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Abstract

Ted Ward presents his viewpoint on the meaning of “need” in development activity and the dangers that emerge when ineffective responses are implemented. *From a convocation address at Bethel Mennonite College, Kansas, April 28, 1978.*

When discussing human needs and worthwhile international assistance it is important to be aware that intervention is often ineffective, just as surely as it can often make a constructive and corrective difference. There are effective and ineffective responses to needs in the world. As Americans we often feel helpless because the problems in this needy world are so large. Real solutions are hard to find. Especially when it comes to recommendations for large scale policy, the search so often seems futile. Defeatism sets in readily. It becomes easy to say that there is hardly anything that can be done to make much difference. Yes, in the large picture, this assumption is often true. There is no magic bullet, no miracle lotion, no permanent cure. As in caring for one’s own health, the best practice is to adopt the procedures of good maintenance and stick to them faithfully. Making a big difference in the long run usually depends on persisting in the little changes as they become possible.

Turning to America for solutions is a habit that many nations have adopted. America’s technological advances virtually invite the attention that America is given. But it is often forgotten, even by Americans, that while this nation is indeed a somewhat reliable source of solutions, it is also a source or contributor to many problems. Thus it is somewhat hypocritical for Americans to become preoccupied with finding solutions for the problems of the world while denying our own role in creating those problems. No doubt about it, as we drive up consumption, as we raise the standard of living, and set a world pattern for acquisition, we put a pressure on the world’s resources and affect others who are trying to emulate us.

As our money becomes less stable, the world’s money becomes more unstable and the probability of economic collapse in many countries becomes a high probability. Within the American community our lifestyle is already affected. Our cars are getting shorter and lighter and the speedometers do not read as high. Gasoline is becoming expensive and money is harder to get. With things changing in so many sectors of society, life has become more than a little harsh and uncomfortable. But we will adapt ourselves and accept change simply because it has become part of our emerging reality. Americans are involved in the world scene. Americans are, in effect, as victimized by the real conditions as anyone else in the world. Our victimization, our sense of loss, our awareness of the degrading of our own lifestyles and standard of living are perhaps less sharp; but the fact remains that we have not only the potential to help, but we have the obligation to help wisely.

The central issue then is that good intentions to be of assistance, to be part of the helping community in the world, are not enough. Sincerity is no substitute for effectiveness. It is nice to want to do well, but it is even nicer actually to contribute to positive change. It is nice to want to help someone; but it is more important to actually provide help. Americans tend to see their actions as based on generous and benevolent motives. We want to be seen as working from a sense of kindness and a sense of concern.

Nice enough, yes, but nevertheless it is important that we make honest assessments of the motives of our “acts of kindness.”

For example, Boy Scouts are said to gain merit by helping little old ladies across street corners. But we chuckle at the cartoon showing a Boy Scout doing his good deed for the day *by dragging the little old lady who doesn't want to cross the street*. Humane acts that are out of tune with the needs of people may be indeed look like humane acts, but when they are out of context or unwanted they become hindrances. The issue then is how do we assure that we go beyond good intentions and accept responsibility for the consequences of having tried to help?

Following are five problems in reference to this issue:

1. The first problem is that *response to need itself is not a reliable basis for helping people*. This comment may seem controversial and confusing; but a few illustrations will make it more clear. Needs often look very different to insiders and outsiders. Outsiders are rarely able to plan or to implement effective development without help from the insiders. In the field of international development and foreign assistance this has been learned the hard way. Outsiders so often are poor planners. The best contribution an outsider can make is to *develop planning competencies among the insiders*. This is a role and a result that I have observed in many situations. It was mentioned in the introduction that I have served in quite a number of countries. Therefore, I couldn't possibly have been very long or gained substantial depth in each of those countries. But I operate within a model of short-term assistance based on the following steps:
 - A. LEARN. By reading carefully and interacting with people who have been in the situation. Avoid making judgments before taking a careful look at the situation.
 - B. LISTEN. Minimize your speeches and avoid lecturing; but pay very close attention to what the insiders are saying.
 - C. PROCESS THE CLUES. Starting with questions that will confirm or disconfirm what the observation and listening has suggested, move into increasingly specific suggestions. Avoid very carefully the appearance of having decided anything more pointed than this question format: “What do you suppose might happen if you tried this idea...?”
 - D. LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN. Keep listening until the local folks begin to notice that most of the new thoughts and ideas being discussed are *theirs*. Success can be measured in terms of how competently they are shifting their comments and roles from being *receivers* of ideas to becoming *sources* of ideas.
 - E. MOVE ON. In terms of short-term and brief exposure a wise consultant will avoid adding to dependency on outside resource. This model is one that missions may have to consider more carefully in the future. The wise consultant will endeavor to enhance local leadership competencies and then move out of the situation before dependency sets in!
2. The second problem is that *lists of needs tend to be statements of symptoms rather than statements of causes*. Consider the phenomenon of beggars: in many parts of the world, while in the company of an experienced local person, you may note that your companion seems to ignore the beggars. You may be surprised that your friend is so callous to human need. But what is more commonly the explanation is that the local person who has an understanding of the development process, will actually caution you not to give to a beggar because it tends to perpetuate an

inhumane relationship between donor and receiver. Americans so rarely recognize that the conditions of poverty usually spring from far deeper causes than can be remedied by pocket change. And when we develop the habit of making small contributions it is fundamentally demeaning. Similarly, responding to illness, deformities, and water-borne disease by providing medicine without helping to remediate the supply system is likely to deepen the problem with no contribution of actual help.

Careful analysis is the first step toward development. Determining what sorts of causes underlie the evident poor health, malnutrition, or poverty in general provides the information that can lead to a knowledgeable basis for substantial change. If we move too impulsively, our tendency is to respond emotionally, almost surely resulting in treating symptoms and ignoring true causation.

3. The third problem is that *many people do not think of their situations in terms of needs*. There was a startling moment of in our work in Indonesia. We were engaged in a long planning session with a village chief and elders. We had all been together for a succession of evenings talking through their hopes and intentions for the village, what they aspired to, what their hopes and fears were, and how they understood their people in terms of their own traditional history. As invited consultants, we two Americans were struggling to gain a coherent picture of the situation. We truly wanted to understand the community better. My colleague was a technologist who persisted compulsively, always in any situation, asking the question "What do you need? Tell us your needs." We had worked together in other Indonesian villages; his procedure was a habit. Sooner or later, his persistent push would begin. He seemed not to notice the evident discomfort of the elders. He assumed that people in responsible positions would be able to respond knowledgeably. Thus he especially badgered this poor chief: "But tell us, what are your needs?" Of course, the truth is that many people, including Americans, don't like to admit that they *have* needs. It is especially true of people that are in somewhat more primitive conditions. They don't like to be pushed to lose face over the issue of needs.

Finally, the chief had heard enough of this, and he decided to answer. "Now I will answer. I will try to tell you of some of the need in our community." We waited and we waited, assuming that he was organizing some kind of magnificent response. Finally, from his cross-legged position, he slowly held up one foot, partially covered by a very well-worn assemblage of ragged leather, and spoke, "See this shoe! We don't have a man in this village who can fix shoes." The irony immediately stuck me: he was the only man that we had seen in that village wearing shoes. Everyone else wore sandals or nothing at all on their feet. The chief did not see his village in terms of needs, in our sense. Apparently he saw his village in terms of people who were able to do things. Was he answering in a way that would make sense to an American technologist? When we approach problems from a "needs" orientation, we may find ourselves in a different world!

4. The fourth problem is that *whatever is given may not fit*. Consider some of the horror stories that are told about famine relief. Various kinds of emergencies tend to produce in people an instantaneous "compassionate giving" reaction wherein the motivation to contribute *something* is very strong. People are willing to contribute all sorts of things, whether they can actually be shipped and put to good use is not considered.

We hear news stories about earthquake ravished villages being re-built with metal roofs so they will not cave in and kill people. But not many tropical residents can survive under a metal roof.

The human tendency so often seems to be to take the easiest, quickest way out of difficult situations. So sending massive amounts of “relief” commodities is exactly what we do first. We send wheat, for example, to rice-dependent regions where very few people understand how to make wheat edible. And then we wonder why it rots on the docks. *There must be a reasonable fit between a help given and a meaningful assistance received.*

5. There is also *the problem of distribution—getting the “aid” items to the places intended*. One of the things that Americans commonly overlook, especially with reference to the majority world, is that distribution systems rarely work backwards. Even in our country distribution works better from source to user. If trucks bring raw foodstuff from rural sources to urban markets they will likely make the return trip empty. It is difficult for people to understand that if food is shipped in, put on the docks, and trucked out to villages, this is a one-way process. It likely means that many trucks and ships gain revenue only in one direction. In a difficult economic situation this is a losing proposition. The lack of adequate distribution systems is one reason that great loads of assistance commodities do not reach the points of greatest need.

Another part of this puzzle is corruption. Infections of political, economic, and social corruption make it phenomenally difficult to successfully operate aid and development projects. Corruption? If a driver is to take a load to the countryside but is paid in advance for his services, he may be inclined to take the load up the road a bit, unload and sell it. Why pay the drivers in advance? In such situations, truck-drivers may be unwilling to operate any other way; further, many quickly learn that the middle-men (emergency aid brokers) are so eager to do *something* quickly with the aid commodities that they join in the deceptions along with the drivers.

6. The sixth problem is that *whatever is given in the cause of aid, assistance, or helping can and often does create further problems*. One of the most pressing of contemporary problems is urban blight. Calamitous overcrowding has triggered a virtual implosion of city after city. Desperately sick cities are now more common than imagined in earlier years. The polite way to talk calls it “urban poverty,” but in one way or another it impoverishes all of us.

But urban problems are not the only problems that are exacerbated by honest efforts to help. Another important secondary problem of development is *rural* poverty. There is a curious relationship now understood fairly widely between the mechanization of agriculture and the deepening of rural poverty.

As agriculture is mechanized in the rural sectors of developing nations, farming families are put out of work. No longer do they have a legitimate claim on the community rice basket. If a man and his family are pushed off the rice paddy by mechanization—especially if they are pushed out of their family rice mill by competition from a big new highly efficient corporation-owned rice mill, they lose their right to the community rice baskets and they become relief cases. Since in much of the world there is no organized relief, the only thing for them to do is to move to the city where, because they have no particular skills that have worth in the urban world, they quickly fall into the ranks of the unemployed. This has led large cities, especially in Asia, to build barricades and check points in order to ensure that anyone entering the city has a work card and the promise of a job. Many major cities have thus taken desperate steps that have led to vast internal strife among their people. Already there are more unemployable folk in the city than they can possibly sustain. This action, then, forces people to build ancillary communities just outside the police cordons—communities full of people who are begging and starving. We live in a desperate world.

7. The seventh problem is that *the underlying causes of problems in the underdeveloped world are quite often untouchable*, except through political and social reform, which usually means bloody revolution. Many of the contracts that most affect development are drawn up on a nation-to-nation basis. Such contracts are controlled by power that is commonly beyond the reach of carefully reasoned decisions and caring concern. When contracts are drawn by government, a nation's pride, prestige, and power are the dominant factors in the decisions and the resulting terms of the contract. In most cases the projects of aid and assistance are regulated through the management of governments, many of which are self-seeking, elitist, and corrupt. Inequitable access to resources, particularly in terms of monopolies of land use and land ownership, are almost inevitable. And issues of justice themselves, especially as they relate to totalitarian governments, is almost an untouchable. And until these sorts of problems can be dealt with, everything else we do in terms of beneficent aid seems to be futile.

8. The eighth problem is that *receiving aid itself can deepen dependency and cause further loss of dignity*. Many young people develop deep resentment of excessive parental paternal postures. They learn to fight against it as they begin to build selfhood and identity. Nations are much the same. Especially in formerly colonial nations and patriarchal monarchies, and long-term dictatorships, the nation itself may have been treated continually as a group of children, continually receiving support and assistance as powerless persons. Such conditions give meager experience through which to gain dignity and a sense of worth. This sort of colonial mentality is not a sound seed-bed for independence. The fact that the world is no longer dominated by colonial powers has very little to do with the fact that many people in the world are still stifled the old-fashioned way. Thus development assistance may or may not result in social transformation of the colonial mentality.

Looking Squarely at Development

What is development? Is it an economic issue? Brazil is an interesting case: industry is expanding, it seems that there are more jobs, tourism flourishes, major corporations are emerging, the universities are widely acknowledged to be world-class-- but a study of the really tough sectors reveals some problems. Small farms and the more remote rural areas seem to be barely existing in another era. In cities, the slums (favelas) are an embarrassing reality. Police control often resembles small-scale warfare. The structure of society is even more disjointed than in the United States. The rich are getting much richer, the middle class is growing, but the poor are getting much poorer. *And the poor are still very impoverished.* That's the fact of life in economic development. Is it technology transfer? Is it simply adding tools and skills and machines so that other people can build for themselves? The multi-national corporations would suggest that is what counts. But if you look closely at what happens in this technology transfer, you cannot help but feel that some of it is inappropriate technology. Is development *mechanization*? Is it moving into a "machine age?" In countries where automobiles and trucks, motorcycles and the like, are forcing tremendous amounts of national investment in the resources necessary to provide roads, one wonders what mechanization has to do with the development of those nations. Technological change is costly, especially during development transitions. One of the bravest series of technological changes in America arose from the advent of the automobile. The highway system was quite literally a huge national investment across a century of change. Its value was even greater than original expectations, but today maintaining the system is a huge annual expenditure.

Is development *urbanization*? It is in the urban fringes where the contrasts of rich and poor societies show the greatest contradictions. In some regions, great wealth is evident in the city core; in other regions the greatest wealth is in the suburban fringes, avoiding the core. Can either extreme represent development at its best? Outlying districts of almost any city in the majority world where poverty is at its

extreme seems to force development into tall and yet taller new residential buildings. But in the United States, the core of many cities has become the poverty zone; wealth is centered in the suburbs. Not so in much of the world, where the people who are on the margins of the city are most apt to be trapped in misery.

There is a natural progression to be seen in the history of both modern missions and in the history of the foreign aid movement since World War II. Both began with the motive of *helping*. They moved beyond helping posture to a *training* posture and then onward into a *reciprocity* posture.

Helping seems to be a reasonable way to think about working cross-culturally whether in missions or international aid; but the problem is that when we help, especially helping by *giving*, dependency will likely increase.

Training goes beyond helping by assuring that the knowledge of the helper is shared with those who are helped. If training is limited to passing along information, it can become just one more tool for exploitation. Misguided training can become a matter of imposing thoughts and ideas on others. It can falsely legitimize hierarchy and hierarchy itself is the very root of elitism. Training, especially if carried out with tactics of domination, can produce a tendency of people to search for other people to be trained—always people beneath them. Training should make people more secure and competent, self-reliant and creative, engaged in discovery. It should not become the perpetuation of a hierarchy of information.

Reciprocity is the third element and the prime objective of the development process. The importance of reciprocity is only recently recognized for its importance both in international aid and Christian missions. Reciprocity is as much a goal as a process. It is the objective of development; it is also a major evidence of development. Through assistance people start the path to reciprocity; through training at its best, people can take deliberate steps toward increasingly effective cooperation and ultimately can become truly reciprocating leaders themselves. Reciprocity is built on a two-way street of learning and action. It is a quality built by the training process; it comes from the shared relationship in which a back-and-forth of ideas, observations, supports, assistances, and companionship leads to a mutually constructive quality. Both the methods and the outcomes of effective training should be *the process of establishing humane relationship among people through which all will learn, trainers and trainees alike*. And whatever is done should encourage people to find their roles within society as productive, sensitive, and autonomous persons, engaged responsibly in the interdependencies of society.

So, then, how can we help a community? Perhaps there is a prior question: *Should* we help? Christians have a unique answer for this question. Some would assert that anyone who does anything generous or kind is ultimately doing it as a kind of remote self-interest. But no, that assertion reflects a failure to come to grips with the reality of the human soul. We can be accused of trying to gain friendship, to make points for Jesus. We can be accused of trying to sharpen our skills at the expense of others; and, of course, as Americans we also accused of expanding our economic markets through whatever we do, whether through Christian missions, foreign aid, or through military presence.

All of that notwithstanding, there is a worthy place in the international world community for the American Christian today and an inescapable reality: world community is not a choice. It is already upon us. The interdependency of the world is clear and has gone past the point of any return. Christians then need to have as never before in the history of humankind a sense of being world citizens. It is one thing to be a sojourner, to be a person wandering through a nation; but it is quite a different thing to realize that the nature of that sojourning puts one into a strong identification with other sojourners in other nations, and, therefore, we are part of a world citizenship.

We need to be about our Father's business just as clearly as Jesus was about his Father's business as a young person in Jerusalem. Redemption is the backdrop of life's drama. The people of God are godly insofar as they respond in compassionate love to the conditions of the human family. The relatedness of reciprocity is the state of humanity that is the most glorifying to God. It glorifies God less that we are giving than that we are *giving and receiving* to others and each other, within the fellowship of the redeemed.

What we call church-to-church sending and sharing began in Acts 9, 10, and 11 with a situation that began with the conversion of the vicious anti-Christian, Saul, who was confronted by a blinding light and the voice of Jesus on the Damascus road. Later, after several days with the Christian disciple Ananias and the confirmation of his conversion, he began to proclaim his faith in Christ, especially in the synagogue of Damascus. Many Jews were thus brought to faith in Christ but Saul was caught in the middle; many of the Damascus Christians were deeply suspicious of Saul's sincerity because he had been their greatly feared persecutor; perhaps Saul was trying to trick them into a trap. His persistent testimony and proclamations that Jesus is the Son of God caused the core Jews of the synagogue to conspire against Saul. His Christian friends in Damascus helped him escape the city and join the growing Christian community in Jerusalem. Here again, Saul ran into the same problem: Christians in Jerusalem were also suspicious of him so they sent him back to Tarsus. The Bible does not describe his months or years back in Tarsus, but the story picks up after the church of Jerusalem heard the great news of the large-scale conversions and establishment of the very strong church in Antioch. Perhaps knowing that Saul would be encouraged by joining a really strong church at work, Barnabas, the encourager from the Jerusalem church, made a quick trip to Tarsus, to search out this new convert, Saul (later named Paul). Together they made their way onward to Antioch where they worked together teaching and encouraging many for the next year. ". . . And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

Christians from one church were helping Christians in another church. It continues to occur in this way. The Jerusalem church did not send a publicist or a street-corner evangelist; instead they sent Barnabas, a man they knew and valued because he was an encourager. There is evidence that strong churches assisted weak churches, funds were shifted from one church to another as needs arose, and each church was provided tangible assistance, even from the weaker to stronger economic regions, from the sending churches to Judea "where at that time a poverty had arisen." In other words, those first sending acts of the new church were reciprocal acts. Missions sour when the haves tend to be the givers who do not see any particular value in receiving. We need to listen and respond to those from other nations who come and share with us something of the reality of lifestyle in the majority world, in order to prepare us to be competent to deal with lifestyle changes in our own nation.

Observations from the Field

Following are some complementary observations from the field. In the first place, I have gained a profound respect for younger and short-term people in the development field. This began with my awareness that many of the people in the Peace Corps had great integrity along with zeal, patience, and substantial skills. Many of their qualities are in sharp contrast with the weary cynicism of the "old-timers." Many have demonstrated that most promising of qualities: *knowing enough to do the job well but recognizing how much more they need to learn*. They are ready and eager to move into cross-cultural work. If newcomers are over-educated before they get into cross-cultural work, they likely will arrive feeling that somehow they must "show off" and prove that they know what the answers are. But if you feel any tug on your heart for service of a humane sort in the developing world, may I urge you to find ways to respond to it while you are still young enough to be honest about what you do not know. And then when you get there, do not put on an act.

The second observation from the field is that family, church, and school background shows through loud and clear especially in terms of handling the natural urge to dominate and to let others dominate them. Young people who are most competent in international development work come from background experiences wherein they have not been dominated in their educational, home, or church experiences, have been treated humanely, and have not been constantly badgered by those trying to push them this way and that. Such people do not feel quite so inclined to find foreign nationals to push around.

Third, those from previous experiences wherein the style of life and learning is give-and-take seem far less often to do the hindering, harmful acts in the world. It is not a matter of technological know-how or natural intellect; more surely it is a lifestyle of reciprocity and truth that leads to leadership. These characteristics are the lifestyle traits of the Christian community, especially in matters of sharing, compassion, and concern.

If you intend to prepare yourself for the future that is inevitably upon us, there is not a better time to start than today and there are no finer people to start with than those sitting around you. Your lifestyle is far more important than any single question of energy consumption, food, and all the rest, because these follow from an orientation of *compassionate sharing concern*. Americans are becoming individualistic to the point where they say, "I don't care about anybody but me."

Development must first attend to survival. Assistance tends to go through a cycle or a series of steps beginning with *relief* through which people respond to symptoms and attempt to relieve symptoms. Participation in relief is surely appropriate for Christians, but if we stop there, it quite often results in useless interference. Relief very commonly results in short-term solutions, "quick fixes," and the likelihood of recurrence of the problems. Without worthy goals for the follow-up steps, such assistance has little or no prospect of success and has no long-term value.

Rehabilitation generally follows relief. Reconstructing, correcting, and rearranging the structural and institutional factors that underlie the need for relief must follow. Rehabilitation is concerned with rebuilding, replacing, and re-organizing the whole social environment. This is usually the most costly phase of the development process.

Development goes beyond rehabilitation. Development is concerned with freeing up the internal, intrinsic functions that enable the natural social condition of continual maturing. In theological terms, the human is born as a creature destined for being fulfilled across the years of a lifetime. Each person is gifted as an evidence of God's redemptive purpose. When the person comes to an awareness of who and what he or she is called to be, the development process moves beyond the physical, emotional, and social states of being into a fulfillment of our great destiny of humanness in the image of God. Development goes beyond rehabilitation inasmuch as it is concerned with the freeing up of internal competencies and spiritual gifts through the process of redemption.

Conclusion: The development cycle transforms interference into involvement. As Christians, we accept and freely acknowledge the buying back of our lives from the power of sin; God has accepted us through the willing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We participate in the development of others, not as puppets of God, but individually and autonomously as a collective society of human beings—the body of Christ. Thus through this process of development we are able to function and stand in the company of saints as persons of integrity. This, for sure, is development.

