



Acts of Kindness: Helping or Hurting¹

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Acts of kindness—helping or hurting? Today, serious confusion exists in reference to international aid in its various governmental and non-governmental forms. We are asking questions about the effectiveness of our own national and foreign aid programs, and about the effectiveness of development carried out by mission agencies. People are beginning to get the message that development is not an easy enterprise. Many people with considerable experience in this field, tend to become increasingly pessimistic; and that pessimism is beginning to undermine the public's confidence in doing anything at all. If the United States, for example, experiences a serious economic recession it is possible that we will once again become an isolationist nation; as we have been before in history. This retreat from intervention would be unfortunate, because even with an economic down-turn, the fact remains that we still possess considerable technological resources; we will still be in demand for certain kinds of products and expertise.

The key assumption that we make about acts of kindness is that they are meant to help. No one really challenges intervention of a humane sort in the affairs of another person so long as those interventions in fact help. What then is the issue? Simply expressed—good intentions aren't enough. Sincerity is no substitute for effectiveness. This proposition is especially difficult for some Christians because of the feeling that if we just do our best God will have it turn out for good. Therefore, some of what we do is inappropriate or inadequate; but we do it anyway because we have good intentions. It is imperative that we monitor and evaluate our acts of kindness. Acts of kindness sometimes hurt. Most of us have seen the cartoon of the Boy Scout dragging an elderly woman across a street she didn't want to cross. There are times when we do things, those basically lovely sorts of interventions, but they don't relate adequately to what it is that people desire to do with their own lives. Here are five problems that arise out of this issue:

1. The response to meet needs is not a reliable basis for helping. It sounds good, but it doesn't work out because of two critical issues: First, who defines needs? Needs always look different to insiders. Or conversely, outsiders rarely are able to plan or implement effective development from outside. Generally, outsider intervention in the international development realm, or as a social/economic development project, is viewed as an inadequate or incomplete response. Second, the description of needs is most often imprecise. The relation of needs to symptoms and problems further complicates matters. Though there is a difference between a symptom and a cause, the distinction is often muddled in the quest to meet needs. *Consider:* If a person is begging on the street, the begging is a symptom. Relating to that symptom by giving the beggar something is treating a symptom. The cause of that beggar's behavior may be something deeper, such as lack of available employment.

The difference between giving a handout to a beggar and providing jobs within an economy so that there are fewer beggars is the difference between symptoms and causes. However, both interventions appear to be a response to needs. The beggar needs something. Give him something. The beggar needs a job. Work to get her a job. In each case it is response to needs. When people

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begin to work in development, an early awareness is that needs aren't defined well by outsiders; and that they have to rely increasingly on insiders to define needs.

The next level of awareness comes about when we learn that insiders don't define needs very well either. Quite often they're not able to adequately differentiate between symptoms and causes. In reality, responding to needs is just not that helpful as a strategy. But, it is certainly better than treating every situation in the world in the same way.

2. The second problem is that a given act of kindness may not fit the situation. We don't understand distribution. In many countries distribution schemes work only in one direction. All the trucks run toward the coast with their loads, for example, and the paymasters are at the coastal end. The problem arises when people reload the truck with supplies for the interior and send it back. There is no paymaster at that end, so the load doesn't get there. In two or three kilometers the load is sold off to somebody else. Sometimes we wonder why great quantities of supplies will sit on the docks in the midst of a famine. The answer is that there are no distribution schemes in place. Most of the stories about problems executing acts of kindness relate to emergency relief. Most understand that emergency relief is a wasteful activity. *Necessary*, but inherently wasteful. For every ten cents invested, a good return is one cent. But, emergency relief, though wasteful is not wrong.

3. The third problem: Acts of kindness may create secondary problems. The biggest problem of this sort, and it is a worldwide problem, has to do with the mechanization of agriculture. When agencies move in with techniques of agriculture that are inappropriately tuned to a country, secondary problems often result. For example, one of many, we have implemented agricultural mechanization strategies in different places in the world—and created urban poverty! For this reason, agencies have eased off using the mechanization of agriculture as a prime device in development. A one-person, two-handled garden tractor will put a water buffalo out of business, and also put two to five families out of business who have been plowing the fields with the water buffalo. Because their work with the water buffalo is needed, these families are able to eat—they have a claim on the rice basket. If they're pushed out of that employment, they don't have any claim on the rice basket. To survive they go to the city. But they have few competencies and skills appropriate to the demands of the urban setting. There are major cities in this world today surrounded by police cordons on a 24-hour basis to prevent people from entering the city unless they have a job waiting for them. Those without jobs build camps outside the cordons, and soon ring of squatter villages spring up around the cities.



Secondary problems occur in many countries. The Philippines, for example, historically, has exported its agricultural products widely and becoming, in effect, the world's green-grocer. The cash flow into the Philippines provided enough money to do many things, but there has been a serious lack of incentive for Philippine investment in business and industry. The Philippines remains a country that sees itself as a kind of a poor man's green-grocer for the world. If they want to do anything technological, they have to go somewhere else to do it. As a result, brilliant Filipinos are taking their skills elsewhere leaving the nation bereft of highly trained workers. The irony is that an elaborate scheme of higher education exists in the Philippines—with more private universities per capita than many places in Asia. But have you noticed the number of doctors and nurses in American hospitals that have Filipino training, and background, and citizenship. They're over here; they're in Japan; they're in Malaysia.

4. Sometimes the real problems of development are untouchable except through political and social reform which usually means revolution. There is especially a problem that confronts those

of us who work in bi-national or bi-lateral aid—in projects and programs such as our own Agency for International Development (AID) because we must work in the frame of reference of the host nation's government policies about development. Sometimes those government policies about development are calculated not to disturb the status quo of the power elite. If you have been doing anything with or for the poor, you're probably guilty of subversion in such a national structure. How does a development agency get past that? It doesn't. The choice is to avoid the situation or confront it. If the choice is confrontation, inevitably there will be bloodshed. In my judgment, as Christians, we should understand that God must work his works of justice through modes that sometimes result in bloodshed; but I don't think that gives us the mandate to precipitate or force those acts.

5. The fifth problem is that acts of kindness can and do often lead to dependency and loss of dignity. Sooner or later, in other words, the one who has received aid begins to resent it. Acts of kindness—helping or hurting? The distinction sometimes is objective; at other times it is subjective. It is in the perception of the one being helped.

The terms relief, rehabilitation, and development are not interchangeable. Relief work is generally a response to symptoms. Rarely does it involve response to causes. Relief then is focused on providing a quick remedy to allow people to get back on their feet. For example, if a person has been knocked down by a fast-moving truck, the first act is not to petition City Council to put a speed limit sign on the street. The first act is to determine the extent of injury and provide basic relief. That action doesn't address the cause—an accident could happen again in the next hour; but it is a necessary and humane act to offer relief where there is serious human calamity.

The next step is that of rehabilitation. Through rehabilitation, we seek to stimulate the capacities within the person, or the nation, or a sector of the nation to deal with the basic causes. Rarely does an outsider deal with basic causes. An outsider, in rehabilitation work, deals mostly with the person, or group, or nation in terms of its internal capacities to deal with causes.

Understanding the distinction between relief and rehabilitation might help us make the distinction between rehabilitation and development. Development is a term I reserve for a certain kind of activity in which the theme or the focus of the activity is freeing up internal competencies. It is collaborating with social groups in such a way that existing internal competencies become liberated to be what they can be. Development is simply working with those processes.

Most of what we conceive of as international aid and international development has emerged since World War II. The first major international development project was the Marshall Plan after World War II. It was successful simply because it keyed into something we understood: European social structure and economics. The Marshall Plan linked to these processes and brought Europe back to life.

The modern missionary movement has a longer history of involvement in international aid. It focused on helping, on providing what they felt was needed (e.g., education, health care, construction, religious teaching, and so on). Certainly, it is humane to want to share. The only problem was that it tended to create dependency; and, even today, that sort of dependency is counter-productive.

Even as missions ultimately moved out of the *helping* phase, even so in its much shorter history, international development moved out of the helping phase into a *training* phase. Much of the training rhetoric used the allegedly oriental proverb: "Give a man a fish and he eats today. Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime."

In modern missions it seems that we are still in a training mode; just barely coming out of it. International development seems to have moved from it more quickly, but in both cases, agencies are sliding back into helping because the training wasn't working.

Training tends to produce an insidious little by-product known as hierarchy. If an outsider is perceived as having something someone else needs, the process is perceived as giving something from higher to lower. The trainers train the leaders, the leaders train the followers, the followers train the peasants.

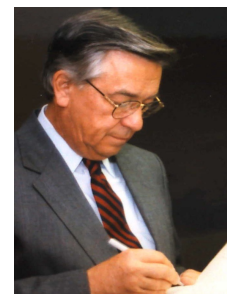
If there are problems in helping that ultimately pull it down, if there are problems in training that ultimately weaken it (at least in terms of its contribution to development) what can we do? Consider the concept of reciprocity—a term that is increasingly used in the literature.

Reciprocity is an attractive notion because it does lead to an emancipating kind of relationship—it frees people to be human beings. *Reciprocity* means that our giving is mutual—each one gives something to the other. There is a difference between reciprocity and *bargaining*. In bargaining, I give in order to get and the other person gives in order to get. Reciprocity is a more sophisticated. I still give on an unconditional basis, but I select my giving places for situations and places where someone else has something to give to me and maintains their dignity through it.

In my work with various kinds of projects, I have observed a high correlation between on-going development activity *after* my intervention or our group's interventions are withdrawn and the nature of reciprocity itself. High reciprocity—a lot of follow up; low reciprocity—projects tend to die. Perhaps, we are entering an era helping, training, and other kinds of international exchange can be based on a reciprocity model.

The model of development that I believe most promising today is a facilitation of humane relationships. Generally speaking, the oppressed of this world are surrounded by inhumane relationships. They are *capable* of humane relationships and anything that can be done to build on that capacity is worth pursuing.

Now, one final big question. How can we help people? What's the big answer? Is there a big answer? Should we try to help people? Here is the basic moral issue in international relations and in human development, in general. Do we have any right to move into situations which are not purely our own? As a humanist I would say, "It depends. Maybe, maybe not. As a Christian, I am more inclined to say, yes. As long as I view development as reciprocal, and in terms of facilitation of human relationships rather than exploitation or fostering dependency, I am about God's business.



There are precedents for this approach in Scripture. For example, the church at Jerusalem had learned that the church at Antioch was experiencing a spiritual revival. The church at Jerusalem was enthusiastic about the news and determined to go, first, to verify the revival and second, to encourage them (see Acts 11). The question was who to send? In the church at Jerusalem was one man who was so known for a certain trait of personality that they called him Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

The first church-to-church giving act, sending act, missionary act in the New Testament was the sending of Barnabas to the church at Antioch—and he went there *for the express purpose of encouragement*. After verifying and doing some encouraging, Barnabas left Antioch for Tarsus to get Saul. As the story unfolds *the church at Antioch* invited Barnabas and Saul to stay and teach for 2 years.

In my judgment, we are returning to a time when the way we relate to people, even as Christians within the church, is more in terms of seeking out reciprocities of encouragement and support on a mutual basis rather than seeing always *them* having a need and *us* having the resource.

Consider the church at Antioch. While Saul (later Paul) and Barnabas were still there teaching they heard that the church in Jerusalem had fallen into an economic recession and they needed money. The church at Antioch raised money and sent it with Barnabas to the Christians in Jerusalem! This example is the first full cycle of reciprocity documented in the new church—resources, and people, and encouragement moving in two directions.