How to Help the Poor – And How Not To

By Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, co-authors of When Helping Hurts

Hope Community Church, a predominantly middle-class congregation, is centered in the downtown area of a U.S. city. Being in the Christmas spirit, Hope decided to reach out to the residents of a nearby housing project that was characterized by extensive poverty. Church members bought Christmas presents for the children and went door-to-door, singing Christmas carols and delivering wrapped toys to the boys and girls in each apartment. Although it was awkward at first, the members of Hope were moved by the big smiles on the children’s faces and were encouraged by the warm reception of the mothers. In fact, the congregation felt so good about the joy they had brought that they decided to expand their ministry, delivering baskets of candy at Easter and turkeys at Thanksgiving.

After several years, Hope’s pastor noticed that he was struggling to find volunteers to deliver the gifts to the housing project. At a congregational meeting, he asked the members why their enthusiasm was waning. One member spoke up: “Pastor, we are tired of this ministry. We have been bringing them things for several years, but their situation never improves. They just sit there in the same situation year in and year out. Have you ever noticed that there are few men in the apartments when we deliver the toys? Many residents are unwed mothers who just keep having babies out of wedlock.”

Churches all across the U.S. share elements of Hope’s story. They want to help people who are poor, but they are not sure that their efforts are making a difference. And sometimes frustration sets in, as it did with Hope Community Church.

Churches want to know: What lasting impact is our church having in our community? How can we be good stewards of our resources and foster lasting transformation in our communities?

Unfortunately, good intentions aren’t enough. As we will see, it is actually possible to harm the poor in our attempts to help them. The first step in moving forward is recognizing that poverty – and thus poverty alleviation – is more complicated than we might think.

WHAT IS POVERTY?

Imagine that you went to the doctor with chronic headaches, and the doctor simply gave you medicine to stop the pain. If you had a brain tumor, this approach would do serious harm to you, for it would deaden your pain while your tumor grew bigger and bigger. The same is true when we work with people who are poor. If we treat only symptoms, we can actually mask the underlying problems, thereby hurting poor people in the very process of trying to help them. Good intentions are not enough.

And therein lies the problem in many of our attempts to help poor people. Most of us define poverty as a lack of material things such as money, food, and shelter. As a result, we try to solve the problem by giving things to the poor, whether in the form of backpacks full of school supplies, turkeys and toys at Christmas, or repainted houses every summer. Although these programs may reduce the pain temporarily, such handouts treat the symptoms of poverty rather than its underlying causes.
Low-income people describe their poverty in far more psychological and social terms than we do, often describing it as a profound sense of shame, inferiority, helplessness, vulnerability, and social isolation. Handouts of material resources will not solve these problems. In order to be truly effective, we need to move past treating the symptoms of poverty—a lack of material things—and correctly diagnose its deeper causes.

From a biblical perspective, poverty is rooted in broken relationships. The Bible teaches that in creation God established four foundational relationships that shape each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. When these relationships are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended: families are nurturing, work is fulfilling and productive, and people glorify God in all that they do.

However, the fall damaged all four of these relationships for all of us. Hence, we are all "poor" in the sense that none of us are experiencing these relationships as God intended. Those of us who are not materially poor often experience this brokenness in the form of pride, self-centeredness, workaholic tendencies, and a desire to "play god" in everyday life. In contrast, those who are materially poor often experience this brokenness in the form of a paralyzing sense of inferiority, violent conflict and exploitation, a failure to steward resources, or a sense of spiritual fear or isolation. Thus, all of us, regardless of income level, desperately need the restorative work of Christ in our lives.

HELPING OR HURTING?

Here is the clincher: The way that the materially non-poor are broken tends to exacerbate the brokenness of the materially poor, and vice versa. The ways that we speak and act towards the materially poor often confirm what they are already feeling: "I am inferior; I can’t do it; I need somebody to save me." This attitude makes them more passive, and, as this happens, we get more arrogant: "I knew they didn’t have my work ethic and initiative. Why don’t they do something to improve their lives?" Their shame is deepened, and our pride is enhanced.

Let’s go back to Hope’s story. There was a reason that few men were in the apartments when the church members delivered the toys. Oftentimes, when the fathers of the children heard the Christmas carols outside their front doors and saw the presents for their kids through the peepholes, they were embarrassed and ran out the back doors of their apartments. For a host of reasons, low-income males sometimes struggle to find and keep jobs. This often contributes to a deep sense of shame and inadequacy, both of which make it even more difficult to apply for jobs. The last thing these fathers needed was a group of middle-class people providing Christmas presents for their children, presents that they themselves could not afford to buy. In trying to alleviate material poverty, Hope increased these fathers’ sense of inferiority and shame.

In addition, the members of Hope Community Church hurt themselves. At first, the members developed a subtle sense of pride that they were helping the project residents through their acts of kindness. When they then observed the residents’ failure to improve their own situations, the members’ sense of superiority was further increased.

This story illustrates the basic formula for causing unintended harm in our efforts to help the materially poor:

| Material Definition of Poverty + Feelings of Superiority of the Materially Rich + Feelings of Inferiority of the Materially Poor = Harm to Materially Poor and Materially Rich |

Breaking out of this equation requires us to change the first two variables: the way we define poverty and our sense of pride and superiority. The repentance starts with us.

As we move from a material to a relational definition of poverty, we begin to see that poverty alleviation is ultimately about reconciling relationships—in both our lives and the lives of the materially poor. As a result, effective poverty alleviation happens by forming long-term relationships with the materially poor, walking alongside them over time as Christ restores both of us.
NOT ALL POVERTY IS CREATED EQUAL

Taking the next steps in walking with low-income people requires discerning whether a situation calls for relief—short-term handouts to people in an emergency or crisis situation—or development—walking with people over time in a way that reconciles their and our relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. If people are in a crisis resulting from a natural disaster such as an earthquake, from a medical emergency, from another unexpected large bill, or from some personal trauma, then relief is often the appropriate response. But the vast majority of materially poor people around the world are not in a crisis. They can contribute to improving their circumstances, meaning that walking alongside them developmentally is the proper approach. In development, we might provide money or material resources to help people, but we would do this in a way that complements the gifts and resources that they are also contributing to their own progress. Relief is done to people or for people, while development is done with people.

Unfortunately, because of our tendency to define poverty as a material condition, we often give handouts for long periods of time to individuals or communities that actually need development. This is one of the most common and detrimental mistakes churches make in attempting to alleviate poverty, whether in their own communities or around the globe on a short-term mission trip. Simply handing out shoes, clothing, or money to people who are not helpless and who are not in a crisis can deepen the very feelings of shame that are one of the root causes of material poverty. Doing so undermines their capacity and drive to support themselves and their families through work, fostering a mindset of dependency.

ASSETS OR NEEDS?

Churches also need to move toward “asset-based” approaches to poverty alleviation, rather than “needs-based” approaches. An asset-based approach focuses on the God-given gifts, resources, and abilities that He has placed in a community. It seeks to identify, celebrate, and mobilize those gifts. A needs-based approach focuses on the needs and deficits in a community, seeking to bring outside resources, leadership, and solutions to “fix” the problems. It assumes, “We must build houses and run Vacation Bible Schools in your community because we know more than you do. We must bring you agricultural equipment so you can farm more efficiently.” Such an approach often reflects and feeds sinful pride in our own hearts and intensifies the feelings of inferiority that commonly plague low-income people. In short, it again deepens the poverty we are each experiencing.

Focusing on the assets God has put in a community frames our interactions with the materially poor in light of their God-given dignity. It affirms that they can steward their resources to God’s glory and support themselves, combating their feelings of inferiority. In the process, an asset-based approach fosters an attitude of respect in our hearts for the materially poor, countering our sense of superiority. This does not mean we will never bring in outside resources, but rather that we will only do so in a way that complements, not undermines, local assets.

Further, healthy poverty alleviation efforts are participatory, asking low-income individuals and communities what should be done and how it should be done. And by asking them to initiate and contribute to their own improvement, participatory approaches give low-income people ownership of their own change and empowers them to sustain that change in the future. In contrast, “blueprint” approaches dictate to the materially poor what they need to do and how it should be done. In the process, “blueprint” approaches treat materially poor as objects, undermining their God-given dignity as image-bearers who are called to steward their own gifts and resources.

MOVING FORWARD

So what does it look like when these principles are embodied in a church’s ministry initiatives? Let’s go back to Hope. Realizing that its approach wasn’t effective or sustainable, Hope retooled its efforts. Instead of giving handouts each holiday, Hope opened a thrift store where the parents from the housing project could buy donated toys at a low cost. The parents were then able to purchase toys for their children, building dignity in
their own eyes and in the eyes of their children.

Over time, Hope’s members built relationships with the parents and began to address their deeper issues by offering job preparedness and financial education classes. Participants in these classes studied the Scriptures together, fellowshipped with church members as equals, and learned how to better support themselves and their families.

As Hope saw the benefits of walking with these parents over time, the church leaders began to re-evaluate Hope’s international work as well. They realized that their short-term missions trips were providing relief-type handouts to people who were not helpless. Hence, Hope changed their trips, focusing on supporting and encouraging partners who could actually engage in the long-term process of asset-based, participatory development.

A growing number of churches like Hope are moving away from crippling habitual handouts to truly restorative approaches. Given that the church is the embodiment of Jesus Christ—who is restoring all things—such a shift is absolutely imperative in order to be faithful stewards of the resources that God has entrusted to our care.

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1 This article is adapted from the book by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert: When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself (Moody Publishers, 2014).

1 Resources and training in these ministries is available at the Chalmers Center: www.chalmers.org