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Local Empowerment: Agency for Unique Communities

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In the United States, the rich have access to the newest high end commodities such as Apple TVs, designer clothes, and sports cars. They do not think of clean water, air conditioning, or plumbing as a luxury. Yet, in many developing countries those who consider themselves rich cannot even imagine having clean, running water, let alone a car. If they have any technology at all, it is outdated such as a small radio. More often than not these people in developing countries live month to month completely dependent on uncontrollable circumstances for their survival, yet keep working and hoping the future will improve.

For years, there has been an ongoing debate on the most effective way to provide aid to developing countries. Two of the most significant suggested models of aid to these countries are either large outside monetary donations or the implementation of local initiatives.[1] A recent example of outside monetary aid is Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Villages Project. Sachs' belief that poverty could be eradicated by pouring billions of dollars into these communities crashed and burned within a span of just a few years.[2] This type of aid often breeds a sense of dependence among the communities on outside sources of money.

Julia Kramer of the Stanford Social Innovation Review demonstrates how local initiatives are the more favored model today by explaining, "To move beyond good intentions, the development paradigm must shift toward collaboration, community involvement, and empowerment"[3]. Through enabling and empowering the residents of recipient communities, local initiatives can bring independence and sustainability. However, even initiatives following this local model fail in some circumstances.

This brings us to ask what these failed initiatives are missing and what makes the successful initiatives thrive. As we ponder these questions, scene from *The Idealist,* a book written about Jeffrey Sachs by award-winning financial and business journalist Nina Munk, comes to mind. According to Munk, Jeffrey Sachs was an innovative businessman who sought to eradicate poverty in an assortment of villages throughout Africa. He attempted to do this primarily by convincing large companies to donate millions of dollars and products to his campaign. He then used these millions of dollars on each village in an attempt to jumpstart their local economy. Each of these villages was far behind the times in the fields of technology, health, and education. The majority of the people lived in extreme poverty and thus had little food to eat, little to no access to healthcare, and were unable to escape the cycle of poverty. When visiting one of his Millennium Villages, Sachs stayed long enough to give a speech and "With that, Sachs and his party climbed into their air-conditioned

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1 Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working And How There Is A Better Way For Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

2 Nina Munk, *The Idealist* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).

3 Julia Kramer, *The Problem with "Help" in Global Development,* Stanford Social Innovation Review, Sep. 3, 2015, http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_problem_with_help_in_global_development.

SUVs waved goodbye, and left."[4] This vignette is representative of many of Sachs' trips to the villages he was attempting to help. He was trying to provide aid, yet he spent almost no time with the people and had no real understanding of what they truly needed. The disconnection between Sachs and the communities he served is a perfect example of why some forms of aid often fail. Among those trying to give aid, many enter the process with preconceived solutions and fail to have an open mind or truly observe and analyze the lives and struggles of the people of the communities they are trying to help.

A New Study to Answer Old Questions

In 2003, a group of Ethiopian graduate students went to four Ethiopian urban neighborhoods and rural villages, Turufe, Shashemane, Dinki, and Kolfe. They surveyed households each month for a year on seventeen different categories, providing a time series that is fairly unique in development studies. These students were performing this study through the Well Being and Development program at the University of Bath. According to their research statement, they researched the well-being of the people because "Research into wellbeing involves exploring the extent to which people can achieve this state of being, and the social conditions that either enable or block this possibility."[5] They use this research to attempt to understand why poverty persists in many of the countries they are studying.

The particular household I will be analyzing in this paper is an eleven-person family from the village of Turufe. The categories I have chosen to focus on are those that encompass income, expenditures and education. In 2005, the father and mother, Guye Hangiso and Saba Jelo, supported themselves and their nine children on 9,119 birr, the equivalent of approximately $911.90 US. In Turufe they were considered rich, yet Guye and Saba's expenditures added up to 9,655.25 birr, almost 550 birr or $55 US more than they earned. Almost all of their income came from agriculture, primarily potatoes, wheat, teff, and maize. Thus their livelihood depended largely on things that were out of their control, such as rainfall and other environmental factors. Most of Guye and Saba's future plans involved planting, prayers for good harvests, or concerns about the rainfall. Their whole lives revolved around the agrarian cycle, yet they struggled to have enough food to feed their family, especially in the dry months, as the interviews indicate. Guye and Saba claimed that they had an adequate amount of food, yet most months they had no meat and they fasted several months to save food for the future[6]. The most obvious baseline solution for these issues is a larger income. The question is, how can a dependable form of income be attained in Guye and Saba's community?

[4] Munk, 86.

[5] "Research Statement," *Wellbeing in Developing Countries,* University of Bath, 2002, http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/aims.htm.

[6] Dr. Alula Pankhurst and Dr. Philippa Bevan, "Wellbeing and Illbeing in Development, Ethiopia", University of Bath, 2003.

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Empowerment Through Local Institutions

Many ideas about how to increase the income of people in these and similar situations in the developing world have been proposed throughout the years. The issue, however, is how one translates any method of aid to different parts of the world that do not share the norms of the recipient culture. Guye was a member of an equub[7], an Ethiopian rotating credit association that allows each member to borrow money on a cycle. This helped cover his expenditures, but he still did not have enough funds to open the small shop he had hoped for. Perhaps the solution is in this already present cultural institution. One possible solution would be for outside sources to invest in these Ethiopian rural institutions, thus providing for a larger amount of money circulating between the members to use for expenditures and the implementation of their innovative ideas. Rotating credit associations are not unique to Ethiopia, so this method could be implemented in other developing communities with similar institutions. However, in communities that do not have these types of systems, one should search for a cultural feature that is already in place and work within that cultural framework, rather than trying to incorporate an entirely new aspect into the culture.

The Power of Education

Another significant aspect of this family's life was the children's education. Eight of Guye and Saba's nine children went to school for at least a few months of the year, but they were far behind where they should be for their ages. Shitaye, the 27 year old daughter, was in ninth grade and Alemayehu, their 23 year old son, was in tenth grade. There were often teacher shortages and some of the children had to take days off to help Guye in the fields[8]. Education is one of the most expedient vehicles out of poverty and was obviously a huge obstacle for this family and countless others in similar situations. Without education, how can one ever gain the knowledge and skills necessary to implement new ideas and overcome a difficult situation?

Turufe's teacher shortage is a prime example of the many problems with educational systems in developing countries. This teacher shortage may cause teachers to be unable to give each student the proper attention they need to thrive. Thus, many kids may fall even further behind in their already protracted education. How, then, can a more sustainable educational environment be achieved? Perhaps the solution lies in the minds and bodies of the people in the community. Maybe Saba Jelo or Shitaye could be trained as teachers for the schools, and they could pass down their knowledge and skills for generations. Perhaps the people of the community, like Guye and his children, could build the school themselves with minimal outside help. This direct involvement could instill in them a sense of independence and pride in themselves and in their work, and they might be more likely to want to maintain it.

[7] Dr. Alula Pankhurst and Dr. Philippa Bevan.

[8] Dr. Alula Pankhurst and Dr. Philippa Bevan.

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A humanitarian organization that uses this model is Room to Read. This organization builds schools, trains teachers, and works towards gender equality in ten countries throughout Asia and Africa. It partners with each community by requesting that the people of the community donate funds, equipment, or labor. Room to Read claims, "This model sets the stage for long-term sustainability, and gives the local community both a high level of visibility to the project's progress and a real stake in its success".[9]Therefore, not only is a sustainable educational environment created, but the community will have ownership of its success.

The Effect of Aid on Culture

Financial and educational intervention are just two of many ways to assist those in need. However, a big question many in the field of international aid ask is how these types of interventions affect recipient communities' cultures and religion. Although the family's life in Turufe may be full of struggles, when asked about plans for next month they were always full of hope and prayer. This could possibly indicate that they are not the only family that relies on their faith for hope. By coming into their communities to seek a positive change in their situation, could aid organizations also be affecting their faith? Their hope in the future seems to be tied to their prayer and religious beliefs, but when much of their focus is shifted to business, they start to make more money, and their situation becomes less dire, could their faith be affected or changed? For some, it may not affect their faith at all, or it could make it even stronger because they associate their success with answered prayers. For others, it might take their attention off their religious faith because so much of their attention is on their business. Whatever the outcome, these possibilities should be considered by those intending to bring aid. Further, in bringing education to the communities, new knowledge is also brought; a traditional beliefs and outlooks on life might be challenged as a result of this broader scope of information. Questioning current beliefs could lead to great innovation and improvement, but one's intent when giving aid should not be educating to change the recipient's culture. It should first and foremost be to give greater agency to the aid recipients. If any change to culture or religion occurs, it should be because the people used this information in their own context and not because an outsider pushed their interpretation on the people or their community.

With these ideas in mind, how can people of faith best utilize their ability to give aid with the least amount of religious or cultural disruption? One of the popular assumptions made about faith-based organizations entering into communities of need is that they are going in with the goal of not only providing aid, but also proselytizing. While this is true for some, there are also many that do not have such a goal tied to their aid. Rather, they use their faith as a basis for their personal motivation and goals. However, as individuals and organizations rooted in faith, they must still adhere to the same principles of what makes aid successful. Go into the community, observe the culture, the religion, the everyday lives

[9] "Learning Environments: Creating safe, child-friendly spaces," *Room to Read*, http://www.roomtoread.org/LearningEnvironments.

of the people, and with observation and dialogue allow for and help facilitate local initiatives, rather than having a set plan in mind. Recognize that their religion and culture is essential to their identities and hopes, and provide aid that does not encroach on these beliefs. However, one must recognize that even aid that is not meant to change culture might still have an effect. As people of faith, the goal should be to help and bring hope for a better future to everyone, regardless of differing cultures, traditions or faiths.

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