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# The Era of Do-It-Yourself Aid: Possibilities and Perils

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## The Era of Do-It-Yourself Aid: Possibilities and Perils

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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March 22 marks World Water Day. As it has for 24 years, the United Nations hosted events across the globe to raise awareness about the global scarcity of fresh water and the importance of water for lives and livelihoods. Besides the worldwide press campaign, events were planned in Paris, New York, Bangkok, and Tajikistan. Although it probably doesn't know so, the UN also has a voice in Conyers, Georgia, where Wells of Hope International has spread the message about clean water—citing statistics from the UN itself—on a budget of less than \$25,000 a year since 2006. The leaders of the group are a retired married couple who are members of an Assemblies of God church. Wells of Hope got its start-up money when the wife sold her large collection of Coca-Cola memorabilia. She explained, “If Jesus can turn water into wine, He can turn Coca-Cola into water.”

This essay discusses the transformation not of water into wine, or Coca-Cola into water, but of global humanitarianism from something done by large agencies associated with governments, the UN, or religious denominations, into work taken up by congregations or even individuals. We are now in an era of what the columnist Nicholas Kristof called “DIY Foreign Aid.”<sup>1</sup> In the last three decades more than 10,000 new international organizations have been set up by Americans wanting to improve lives in the Global South. These formal nonprofit organizations are joined by thousands more short-term missions projects and informal social entrepreneurs. These are people working individually or in small groups on programs ranging from women's empowerment to digging wells to training African surgeons. Their specific projects vary, but what these groups have in common is their ability to work directly, grassroots to grassroots, bypassing the large bureaucracies of aid that have dominated development projects since World War II.

In a way that has never been possible in history, the materially rich can now reach directly to the materially poor, even across continents and oceans. It's not hard to sense the possibilities here. Globalization has eased the flow of people and goods across borders. Compassionate individuals no longer need to wait for their national government or even the blessing of their religious denomination in order to take action for the poor. Instead of being bound by the economic stratification that is increasingly built into our geography, rich living among rich, poor among poor, American generosity can reach the world's very neediest.

But there are perils here, too. When charity gets easier, justice can get harder. The complications of strangers' lives look much simpler at a distance. And the difficulties of politics of compromise that happen when we live side-by-side with the disadvantaged can be avoided when we work in distant communities and can get on a plane and go home when things get unpleasant. Americans working abroad are not subject to political give-and-take. This can make us look for the charitable “quick wins” abroad and make us increasingly impatient of the messiness of democratic life at home.

This essay proceeds in three parts. In the first I provide a (necessarily brief and simplified) historical sketch that traces how we got to the era of do-it-yourself aid. The second part

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<sup>1</sup> Kristof 2010

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considers what role religion plays in this kind of aid, and I conclude with a discussion of the possibilities and perils of this era.

### **How We Got Here: American Global Charitable Action from Missions to DIY Aid**

Religious missions were the most common way that a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American would approach charitable action in the global South. The largest Protestant denominations had their own missions boards by the 1850s, and upstart independent agencies were launched by the end of the century. In 1887, a handful of enthusiastic college students calling themselves the Student Volunteer Movement went on a barnstorming tour of American college campuses, calling for volunteers to effect “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”<sup>2</sup> That was not achieved, but the goal of putting missionaries in Asia, the Pacific, and Africa was—by World War I, there were 128 American-based Protestant missionary societies working abroad.<sup>3</sup> Over time the projects of many missionaries expanded from pure evangelization to include services in education, medicine, and agriculture.

When the World Wars came, American religious groups were accustomed to funding these kinds of humanitarian practices. Many of the religious aid agencies we know today date to this era, including Lutheran World Relief, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and Catholic Relief Services. After the Second World War, these organizations turned to relief projects in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Their work continued rather quietly for two decades, supported by private contributions and some food aid from the U.S. government. These were also the years when modernization theory dominated American thinking about development.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by this idea, the U.S. government helped build infrastructure and industry in the Global South in hopes of keeping underdeveloped nations out of the thrall of communism. In the background, religious relief and development agencies were quietly expanding their budgets and their portfolios. Evangelicals launched their own agencies, including World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse, in these decades as well.<sup>5</sup>

As the Cold War dragged on and flared up badly in Vietnam, the U.S. government grew disgruntled with a development program that centered on direct aid to foreign governments. In the early 1970s the Senate Foreign Relations Committee outlined a proposal to de-emphasize infrastructure and focus on basic human needs. Instead of channeling funding directly to unreliable foreign governments, money would be sent through nongovernmental organizations. The private agencies that had been critical during the wars again took up a prominent role bringing American compassion to the Global South.

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<sup>2</sup> See the explanation of the SVM’s “watchword” in Mott 1900.

<sup>3</sup> Hutchison 1987; Wuthnow 2009

<sup>4</sup> For a brief introduction to development theories, see Khan 2014.

<sup>5</sup> On emergence and growth of American NGOs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Smith 1990.

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Some of these organizations, like World Vision, have since become highly professionalized aid agencies that compete with other NGOs for government contracts. These organizations are no longer cloistered within their denominational traditions. Instead, they are part of the professional field of aid contractors that includes both nonprofit and for-profit agencies.<sup>6</sup> This means that they are integrated into networks of Washington officials, and that they must create bureaucratic structures that can meet the complex reporting requirements of their government funders. Traditional missionary agencies continue to thrive in parallel, some of them supporting thousands of missionaries on budgets of tens of millions of dollars a year.

But while these transnational agencies hum along, individual congregations are increasingly choosing their own project and partners abroad. The sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow found this among hundreds of the congregations he studied for a 2009 book on the global reach of American Christianity. An immigrant member of a congregation, for instance, will set up a partnership between his new church and his old church in Africa. A denomination might sponsor an exchange trip between pastors, and the pastor may return to a Latin American community with a short-term mission team from her church. Some of the faith-based NGOs have recognized this trend and have embraced it as an opportunity rather than a threat. For instance, the staff of World Vision helped a congregation in North Carolina set a special project in Zambia. The congregation provided funding to care for 500 orphans in the community. They also sent short-term missions teams and provided support for education, water, and micro-enterprise projects in the village.<sup>7</sup>

Given that aid agencies, faith-based NGOs, and missions agencies now have better trained staff and are smoother-running machines than they have ever been, why do American congregations choose to “do it themselves?” Wuthnow found several reasons. First, many people felt as though giving to projects that they could choose and have control over felt more voluntary and less like a tax. Church members felt that the money was used more efficiently because it was used to buy bricks and mortar abroad rather than financing salary and benefits of staff at home. The church leaders that Wuthnow interviewed also talked about relationships. The Americans felt satisfaction at seeing tangible changes in people’s lives, and in building personal relationships with the beneficiaries of the aid. One leader said, “This is what Jesus would have us do. It causes people to feel in touch with God’s love.”<sup>8</sup>

*Do-it-Yourself Aid: Grassroots International NGOs Emerge*

Congregations’ direct action is only one facet of the do-it-yourself aid movement. My own research has centered on roughly 10,000 new nonprofit organizations set up since 1990.

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<sup>6</sup> Burchardt 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 5 in Wuthnow 2009

<sup>8</sup> Wuthnow 2009, p. 145

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Today, every state in the union, and one out of every three U.S. counties, is the home base of a registered international aid organization.<sup>9</sup> To make sense of this organizational expansion, we have to understand that most of the new international aid groups that have been established in the last 30 years resemble Wells of Hope more than well-known NGOs like CARE or Catholic Relief Services. These new groups rely largely on volunteer labor and donations from individuals rather than contract revenue or foundation grants. IRS records show that the median organization has an annual budget of \$25,000 or less. Less than the top 10% of U.S.-registered international aid organizations draw annual revenues of \$1 million or more.

The groups I am most interested in are what I call GINGOS: Grassroots International NGOs. These groups are typically personal projects launched by Americans with a college degree but no training or professional experience in international development. Adoptive parents want to provide extra help to their child's native town; MBA students want to try out an idea for improving small-scale farming; an immigrant wants to set up a school in his home country. Fifty years ago a few of these intrepid souls would have set off as Peace Corps volunteers or missionaries, but most of them would have sent checks to large humanitarian organizations. What has changed in the last three decades is that cheap travel and instant electronic communication have made it possible for amateurs and part-timers to launch their own development projects.

Technology has changed, but geopolitics and patterns of immigration matter too. Thanks to the end of the Cold War and various civil wars, whole swaths of Africa, Central America, and Asia opened up to tourists by the 1990s. This was also the moment when the price of airline tickets was declining in real dollars and the income of white-collar Americans was increasing. The 1965 immigration reform swelled the population of highly educated Chinese and Indian immigrants, who by the turn of the millennium had the means to travel back and forth to their countries of origin. Immigrants and tourists alike could communicate with acquaintances abroad as the reach of the internet and mobile phones extended first to cities and then to rural provinces.

All of this contributed to a context in which Americans can travel relatively safely and inexpensively to less developed parts of the world. Most often the travel is related to tourism, study, or volunteer work through existing partnerships with universities or civic groups. Aid projects are started to provide assistance to specific communities that Americans encounter during these travels. This is a critical point: grassroots aid does not trickle down from a national development scheme, nor is it broader aid interventions in search of apt "sites" for implementation. Instead grassroots aid emerges in a personal, relational context.

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<sup>9</sup> Schnable 2015

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What is it that do-it-yourself aid givers actually DO? One of the things we know about larger aid agencies is that they have significantly shifted their projects over the last several decades. David Korten, who was for many years an officer at the Ford Foundation, and is one of the most insightful analysts of NGOs, wrote in 1987 that there were then three generations of NGO work. The first focused on welfare, or providing goods and services. The second focused on what we might call development, or capacity building. This was about local communities identifying their problems and working together with outside collaborators to find solutions. The third generation reduced the role of outsiders more still, and centered on large-scale political mobilization to change the institutions that left poor people powerless. When Korten wrote about these three generations in the early 1980s, he already saw first generation strategies of NGOs as providers of welfare services as outdated.<sup>10</sup>

So it came somewhat as a surprise when I started looking at grassroots NGOs that most of their work would be labeled by Korten as first-generation projects. The most common activity of grassroots NGOs is building schools or providing scholarships. This is followed by providing medical supplies or supporting a medical clinic, and projects to supply clean water. Even if we include training people in small business projects as second-generation, about three-quarters of grassroots NGOs focus on first generation projects. Most of the Americans who assist disadvantaged communities through grassroots NGOs are, in other words, providing the kinds of goods or services that people in wealthy countries receive either from their family or from the state. In an interview one leader of a grassroots NGO was explicit on this point. She said, “It’s really stepping into the gap of what the government can’t or won’t do.”

**Grassroots International NGOs: The Role of Religion**

Let me turn from what grassroots aid organizations do to the role of religion in these organizations. Remember, these are groups set up explicitly as relief, development, or human rights organizations. One of the strange features of U.S. laws about nonprofit organizations is that churches and missionary societies do not even have to register for tax-exempt status. All of the organizations I studied deliberately chose to incorporate themselves as international development groups. One of the most striking findings of my research is that even though many of these organizations described themselves as secular or rejected the label of “faith-based organization,” the place of religion in them was pervasive.

Let me provide an example. I interviewed a woman I’ll call Natalie, who founded a grassroots NGO I will call For Kenya’s Tomorrow (FKT)<sup>11</sup>. She and her Kenyan husband

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<sup>10</sup> Korten 1987

<sup>11</sup> The individuals I interviewed and organizations I observed during fieldwork are named here with pseudonyms.

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are Pentecostals, and her mother-in-law is the pastor of a Nairobi church that is FKT's key partner in aid projects. Most of FKT's funding and volunteers come from Natalie's childhood church in Michigan. I asked Natalie at one point in our conversation why she did not think of her group as a religious organization. She told me:

When I founded For Kenya's Tomorrow I purposely did not found it as a religious organization for a couple of different reasons. . . it comes with a certain connotation, I guess you can say. And I didn't want anybody who wanted to come and serve to feel left out. Do you know what I mean? Whether or not you are a Christian or a Muslim, or a Jew or whatever, I wanted it to be an open door for people to come and serve. Not limited to any type of religion. And I also felt, too, like in my conversations with God that God was just saying to me that there are so many Christian organizations that are out there doing things in my name that aren't a true representation of really who I am. So just lead by example. And that's kind of how I felt about it, too.

Natalie understood the label "religious organization" to imply that only those who share the faith could volunteer or be eligible for assistance. It also implied to her that the group is claiming a divine mandate for its work—"doing things in my name." She fears that Christian groups abuse this mantle, "doing things. . . that aren't a true representation of really who I [God] am." In her view, it is best to avoid religious labels and instead to "lead by example." Natalie and For Kenya's Tomorrow show that what religion brings to grassroots NGOs is a complex question.

So rather than thinking about an organization as either religious or not, or the people who run it as either religious or not, I argue that it is most useful to think about the kind of resources that religion affords. We can think of certain parts of religion as being tools in a sort of cultural tool kit<sup>12</sup> that the leaders of grassroots NGOs can choose to take out and use for particular jobs. I want to mention three particular categories of tools.

First are *frames*, or ways of thinking and speaking about relief and development work that imbue it with legitimacy. Next are *networks* of congregations and individuals that provide goods, personnel, and entry into aid-receiving communities. Third are religious *modes of action* that link the NGO, supporters, and local aid recipients. Even grassroots NGOs that would not describe themselves as religious—and probably even that outsiders would not describe as religious—still used some of these tools.

Let's examine these tools one by one. When I say that religion offers the leaders of grassroots NGOs *frames*, I mean that it provides ways of organizing and making meaning of the problems of global poverty. When grassroots NGOs use religious frames, they highlight religious justifications for charity and sometimes for particular projects or classes of recipients. In my analysis of a random sample of the websites of grassroots NGOs, I

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<sup>12</sup> The sociologist Ann Swidler introduced the metaphor of a "tool kit" to explain how people use different elements of culture in different situations. See Swidler 1986.



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found that about a quarter of them justified their work by saying that it was God's will or a demonstration of God's love. Here is an example from another grassroots NGO that digs wells, called Living Water International:

For Living Water it's all about Jesus. It's about demonstrating God's love, announcing his kingdom, seeing Jesus in the least of our brothers and sisters, offering a cup of water in Jesus' name and proclaiming his gospel, the living water.

Helping communities create sustainable water, sanitation, hygiene, and Christian witness programs in partnership with local churches is just the best way we've found to do that. Why? Because the water crisis affects poverty, women, health and education—and for us it's a spiritual issue.

The NGO's name and this text allude to passages in the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of living water: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37-38). The group cites claims from development experts about the effect of water shortages on women, health, education, and poverty. But using the phrase "living water" invokes the ministry of Jesus and suggests to the reader that digging wells is in continuity with that ministry. The allusion is what allows the group to say "for us it's a spiritual issue," and to enlist supporters on the basis of the project's religious bona fides.

Using religious framing can also extend the boundaries of what we might think of in the Christian tradition as typical charitable religious action. Projects that can't be directly linked to a Biblical text can still be framed as expressions of God's love, as seen by the website of an NGO doing women's enterprise projects:

OneMaker exists to be a tangible expression of God's love to poor women and girls vulnerable to trafficking and other exploitation by giving opportunities through education and business ventures. We provide educational sponsorships to girls in poverty, believing their God-given potential is a treasure and should be developed.

In this text, women's "potential"—intellectual and economic—is a gift from God, and programs that support that potential are an extension of God's love. These kinds of framings help Americans look at the complex problems of poverty and see a place to start. They can also give potential supporters confidence that an NGO's work is morally valid, or hope that the work will find divine favor and will succeed.

The second tool that religion provides to grassroots NGOs is human *networks*. Religious networks play critical roles for grassroots NGOs in finding partners in the global South and in recruiting supporters in the United States. NGO websites suggest that, other than fellow NGOs, religious congregations in either the aid-receiving country or the United States were the most common organizational partners. This is partly because churches are the most common sort of nonprofit organization in the United States and the kind that Americans are most likely to belong to.<sup>13</sup> But the history of colonialism and missions that are wrapped

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<sup>13</sup> Salamon 2012

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up in religion also contribute to churches' networks across the globe. For instance, the global reach of the Lutheran church has extended, through migration and colonization, to the Midwestern United States and to Tanzania.

One of the people I met in my research was a Tanzanian immigrant to the United States I'll call Erasto. As a teenager he was the first student in his village to be admitted to secondary school, and eventually he won a scholarship to attend Luther College in Iowa. He married an American woman from St. Paul, Minnesota, and eventually the two of them decided to raise funds to establish a secondary school in Erasto's home village in Tanzania. Their friends suggested that they meet with a local Lutheran pastor who was part of a sister-church program with Tanzania. Erasto soon discovered that the pastor had not only visited his village, but had met his mother. This pastor's church became a dedicated donor to the school, and until the school was legally incorporated as an independent nonprofit its funds were wired through the Saint Paul Area Synod. This is an example of a project that is not intrinsically religious-- a secular community school. The leaders that started it do not use religious framing or describe their motivations as rooted in their faith, but the religious networks of the Lutheran Church were essential in giving this NGO its start.

Religion offers grassroots NGOs a third tool, religious *modes of action*, that can generate resources for the group, or provide shared activities for Americans and aid recipients. People learn to do many things through their involvement in religious life: make music, pray, give money. Grassroots NGOs draw on these skills and habits and deploy them for the good of aid projects.

One religious practice of giving harnessed by NGOs is the Muslim obligation of *Zakat*. There are several forms of religious charity mandated in the Koran, and two NGOs that I studied advertised their projects as a means for Muslims to fulfill their obligations. One NGO allows donors to designate their contributions as *Zakat al-maal*, which are alms given as a "tax" of one's wealth to the poor, or as *Zakat al-fitr*, or alms given on the holiday of *Eid-al-fitr*. With the funds they raised, these groups carried out education and sanitation projects, but also distributed food aid during Ramadan.

In another departure from the playbook of professional NGOs, nearly 1 in 6 of the groups I studied used their websites to ask supporters to pray for them. In these texts prayer is often presented as a way for those who are unable to volunteer overseas to support the organization.

Prayer also serves as a bridging mode of action between Americans and people in aid-receiving communities. Clara, a 22-year-old American woman who volunteers with For Kenya's Tomorrow, told me that prayer walks and Bible studies were the main tasks on which she was able to collaborate with young Kenyan men. The walks helped the volunteers meet neighbors and understand local conditions, which would help them carry out future work. (I also had the impression that the young Kenyan men and young American women liked having a religiously-sanctioned opportunity to socialize.) These "bridging" modes of action help grassroots NGOs reinforce religious networks by building

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trust and providing a starting point for on-the-ground collaboration between Americans and local partners.

But other NGO volunteers believed that religious modes of action would hinder rather than help their work. The Rwanda Ultrasound Initiative (RUI) prohibited any expression of religion in delivering medical care, in spite of the fact that some of the doctors described themselves as personally religious. The founder of this organization had seen such behavior among other organizations, and disparaged it as “a bartering system”—medical care in exchange for being proselytized. A mainline Protestant RUI volunteer distanced herself from missionaries. She said, “of course, there's very good things that missionaries have done. But we're not in that day and age anymore, so I think you have to be a little bit careful.”

Her comment about the age of missionaries being over might not be empirically true, but it points to a perceived shift in the role of religion in giving aid. More importantly, her comment points to one of the dangers of the bridging religious modes of action: by emphasizing sameness, religious modes of action can mask inequalities in power between Americans and aid recipients. This volunteer's comments bring us to some of the perils of do-it-yourself aid.

**Possibilities and Perils of Do-it-Yourself Aid**

All aid programs, of course, risk misdiagnosing or oversimplifying development problems. James Ferguson famously described a Canadian aid agency's failed attempt to improve agricultural production in Lesotho, which overlooked that the region's residents were not actually farmers but migrant laborers in South African mines.<sup>14</sup> However, grassroots NGOs' vulnerabilities to these errors are different from larger NGOs. First, the leaders of GINGOs typically know less about the local context than traditional aid agencies. Leaders—even emigrants like Erasto—spend only weeks or months of the year in the field and instead rely on the reports of their local helpers. Many GINGO leaders have few local language skills and must rely on translators or ask locals to speak English. Important information can be lost in translation or is unheard as Americans are deaf to the small conversations taking place around them. American do-it-yourselfers also usually lack the contextual knowledge of the past development efforts—failed or successful—in their particular sites. As the leader of one grassroots NGO explained to me, “We may have been reinventing the wheel—but man, it was OUR wheel.”

A related problem that comes out of the part-time relationships between American givers and the receiving communities is that grassroots aid can lack effective mechanisms of accountability to its clients. The primary axis of accountability is between the organizations' founders and the small individual donors—usually friends and family—who support the projects. One of the hard-won lessons of the last 70 years of development work is that

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<sup>14</sup> Ferguson 2000

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projects that are simply parachuted into a local community without meaningful local buy-in typically fail. Achieving this buy-in takes time and local knowledge, and it is often messy.

The desire to make it “OUR wheel”—the high expressive quality—adds to the peril of grassroots NGOs. These organizations are launched as passion projects of the founders. Americans involved with GINGOs derive deep emotional satisfaction (and sometimes frustration) from their efforts. But there are real risks in allowing the preferences of Americans to steer the ship. Allowing expressive impulses to flourish in an NGO requires certain accommodations. It means choosing projects that are of interest to Americans; it means allowing in foreign volunteers, even if it isn’t particularly efficient; it means constant negotiating and emotional work between outsiders’ ideas and insiders’ practical knowledge. One of the greatest perils of do-it-yourself aid is that these programs become more about satisfying Americans’ desires to be cosmopolitan, wise, or generous, than about helping others gain greater well-being and self-determination.

Grassroots NGOs do have some advantage in being independent from the budgets and networks of professional NGOs. Larger organizations are constantly pushed to demonstrate their results and to create projects that can be replicated. Grassroots NGOs, since they are supported by personal networks of family and friends, are immune to these pressures. Their accountability to their donors is based on personal relationships rather than formal metrics. These organizations have the opportunity to work “deeply” in a community rather than widely. I predict that where these organizations are successful, it will be in places where they have made longstanding commitments to a particular community.

But there is a final peril built into the strategy of funding an NGO with donations from family and friends. When NGO leaders explain their work in the Global South to fellow Americans, no matter how virtuously they portray their local partners—and usually they are portrayed as hardworking and hospitable—these individuals are still portrayed as aid recipients. When other Americans hear the stories of do-it-yourself aid, the story centers around the American as the protagonist—or as aid critics call it, “whites in shining armor.” Even when the programs on the ground are attempting meaningful partnerships between Americans and local partners, this partnership is usually effaced in the discourse of fundraising, which, like all fundraising pitches, centers on a donor’s willingness to act. So even while they rouse Americans’ compassion, do-it-yourself aid risks calcifying Americans’ existing ideas about the Global South.

But I would like to inject some optimism into the discussion by sharing the story of an aid do-it-yourselfer named Diane Coffey who has managed to avoid many of these perils. The 2015 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, Angus Deaton, recently called Diane “an economic Mother Theresa.” With her husband Dean, Diane established an NGO called the Research Institute for Compassionate Economics, or R.I.C.E., for short. They were just funded by the Gates Foundation for \$1.5 million to research sanitation in India. How has Diane reached this point while avoiding many of the perils of do-it-yourself aid?

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Diane, now in her early thirties, attended Villanova University. She studied sociology and peace and justice studies and took courses in Spanish and Hindi. In her junior year, she spent a semester abroad in India as part of an exchange program through Minnesota Studies in International Development. Although her interest in children's well-being was piqued there, she didn't run home to start her own nonprofit. Instead, after graduation, she spent a year in the Dominican Republic living in community with the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. The Sisters accept four volunteers to live with them each year and help in a school and clinic that serve the country's poorest children. As a volunteer, Diane taught children each day, in Spanish, while living simply and joining the Sisters twice weekly in community prayer.

Already, we can glean two important lessons here. First, Diane saw that you must speak the language of the people you want to serve. Further, the Sisters' methods remind us that a sense of shock at poverty or a rush of ideas about how problems could be fixed with first-world help is not enough to anchor a meaningful movement for social change. The Sisters' efforts in the Dominican Republic are based on centuries of Catholic teaching about obligations to the poor. They are rooted in the mission of their own order, which is to "to rejoice in God's presence and to help people believe that God lives and acts in them and in our world." Here we see religious resources at their very best: the global network of the Catholic church that connects people of faith from the U.S. to the Dominican Republic, and a religious frame of meaning that is used not just to justify the projects that aid-givers favor, but to provide a deeper ethic that guides the programs, the relationships between the aid givers and the aid receivers, and that shapes the mind and spirits of the aid givers themselves.

After her time with the Sisters, Diane went to Princeton University, where she earned a master's degree and then a Ph.D. in public policy and demography. In other words, she developed concrete skills that would be useful to address development problems. In her studies she soon learned that there were a number of issues about child's health where more research was needed to develop better solutions. For instance, how much of children's malnutrition can be traced to the malnourishment of their mothers during pregnancy? How much will the availability of latrines reduce child mortality? She developed the research skills to answer these questions, and then she apprenticed herself to the local experts at the Delhi School of Economics. Even though by this point she was working in highly specialized demographic research, she still believed that being able to talk with people in their own language mattered, so she used her Hindi language skills to do face-to-face research in villages.

As I argued above, one of the great challenges of grassroots aid is making sure your programs are tied into local institutions and are accountable to the people you are trying to serve. Diane has done that through her fellowship with an Indian university, and more importantly by collaborating with the Indian nationals who are on R.I.C.E.'s staff and board. She has told me that one of the challenges of her work is that their research sometimes critiques the policies of the Indian government. For instance, they found that a massive

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effort by the Hindu-party led government to build latrines hadn't led to a decrease in the practice of open defecation in rural areas. It turns out that even though latrines are being built, many Hindus are reluctant to use them, because they fill up quickly, and emptying latrines is associated with the (formerly) untouchable castes. Adopting this new, healthier behavior, in other words, conflicts with a long-held cultural taboo. This problem touches *two* third rails that an NGO would typically avoid: host-country politics and sensitive cultural issues. As an executive director of R.I.C.E., Diane has deferred to her Indian colleagues on these issues. *They* are the ones penning op-eds for Indian newspapers and giving interviews to Indian media. R.I.C.E. is willing to take on politically and socially sensitive subjects, but only because they have the research to back up their positions, and because it is local people leading the charge.

I can imagine that for a compassionate young woman like Diane, it would have been very easy after college to go home to friends and family, raise several thousand dollars, and return to India and start building latrines. It would have responded to the immediate suffering she saw, and she would have seen tangible evidence of her work. But we know that it probably would have done very little to curb open defecation or to improve rural health. Instead, Diane submitted herself to a religious discipline, and to the disciplines of demographic research and learning Hindi. The work she is doing as a result now has potential to change policies and improve literally millions of lives instead of a few hundred or thousand.

I am not suggesting that all compassionate young adults dispatch themselves to the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus after graduation, or that the only way to be useful is to earn a terminal degree in demography or economics. But I do hope that students who wish to make a difference in communities outside their own heed some of Diane's lessons: be willing to live with the people you want to help, and learn their language. Go slow and look for the source of the problems, not just the symptoms. Develop a useful skill and then take the time to learn how the academic version of this skill applies in the local context. And put yourself in the service of the people you want to aid. You are not their fairy godmother.

Angus Deaton, the Nobel Prize-winning economist that I mentioned earlier, has described the last 300 years as a Great Escape from poverty, poor health, and early death. Most of us in the Global North live long lives in relative comfort. But, there are more than a billion people living in Africa, Asia, and parts of Latin America who have not yet made the escape. A wonderful and perverse thing about globalization is that it has made airplanes a kind of time machine. We can get on a plane and in four hours emerge in Haiti where levels of income and life expectancy are what they were in Europe 300 years ago.<sup>15</sup> Any American who witnessed this would need to have a cold heart to not see the injustice and want to do something about it.

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<sup>15</sup> Deaton 2013

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But as people like Diane Coffey show us, the world needs more than warm hearts. It needs learned minds, patience, and the bigger ethical commitments that many of us find in religious traditions. If we can cultivate those, we can rely less on Coca-Cola and miracles.

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