

Food for Thought:

Is It True That We Can Fully Eliminate Poverty if People Took More Steps to Give in Their

Local Communities?

Poverty exists, and even if an argument can be made that today's world possesses the means to eradicate it, nothing short of a radical change in the way the economies of the world are ordered could alter an established dynamic based on a few controlling most of the wealth and the great majority subsisting on the bare minimum. Acceptance that this change is not likely to occur within the foreseeable future informs the decisions that we make about charitable giving. Individuals must resign themselves to the fact that their efforts can at best only mitigate the effects of hardship, but are unlikely to eradicate them. With this understanding, charitable organizations have narrowed the focus of what they seek to accomplish; working for moderate gains instead of the grand expectations of a more idealistic age (Johnston, 2019). Giving locally offers the advantages provided by the private infusion of funds for remediation and re-establishment of norms without many of the pitfalls associated with giving to distant locals. Chief amongst these is the ability to verify the efficacy of any proposed action, but no less important is the emotional connection to a cause within one's own community and the powerful inducement it engenders. Consideration such as these influence an individual's decision of where and how best to give.

For many countries, poverty stems from poor farming practices, economic policies, subjugation of a population by its ruling elite, or even international policies that deny a country access to finance or world markets (Myers, 2019). However, there is also deprivation caused by upheaval within society. Often, populations that are otherwise stable experience economic or

social disruption (“Know Your Facts About World Hunger & Poverty”). Many societies often lack the resilience needed to withstand catastrophes or the robustness to quickly recover from them. These societies can fall victim to natural disasters such as fire, storm, or earthquake and it is in this arena that philanthropy has the greatest opportunity to effect change, though the outcome is not always certain.

The industrialization of charitable giving has had a devastating impact on a given society’s ability to lift itself out of poverty. Where once charity was carried out at the local level by grassroots organizations, it has since become an industry unto itself where great sums of money move around the globe with unforeseen and often undesirable consequences (*Poverty Inc.*, 2014). Charitable programs can undermine the stability of local economies. Consider the impact of imported rice on the Haitian economy. When Haiti suffered a massive earthquake, it’s entire economic base was disrupted. This prompted international aid organizations to launch relief programs in an attempt to stave off further disaster. To address the very real risk of starvation, they shipped over great quantities of rice. Initially, this proved indispensable. However later, when the agricultural system had been reestablished, it proved a hindrance to the resumption of normal farming practices. Heavily subsidized rice imports displaced locally grown foodstuffs as the new food staple of the region. This led to farmers not growing traditional crops that they now found too expensive to market. Not only was the local economy affected as funds were no longer recirculated within the community but additionally, the social fabric was damaged as a population’s continued reliance on international assistance robbed them of agency and autonomy (Dodds, 2010). This example illustrates how well-intentioned aid can lead to unforeseen consequences.

Another example is the exporting of what is often described as disposable clothing. Sent from drop-off boxes in Western communities to the Third World in prodigious quantities, supposedly offering opportunity for local industry; they merely displace local garb for something less practical (Hannah, 2017). In the end, this influx of clothing did not spark a new industry but rather stifled the local economy. Any exercise in charitable giving that results in a population becoming dependent on an artificial economic construct should be questioned. A similar pattern occurs with agencies providing infrastructure after a disaster. Their well-intentioned generosity often results in the displacement of burgeoning local industries and a negative impact to entrepreneurial activity. Decades of ill-considered policies such as these have resulted in an ongoing dependence on foreign aid. Whether second-hand clothing in Kenya, free eggs in Kigali, or the provision of cheap rice in Haiti, these policies have effectively depressed economic growth and locked these societies into a cycle of dependence (*Poverty Inc.*, 2014). There are many negative consequences to uniformed philanthropy. These are not limited to protracted economic difficulties but extend to personal crisis as well as damage to cultural identity (Murori, 2016). Continuing to send international aid without critical analysis or assessment of the long-term ramifications for agriculture or infrastructure poses a risk to the very economies that it propounds to assist.

An exit strategy should be a part of any plan devised to offer assistance to those in need. There are few instances where the ongoing presence of a charity does not undermine the economic foundation of a society. If people are hungry, feed them, but at the same time, help to reestablish the agricultural system that was interrupted. Do not replace the crisis of impoverishment with a system of dependance (Corbett, 2014). It should be noted that little

consideration is given to questions of identifying those with the greatest need, efficacy, or the cost effectiveness of donating to one cause over another. Tables of comparison for these and many other facts are readily available. Assessing where one's dollars might be most cost effectively spent is of little value if these charitable decisions ultimately result in undermining recovery. Personal responsibility extends beyond merely taking a cursory look at a charitable organization's offering for public consumption. It requires the conscientious individual to weigh the benefits against the often unspoken harms that inherently accompany all such interventions.

The question of how best to give still remains. Although pictures of a small child cradling a baby goat in their arms are endearing, the gift of clean water, while less engaging, ranks as amongst the most beneficial to the individual and the community. Further, consideration should be given to organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières. They offer temporary assistance where service has been interrupted or is non-existent. They exist as a stop-gap measure and do not supplant the local infrastructure. Both are examples of choices that when objectively considered still seem to offer an acceptable reward to risk balance (Polak, 2009). The suggestion is not to choose amongst these specific options, but to take the time to gain more than just a superficial understanding of any given cause. Without this effort there is the possibility of doing harm and the real risk of not effecting any change.

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