mr. B. had the most extensive history of working in a developing nation amongst the three interviewees. His comments regarding the importance of empowering and developing the indigenous people were remarkably similar to the other participants. He expressed his feelings as follows:

Our long-term goals are really to get them self-sustainable in that community or whatever community we work in in Haiti. To get them to the point where they don't really need us to go down, but they will be able to send their own children to school and have access to medical care that's provided by Haitians. They will know enough about nutrition and that kind of thing so they don't require us.

I don't think it's our organization. It's their organization. They perceive it as their organization. It's them. We just show up and they treat us nice and we make sure that they have the resources. It's their organization. They completely own it... It's Haitian. In fact, we will take it to the next step and try to dissolve the US side (of the organization) and just create a fund foundation, like funding mechanism and the governing entity will actually be a Haitian NGO (non-governmental organization). Our long term goal is to devolve everything to them.

Empowerment is the only priority. One of the things we have learned is there are these technocratic approaches which basically say, "We start with a blank slate and we have got all the answers and we will bring all the answers with us," and we have taken a completely different perspective. We have seen a lot of failures in those technocratic approaches. It's working with people to develop their capacity to do what they want to do. That capacity can be technical in some cases, but more often than not it's really just about confidence building and mental models and reframing and having people think differently about themselves and what they are capable of doing.

Getting the local plumber to commit to do some work on some social things he may not be aware of, but yet, if you asked him, he may be able to help with some of the drains—that kind of thing. It's community organizing, community mobilization, and community awareness. Haitians have this word called "formasyon," which is getting out and talking to people and making people aware. Mobilization. Once people start mobilizing and they buy into the notion of mobilizing and that they are empowered and can make decisions and coordinate and collaborate, it takes a life of its own. You don't need to do a lot after that.

Each of the leaders shared thoughts about practical ways to empower and develop the indigenous people. Mr. B described one approach his organization has used as follows:

*We discovered the way in which work gets done in Haiti and the way in which daily life is organized is around something called a "lakou," which is an extended family unit that everybody works and lives together kind of thing. So we have developed a notion in health called *santé' non lakou*, helping the lakou which really focuses in on what are those interventions we can do at the lakou level where we can educate people at the lakou level about where do they get their water, how do they treat their water, how do you identify malnutrition, how do you know when someone has preeclampsia, how do you—do you know what I mean? If you can get the family thinking about those things at the lakou and then they reach out to their community health worker, that community health worker can report it back to the hospital then we can get somebody out there. We hopefully never see them in the hospital.*

Ms. M. explained some of the educational interventions her organization has undertaken with the goal of developing and empowering the people her organization serves in Haiti as follows:

When we first started coming down there and teaching the mothers, the teachers, and the children about nutrition we found out things like they would send the children (to school) with energy drinks like Red Bull in their lunches and just completely unhealthy nutritionless food. Teaching them about portion control and portion sizing, not necessarily because they need to lose weight, but they need to get each food group in their diet. Protein, fiber, and all of those things—that they need it. It's not that they eat a whole day's worth of fruit and they think it is just eating food, but to seek out the different types of nutrition they need.

As far as training goes, again, to kind of reiterate what I said, look at the solution to whatever the problem is and train them so they learn and can keep doing it after you leave.

Each of the interviewees expressed a strong belief in the intelligence and potential of the indigenous people in the various countries in which they serve. Mr. U. described his feelings about this idea as follows:

Really what we are saying is we believe that there is something trapped in Uganda, something trapped inside the hearts and minds and passions and dreams of the Ugandan people that doesn't have an opportunity to express itself in the world. We are interested in unlocking those things in individuals, unwrapping the potential of communities and unleashing the destiny of a nation. If that sounds audacious, it is.

Our goal is to see the entire nation of Uganda have access to clean drinking water through various solution sets with the end result being we see stronger upticks, a better educated culture and reduction in overall health issues and concerns and we see some exciting and interesting things happening out of the people in Uganda. What can you do with your time, your life your passions when you do not have to commit so much time to the pursuit of clean water?

Mr. B. described his feelings about the people of Haiti as follows:

The people we work with are so smart. The Haitian folks we work with are just so—they are natural systems thinkers and think in broad systemic ways. They understand how to grow their own food; they understand the nature of disease in their community, where it comes from and how to prevent it. What they don't have is certain resources. So talking through that with them to identify the resources they do have available to them, so never starting from a deficit model, but always starting from what are the assets and resources you have available to you to help you do those things right, and then helping them identify the partners that could bring the resources needed. Sometimes those resources are right in their backyard.

Ms. M. had the following to say about her impression of the Haitian people and how empowerment can help them fully utilize their talents and abilities:

It's a boost of self-esteem, you know? They are not stupid people. They are extremely industrious and brilliant and they just have to be encouraged to utilize that part of their internal structure that they already have.

Theme #2: Focus on Long-Term Relationships and Partnerships with the Indigenous People

While all of the leaders that were interviewed expressed an emphasis on empowerment and development of the people with whom they work in developing countries, they all made it abundantly clear that the way to accomplish those objectives is through an emphasis on investing the necessary time and energy to foster quality, long-term relationships and partnerships with the people with whom they are working. The leaders describe how damaging it can be if people from the developing world show up and try and tell people what to do and act like they have all of the answers, instead of trying to get to know the indigenous people and develop an understanding of what the community assets are and what areas need work to help them move forward. Mr. B. feels strongly about the importance of not only partnering with his Haitian colleagues, but also making it clear that they respect the Haitians and that they don't pretend to have all of the answers. He describes it as follows:

I think respect for government and being respectful of the fact that you are operating in another country and they have their own laws and standards. I have seen a lot of practitioners step into those environments and assume, "Hey we are Americans and we are here to save people—we don't have to abide by your standards, your rules, your laws." Those kinds of things. It's serious business. I think sometimes we treat it a little bit like tourism. Those things disturb me greatly. When I see that it troubles me. So I am sensitive to that. We do very little defining of what is needed. They define anything that is needed and we sort of march together to make it happen.

It's relationship-building. You don't ride around in a big white SUV. You walk with people and talk with people and you spend time socializing and connecting in ways that not a lot of big organizations do. I think respecting those is very important.

Ms. M. articulates a very similar philosophical approach when describing the work that her organization does in Haiti. Once again, the emphasis is on relationships and letting the indigenous people take the lead within their partnership to ensure that all work that is done is approached in a culturally sensitive and appropriate fashion.

We mostly work hand-in-hand with our people on the ground and ask what the needs are. We try to get most information from them and then, of course, we process it to see whether or not that's something that we feel is in our boundaries as an organization. If it doesn't fall within the categories that we listed, then typically we don't touch it only because you can't spread yourself too thin financially and that kind of thing.

We try to get all of our information from the Haitians. Of course when we go down there we see needs and then we bring them to them and say, "Okay, this is what we see. Is this a stupid idea? Is this a good idea?" And they will tell us if it's stupid and say no. That's not going to work here.

Don't make false promises. Make relationships. Walk with them. You have to walk them through the process. So many people in developing countries have been just left. The people in our community love (our organization) to the point where they paint (the organization's name) on their shoes and their backpacks and their houses. It's a good name because they know how much it's helped their community. They see us as being

the catalyst that really helped them get through after the earthquake which is really an amazing thing to see years later that I think really made a difference.

Mr. U. shares very similar beliefs about the importance and centrality of relationship- building as a key factor in successful poverty alleviation work in developing nations.

We really respect and honor local people. It's not a patronizing relationship. They recognize we really do love Uganda. It's a love relationship. It's not just about getting the job done. We love it. That's part of the focus and that comes through. They talk about and we hear a lot that we are working in a way that's really meeting a need that reflects the way life flows there. We work through organic sets of relationships.

I think also just recognizing we are always looking for feedback and pooling feedback from the partners that we work with. We ask community leaders in communities where we have done other water systems how it was working with our organization. What did you feel was challenging? What do you think went well? We listen to that stuff. There is a lot of trust in one another to say this is your area, you own this area of the organization and I am going to defer to that. It's a leadership style of submitting to one another. You recognize it as a positive strength everywhere in the organization.

Mr. U. goes on to explain how he feels that poverty is much more than simply an economic problem, but that poverty also has roots in broken relationships for many people.

It's interesting because one of the guys I befriended within the last year ... has been working in social entrepreneurship and microfinance and different aspects of poverty alleviation for a very long time and he sent an email even within the last week and he talked about poverty as basically a lack of money. My response to that was to say that approach is to reduce the human experience to an economic equation, and that's not my experience. That's not my experience as a human being. It's not my experience observing and in relationship to the people that I live with or to the people that I serve in Uganda. My experience says that we are relational beings, not economic beings. Finance is something that measures relationship and expresses relationship in different ways, but the poverty issue then—I think it's fairly easy for people to resonate with the idea that we are primarily relational, not primarily economic.

I don't get a lot of resistance on that idea. So then you have to say poverty, and it assumes and extends from that very logically and quickly, that poverty must be a relational problem, so you are looking for broken relationships not broken economics. It's not that there is no place for economics in this, obviously that's an environment and tool set that's part of the solution and part of diagnosing the problem.

It really comes down to broken relationship with yourself, not knowing who you are, not having a clear sense of identity. There is a poverty of identity there. You see it expressed in insecurity. You see it expressed all sorts of different ways that impacts the relationships that you can have.

That can happen because of things that are happening in your own life, a broken sense of self or the way you personally process broken systems around you whether it's a family environment or an impoverished community you live in. Another big area is broken relationships with other people. If there isn't that healthy connection to the people that you do life with, whether it's on a daily basis in your household or whether it's in your

community, the way you do commerce or education or broken relationships on a national or global scale, that results in certain kinds of fallout of poverty.

So obviously material poverty as we know it—the economic issue can only be accurately understood by looking at the broken relationships that resulted in it.

Theme # 3: Work on Understanding the Local Culture

The third theme that emerged after interviewing the leaders in this study was the great importance of striving to understand the local culture within which the US-based organizations were working in developing countries. The leaders made it clear that not placing a heavy focus on this theme can derail all of the goals of the well-intentioned organizations and lead to significant harm for the very people the organizations are trying to help.

Mr. B. sums up his feelings about this concept as follows:

You don't know anything. Start there. Assume you don't know anything because so many of the solutions that are really viable and work here (in the USA) just don't work in these environments and these locations (in developing nations). They don't respect cultural differences and don't respect the history of the place. These places aren't clean slates, right? That's a classic assumption made by some people. We have this great idea and we will just impose it in this environment because that's a clean slate. That ignores history, traditions, culture and the values that exist already. It ignores the capacity of people that exist there already. At the end of the day you waste a lot of resources and you miss opportunities.

I will pick two areas. One is definitely on the health side and mostly on the sanitation side of things. Organizations come in and build latrines. There are latrines all over Haiti. Everywhere you go there are latrines. They are not maintained and no one has any sense of ownership to them. Some of these ones that I have seen are so beautifully built they actually make better chicken coops than they make latrines. That's what they become—or storage sheds or something. It's hard to convince people to keep a latrine as just a latrine when it's actually built better than their house. So the problem was there was no buy in. A group of volunteers, white North American volunteers fly down and spend 5 days building a latrine and they pick the site where it will be and they decide what it will be made out of. The volunteers feel good and then they go home.

Another example I can give you of that is we think traditional doctors compete with witch doctors and voodoo practitioners in Haiti. They don't. They (witch doctors and voodoo practitioners) are actually some of our best advocates. But if you ask a western medicine practitioner – a biomedicine practitioner and you say, "Okay they are going to come see you and then they are going to see the voodoo priestess or priest and some charlatan ... a snake oil salesman, they will do all 3 of that no matter what you will do." If that's going to happen, what would be the smart strategy? We ought to meet with the voodoo doctor and the charlatan and talk to them about what you do and what they do and how they might actually attract a person to go to a biomedicine doctor. You know what I mean? If you start with a clean slate and assume all that stuff away and you just impose your thought, you miss the opportunity. And you ignore the fact that 70-80% of the patients that come to you to see a biomedical solution are at the same time going to see a voodoo doctor who's probably giving them some reasonably good advice, not biomedical advice, but probably psychological advice.

So I would just say learn before you assume anything. I think it takes 3-4 trips to a place before you really know it. Do you know what I mean? And you see what you can and can't do.

It's something that helps that people realize they don't understand many things. So working together, you can build a deeper understanding of the community. I think that's been a most recent epiphany for our doctors and us is to really start looking at how to not exclude, but incorporate these other pieces of the system that we need to better understand.

Ms. M. describes how her organization places a high priority on training in the area of cultural sensitivity any volunteers from the US that are preparing to go to Haiti to ensure that nothing happens that could damage the relationship building and efforts towards empowerment and partnerships that are underway.

My job when I train teams is to teach them about cultural perspectives of the Haitians and to not come in and act as Americans who know everything. When the volunteers are culturally prepared, I think it's easier to bridge the gap and to work with the Haitians than it is to come in and just do everything for them and act like we have all the answers.

We just do regular meetings before each trip. Definitely try to teach some of these philosophies that come from books we believe are helpful and teach them they are not the great white hope coming from America and to not be disrespectful. Just like with anything else, training is absolutely key. I believe that preparation for teams, learning about the culture, learning about the people and their history and all of that stuff goes a long way towards relationship building within a country. Even learning some of their language skills and whatever you are going to be doing, whatever task it is, do as much research as you can to give them as much information as you can.

Ms. M. further explains how some mistakes have been made in the past despite good intentions, but those good intentions were not combined with cultural awareness.

Definitely, Haiti had a plethora of assistance after the earthquake and everybody came in and they were going to help and they were going to do these things and there were all these ideas about how to help them. I kind of watched some certain things go down.

We weren't training out teams very well right after that. We didn't have that real bent or knowledge and I think now when we go down they think we will give them all kinds of things. We are trying to shift that thinking and it's been a challenge. We get asked for iPods and iPads and you name it. They just think that you are rich and you can solve all of their problems. When you try to tell them, "No," and, "This is your thing now and we are trying to help you do that," they push back. They don't understand. It's hard to break that culture.

I think one of the basic examples I can use to illustrate other issues I have seen involves groups that provided housing for them after the earthquake. Some organizations that we witnessed would put up these little wooden board houses and they were not secure, not earthquake proof, not anything. I think in the long run since I've watched that progress the houses are falling down and now the people have nowhere to live rather than maybe raising a little bit more money and providing them even a one room block house. There are a lot of homeless people again because they didn't, I don't think they spent the money

wisely in the beginning. Even sanitary conditions I would say, because wood in Haiti breeds mold and all kinds of things and it just doesn't help them at all.

Mr. U. was very forthright about the learning curve he has had over the years since he first became involved in international poverty alleviation work. Many of the early missteps happened as a result of a lack of cultural competence regarding those with whom he was working in Uganda. He describes some of those learning opportunities in hopes that others can benefit from his unfortunate experiences.

I think it's not fair to just assume that other people are the only ones making mistakes, because we didn't start out doing it right... Most of the time before you do something well, you do it poorly. You have to have grace and forgiveness for yourself. So, a simple example—we take volunteer trips three times a year to Uganda. So we will have collections of donors and people that want to be involved in helping us do field work. We take them over there and we go out to some of our sites when we are done working and we are connecting with people or we are trying to find new places to do water development. In between those sites we drive around a lot. It had become a practice to bring bags of candy and sometimes we would throw candy. We would see kids alongside the road and we would throw candy to them. I remember a guy, who is now on staff with us actually, but he wasn't then. He was working with another organization. He was driving with us and he sees this and he goes, "What are they doing?" And I'm like, "They are throwing candy to the children." And he is like, "Why is this a good idea?" And it was just confronting the idea that in Uganda one of the big things you deal with is this idea that white people will fix everything, and they pay for it! [Laughter] So they will come in and they will just do everything for you and you don't need to take care of this because someone else will take care of it for you.

It's basically a God-complex on the helping side and on the help side it is dependency, and he said obviously the single act of throwing candy to children, it means something different in this culture. Like if I drove through a village in the US before the school bus and I am like, hey I know all these kids are getting out of the first day of school for instance and I know they are all out waiting at the bus stop. So before the bus comes, like 15 minutes before that, we will drive through the village and throw candy to the kids, it would be great.

Well, it means something different in our society because this is not a dependency environment and I don't represent a God-complex demographic here. But you do that in Uganda where there has been decades and decades of these powerful messages saying, "Your culture is not as good as ours. Your language is not as good as ours. Your form of government is not as good as ours. Peg your currency to ours." All of these messages that basically say, "You and your culture are inferior."

It is a dysfunctional action. So that's a small one. Another example with a bit more tooth to it —there was a group locally that was getting together and sewing pillowcase dresses. The idea was something as simple and cheap as a pillowcase can turn into a dress for a young girl in East Africa and all it takes is a couple of straps, a couple of snips, and a couple of stitches and it's a dress. It sounds so magical, right? So they were getting together for these dress making parties and someone had contacted me saying, "Hey would you like to bring some of these to Uganda?" and I was like, "Yeah sure." This was early so I was like you know, hey, we will take anything. That would be great. They have all

kinds of needs. So we bring like 100 of these pillowcase dresses—and they weren't all pillowcases, but they were all simple sack dresses and we go to one orphanage where we were doing a water project and we bring these dresses and of course for the donors I wanted to get some pictures.

It was all girls, and already I had something inside me stop and say, "We are not doing anything for the boys." It's not that we have to serve everybody, but admittedly it's a rough point where you go, "Hey on the basis of gender, even though you are all orphans we will only do something nice for the girls." I had a voice in the back of my head say, "Wait, something might be wrong with this whole scenario," as I was watching the boys standing off to the side watching what was going on. You know and I do recognize that poverty does impact women and young girls significantly harder than it does boys generally. There is a lot of metrics on that, but in the actual transaction that I was in I am recognizing I may be amplifying a sense of poverty and worthlessness in these boys when they go, "Huh, they didn't bring me anything. And I would go talk to my mom about it, but I don't have one because I am an orphan!" I am like, "Oh my gosh!" So this is going on in the back of my mind.

Second of all, I am realizing there is something not quite right in this interaction as I am going, "Hey can you try your dress on, and then I would like to get a picture with you." Well here is what I found out through conversations with people who love us and care about us and know that we want to grow. These were Ugandan friends. They said, "You need to know those dresses are not appropriate." He said, "In Uganda we take dresses down to the ground. That's partly because we are conservative and partly because life here is very active and moving and there is lots of squatting and bending and climbing and things to do life."

So it's too short, and they said that style of dress really is considered what they call a dressing gown. So like if you are doing your laundry you can wear this because they really only have maybe 1-2 sets of clothes. So he's trying to be nice. What it came down to is they look at it as underwear. So basically, I came to these young girls and said, "Hey look. I brought you a bunch of underwear. Can you put it on and then I want to take pictures with you." Oh my gosh! And it's a horrible feeling to realize you did that. Like, I did that. So to have to back up and come to the people on this side who ask, "So how did it go?" and say, "Hey, boy, first of all I just want to say thanks for getting all these people together to mobilize them and try to meet a need. There is some feedback I would love to share with you to help make this more effective."

Honestly that group was not interested in changing their design. They were not all that happy about the fact their gift wasn't appropriately received. They felt out of sorts, because I am saying in order for this to actually be good, it needs to be longer, it needs to be like this. You do understand you are not giving them something they can wear to school. You are giving them something that they can wear around the house to do chores, and that is valuable, but please just understand it accurately. They were all bent out of shape about it. I never worked with them again, because I was like, hey we are focused on serving and learning and growing and submitting ourselves to what we are learning. That was tough.

Discussion / Implications

The information gleaned from the participants of this study can be very valuable for those who are contemplating undertaking similar efforts. Their philosophical approach in leading their respective humanitarian relief and development organizations aligned very closely with the previously described best practices found in the reviewed literature. The important concepts presented by these organizational leaders can add depth to our understanding of how to best approach this important work.

Humanitarian relief and development organizations often rely heavily on volunteers who sign up to take short-term missions trips and many of those volunteers have no previous training or experience in this type of endeavor. Those who are responsible for organizing such trips would do well to integrate into pre-trip training programs the wisdom and advice the leaders have shared during their interviews in this research study. Each of the leaders pointed out the importance of taking this work very seriously and all recognized that even the most well-intentioned people will make errors in judgment until they have come to terms with several key concepts.

It is clear from the literature and this study's participants that all people who desire to do humanitarian work in developing nations must make empowerment and the development of the indigenous people a top priority so that any assistance that is provided doesn't simply result in on-going dependence and perpetuate cycles of poverty. This objective, by its very nature, requires organizations to make a long-term commitment to the process. The leaders in this study felt so strongly about the importance of empowering the people whom they serve, that they all hope for a future where their US-based organizations are no longer needed.

Because there are no quick solutions to the complex societal problems faced by people in less developed countries, the leaders in this study discussed the great importance of developing long-term relationships and partnerships with the people with whom they serve. When the working paradigm becomes one that is focused on empowerment, long-term working relationships, and partnerships, the third recommendation from our leaders flows naturally from the others.

Each of the leaders placed a heavy emphasis on understanding the local culture and basing all action items for the organization from that context. They warned that it is not appropriate to think solutions to problems that might be utilized in the US will either be effective or well received if attempted in a developing nation without the full vetting and support of the indigenous people. They suggested flipping the whole approach to problem solving around and recommended starting with local leaders and asking them to identify the problems that exist and the barriers that need to be overcome to move forward. The US leaders generally favored an approach where their organizations fell into a supportive role, while following the lead of those in the developing country.

The leaders pointed out that people in developing nations have had many people make promises that are never kept and this needs to be avoided at all costs. Obviously, if the maintenance of long-term relationships is a priority, making promises that can't be kept would be very damaging.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study are the number of participants included in this phase of research. Future research with additional participants may result in the capture of expanded

insights and suggestions for leaders of organizations doing humanitarian relief and development work in less developed countries. Despite these limitations, the information gained from this purposeful sample of leaders of organizations whose missions and visions align very well with the best practices noted in the literature, can add to our understanding within this field of study.

Conclusion

In this paper, the challenges that exist for organizations that do humanitarian relief and development work in less developed countries have been explored. It has been described how many who intend to do good work to help the poor, actually end up doing harm by creating more dependence, demonstrating ignorance of the local culture, breaking promises, not understanding the importance of long-term relationships, and offering solutions to problems without ever getting input and buy-in from those they intend to help.

The leaders that were interviewed have offered their collective wisdom, based on many years of work in less developed countries. They have shared the lessons they have learned through their own personal and professional experiences as well as those gleaned from relevant literature, advice from colleagues and their personal faith and other philosophical influences.

It is hoped that this research can help others who are considering participating in humanitarian relief and development work in less developed countries, to more fully understand the complexities that are involved and to provide some solid strategies to guide their efforts.

After reading this paper, there should be a clear understanding that organizations that are doing humanitarian relief and development work in developing nations should embrace the following strategies: 1) Empower and develop the indigenous people, 2) Focus on long-term relationships and partnerships with the indigenous people, and 3) Work on understanding the local culture.

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