



Good Guys are Sometimes Bad Guys (and Vice-Versa!): *Preparation Reading*¹

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The tendency to simplify the world into “good guys” and “bad guys” is characteristic of the American view of life. America’s Christians are especially prone to this tendency because their cultural bias is reinforced by Jesus’ observation that those who are not *for* him are *against* him.

Thus the “bad guys” are those that we are contending against and the “good guys” are helping us—those that we have decided to work with. At least we tend to begin with these assumptions.

Worse yet, Christians tend to impute high and altruistic motives to people who seem to be helping, doing “the right thing.” And when we have decided that what we want to do is “the right thing,” we are quite vulnerable to being victimized by anybody clever enough to manipulate our good intentions into his or her own purposes.

All of this is complicated by a natural human tendency (not confined to Christians!) to treat people who have trouble speaking English as if they were mentally handicapped, deaf, or both. It seems to escape us that many of the people we deal with in development work are not only bright, but they are often very, very clever. And, depending on their values, they may or may not be heading in a direction similar to our hopes.

The danger of becoming cynical is always present. In my experience, I think that development workers who carry a borderline suspicion are less likely to be jolted into cynicism than are those who are totally naïve and overly optimistic. At best, development is a different matter.

The dilemma is that although trust and vulnerability are important qualities for the development worker, one must be protected against the complete demoralization that can result from being victimized by betrayal. Perhaps the compromise is to be mildly cautious. But be careful that caution doesn’t become paranoia!

Knowing the cast of characters might help. People of the following sorts will be encountered by the development worker. Some will be easy to spot, others will be hiding in various disguises:

1. *Those with vested interest in the status quo.* No matter how sad may be the present conditions and welfare, it’s a safe guess that someone has learned to get rich (or at least get power) from within the present structure. Development threatens such people: they will likely threaten development!

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2. *Those who will gain personal advantage from the degeneration of the status quo.* Perhaps the cruelest blows to development come from those who would prefer to see *more* misery, not less. Political motives are often the cause; especially in a pre-revolutionary situation, political extremists will do *anything* to make matters degenerate further. From such depths will arise the true revolution, their argument says.
3. *Those who see ways to gain from the development activities.* As Americans we sometimes have unrealistic views of human nature. We tend to forget that even Americans like to get salaries for helping others. So we seem surprised to find that others want to dip their own cups in the grain sack. In even slightly different social structures, we tend to call it “graft” when in the US it’s called tips, honoraria, or bonuses.
4. *Those who see no alternatives to the status quo and, thus, do not comprehend development.* The most stubborn problem in development is the “peasant mind.” This overgeneralization refers to the fact that people who have little experience in abstract thinking have great difficulty with the concept of life being fundamentally different from what it has always been. Things that the outsider calls “problems” are usually so much a part of accepted everyday life that there is no sense of importance for changing them. One of the basic axioms of development work is that outsiders don’t solve people’s problems. People have to grow into their own awareness of need. The outsider facilitates best by helping people to find their own agenda and move it ahead at their own pace.