



# Getting Serious About Christian Development Assistance: *The Limits of Self-Reliance*<sup>1</sup>

---

Ted Ward

The observations and content herein are based on several presuppositions:

1. The responsibility of godly people is to exercise compassionate concern. Relief, at the level of a neighbor or as a corporate act of communities and organizations, has validity in that it fulfills Christian theological mandates revealed in Scripture.
2. Although relief activity has validity, it is accompanied by specific hazards. Most dangerous are these:
  - a) The dislocations of key components of economic structures.
  - b) Enticement of unstable migrations.
  - c) Unwise shifts in people's incentives and motivations.
  - d) The establishment of unbalanced dependencies, especially the long-term dependencies on resources which are neither indigenous nor sustainable.
3. Human development is a normal and natural process, in people, in families, in communities, and in nations. Just as the consequences of humanity's fall into sin resulted in disturbances of the personal growth and development process through the instrumentalities of disease, malnutrition, genetic flaw, and trauma, even so families, communities, and nations are to some extent caught up in various development-impeding influences. Such as the human condition, sin is at the bottom of it.
4. Relief delivery and development assistance are essentially different processes. Each loses vitality when subordinated to the other. Staffing and management demands of each are sharply contrasting, although Christian values underlie both.
5. The methods and messages of missionary and philanthropic intervention, common to much Christian ministry in "needy" situations carry cultural overtones and socio-emotional assumptions of an outmoded colonial era.
6. The cause of Christ is better served by critical reflection and reformation than by persistence in habituated forms, no matter how such forms are rationalized.

## Thesis

The tasks are far from finished; human needs are increasing. The 1990s should be seen as a time for self-criticism, reform, and further aspiration. At least one more significant leadership task lies ahead: for relief and development organizations to fulfill their own best promises to expand beyond the limited accomplishments that are possible through relief operations and interventional child-support. What is needed is a tandem or dual operation, not simply a convenient accommodation publicized as a presumed unification of the tasks of providing relief and the infinitely more complicated and demanding tasks of development assistance.

## Observations

Relief and development organizations have fulfilled important tasks. Many have pioneered in several important technologies of the communication of need, the solicitation of support, and development

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for World Vision International Director's Conference, Frankfurt, Germany, May 5-17, 1990

of organized efforts toward cooperative solution of human problems. Nevertheless, in many particulars, such organizations can be described as having discovered the importance of development assistance but not yet having accepted the principles of the development process and the required disciplines of development assistance. Certain of the disciplines have become apparent through research and shared lore among inquirers since 1970. Some of the more pertinent of these disciplines follow:

1. Adjustment to the agenda of those who are to be assisted.
2. Constraint on the disruptive uses of money.
3. Investment in long-term rather than short-term correctives.
4. Invention of financial management procedures that allow for long-term slow-and-steady infusion rather than fluctuating spurts.
5. Patience to await community emergence and ownership of ideas.
6. Emphasis on the development of local leadership with minimal disruption of other leadership functions in the community.

Following are several categories of difficult problems. Some are dilemmas; no matter what is done in each of these it will create problems. Others are paradoxes; as an appropriate action is undertaken it will as likely lead to unintended and undesirable by-products as it will lead to the valid intention. The effectiveness of relief and development organizations in the 1990s may well hinge on how well it can cope with these problems:

1. Not-so-well kept secrets of relief agencies:
  - a) Social distance between us-and-them is intensified by every link in the relief system.
    - In fund raising—reciprocity or interdependence is very remote/abstract.
    - In regional allocation—central decisions are always remote.
    - In project selection—the organization is inevitably not the community.
    - In auditing and overseeing—here the gap is often intensified.
  - b) Donors comprehend little of what is at stake. (It is hard enough for field workers to comprehend.)
  - c) Emotional appeals are more successful than reasoned appeals. The tendency to dramatize and exaggerate is overpowering.
  - d) Rising costs require continuously expanding fund-raising activity, invariably dividing the ratio of costs to delivery in the wrong direction.
  - e) Educating donors to grasp the abstractions of the development process is especially difficult. Efforts in this cause seem to result more in “winnowing out” than in “converting” donors.
  - f) Barriers to effective use of donations, especially political and logistical problems, make it difficult to promise anything with real integrity.
  - g) The importation of commodities and human resources has predictable negative effects on marketplace stability and long-term capability of self-support. [We need a better grasp of development economics.]
2. Carefully overlooked trouble spots of Christian relief and development organizations:
  - a) Conflicting views of the relationship between social action and verbal proclamation persist as a wasteful and divisive handicap.
  - b) Pride is a besetting sin at the personal and corporate level.

- c) Pride begets distrust and distrust begets compartmentalization. Thus sooner or later everyone tries to do what is right in one's own eyes.
  - d) Faith in our technologies, especially the technologies of management and public relations, is usually misplaced faith. At best our technological tools must be constantly watched with suspicion so that they do not become our masters.
  - e) Being able to control the uses of money is a worthy image of Christian stewardship that often undermines the development process.
  - f) Socio-political problems are out-of-bounds. The self-imposed and sometimes required posture of "political neutrality" makes it easy to overlook the deeper structural issues of a society, especially social injustice. We end up putting band-aids on the victims after sharing lavish dinners with the torturers.
3. Special problems of international Christian ministries:
- a) To get well-trained and experienced personnel, western-style standards of background, education, and salary are put into place. The resultant interpersonal differentials are matters of tension, just complaint, and functional distance between the home-and-abroad sectors of work.
  - b) Mission organizations are a reality—a reality to be respected not disdained, yet relationships are difficult.
  - c) The national churches, in many places now well planted and in certain situations taking strong root, are not to be overlooked or disdained. Especially crucial are the matters of co-opting their roles and their leaders.

A suggested pattern for further refinement of relief and development organizations:

1. *Conscientization*—a responsive heart, disciplined by conscience, is the starting place. To accept the realities of suffering as a burden for all humankind requires both intellect and emotions.
2. *Reorganized experience*—a substantial approach to change depends on willing to learn. Unexamined experiences need to be reorganized into reality-based concepts.
3. *Confession*—the basic requisite for responding constructively to the righteous claims of the redeeming God is personal and corporate confession. Confession now requires humility.
4. *Reformation*—the continuous quest for refinement, becoming more conformed to the image of Christ, is the restless state of all our inherently flawed best efforts. As the gospel is anchored in several cultures we are therefore in the position of doing serious theology on what is truly cross-cultural.

### Closing Remarks

The church has tended to confuse *sending* missionaries with *doing* missions. How to break through the effects created by our own promotion?

- Use partner agencies vs reciprocating with partner agencies.
- Never use money to dominate.
- Never use persistent pressure to dominate.
- Sharing is a requirement of human compassion (Luke 10)
- Love is the basic manifestation of godliness (I Cor. 13)
- Injustice and its consequences are the barriers to development.
- Reciprocity is an important safeguard against injustice (II Cor 8: 10-15)

A biblical view of equality does not assume a balance beam at rest but rather mutual freedom from the wants of rudimentary needs and from the intoxicating excesses which numb us to injustice. We are equal when we are capable of human qualities: to be fed, to be sheltered, to be at peace, to feel and enjoy beauty, to learn, to share. Equality is lacking when reciprocity is impossible.

#### **Yearnings for World Vision expressed in brainstorming session**

- To move beyond repeating the past.
- To move beyond reaction to crisis.
- To move beyond social welfare.
- To move beyond the maintenance of institutions.
- To move beyond the inadvertent creation of dependency.
- To move beyond the ambiguity of doing development assistance with relief funds.
- To move beyond the strategies which are based on fund-driven projects.
- To move closer to community leadership.

#### **Ted's Yearnings for World Vision**

To be enabled to do even half as well in the field as the magnificent claims suggest.

To listen more responsively to what those in the field are learning.

To be kept from the snare of the evil one—especially the beguiling snares of “opportunity.”

To be centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Not just the works of Christ, but the person of Christ and his work in creation and salvation.