Stop Helping Us!
A Call to Compassionately Move Beyond Charity

By Peter Greer

Stop Helping Us! introduces a new paradigm for an evangelical response to poverty alleviation. Being effective means recognizing that there is a difference between short-term aid, which is important and necessary, and the long-term elimination of poverty, which is the best defense against receding back into material poverty and the most effective method of elevating the dignity of all God’s children.

THE STORY OF FADZAI

Every time an employer discovered Fadzai Nhando, a woman from Zimbabwe, was HIV positive, the door shut. “Life was difficult for me when I came to Harare,” Fadzai later remarked. When Fadzai speaks, she covers her mouth to hide her missing front teeth, a daily reminder of the brutal way she contracted HIV. “I left my hometown after someone had beaten and raped me,” she said. Following the assault, a friend took her to a clinic at the capital, Harare. There she discovered she was HIV positive. “When my husband found out I was sick [with HIV], he disappeared,” Fadzai commented later. “I did not have a place to live.” After her husband’s abandonment, Fadzai was left a single mom, a stranger in a new city. With no place to call home, she moved from place to place with her children.

It is possible to debate many points of theology, but our faith clearly calls us to care for Fadzai, an individual who has been exploited and abused. She is the widow and foreigner so frequently mentioned throughout Scripture. When we hear the story of Fadzai’s mistreatment and understand the message of grace in Scripture, we are compelled to respond.

John, one of Jesus’s closest friends, asked the question, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” James, the brother of Jesus, questioned, “If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” This concept was discussed in great detail in chapter three, but the takeaway is worth repeating here. Followers of Jesus have a rich history of responding to a gospel message of compassion. From New York City to New Delhi, the homeless find shelter and a compassionate response in Christian missions. In rural areas lacking access to healthcare, medical clinics have been built. Through prison ministry, thousands of prisoners are visited each year. Soup kitchens run by churches are a fixture in many cities.

Fadzai was one recipient of such care. After arriving in Harare, she found a charity that provided aid. But as with most charities, the support eventually ended. “I had a big problem when the charity that I was getting my food from stopped,” Fadzai lamented. It is unclear whether Fadzai was better off as a result of the church’s support, despite its good intentions. Although charity helped Fadzai for a time, it did not change her situation or address the underlying issues of her poverty. She was still in tremendous need. Having learned no additional skills, Fadzai was in no better position to provide for her children. Worse—as handouts often do over the long term—charity may have actually deepened her poverty.
WHAT IS POVERTY?

In the 1990s, World Bank surveyed over sixty thousand of the financially poor throughout the developing world and how they described poverty. The poor did not focus on their material need; rather, they alluded to social and psychological aspects of poverty. Analyzing the study, Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development said, “Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness.”

The study highlights that, by nature, poverty is innately social and psychological. In an informal survey, our clients at HOPE International in Rwanda affirmed that poverty is more than a lack of material possessions. In 2011, a lead trainer of a savings program in Rwanda posed a question to a group of twenty individuals within a savings group, most of whom lived on less than $2 a day. “How do you define poverty?” he asked. Listed below are their answers in the order provided:

1. Poverty is an empty heart.
2. Not knowing your abilities and strengths.
3. Not being able to make progress.
4. Isolation.
5. No hope or belief in yourself. Knowing you can’t take care of your family.
7. Not knowing God.
9. Poverty is a consequence of not sharing.
10. Lack of good thoughts.

As can be seen from the above, money was mentioned only once. If poverty is not only a material deficit, but also not knowing one’s potential, abilities, and strengths—as well as having an empty heart—then traditional charity neglects to address the root causes of poverty. In Fadzai’s situation, receiving handouts did not enable her to recognize her abilities, maximize her potential, or believe her situation would ever change. When aid stopped, Fadzai said she hit the nadir of her life. Aid—a short-term solution—left her hopeless, despairing, and powerless in the long term. Suicidal, Fadzai felt unable to take care of her basic needs, while charity deepened her hopelessness.

The downward spiral of charity has been experienced by countless people eager to do good and serve the poor, but it is best described in Toxic Charity by author Bob Lupton. In this book, he details the negative cycle of giving related to traditional charity.

1. Give once and you elicit appreciation;
2. Give twice and you create anticipation;
3. Give three times and you create expectation;
4. Give four times and it becomes entitlement;
5. Give five times and you establish dependency.

Even when offered with compassion, traditional charity, which should be only a temporary fix, can often enslave individuals—becoming a poverty trap—if extended into the long term. Instead of focusing on the potential of those like Fadzai, charity cheats them of using their God-given abilities and talents. The church is beginning to recognize the pitfalls of traditional charity and rediscover an alternative way of helping.
EFFECTIVE VERSUS EASY

Obedience to the biblical command to clothe the naked and to give food to the hungry is not easy. Requiring us to go beyond surface needs—the symptoms of poverty—an effective response demands a longer-term commitment. The starting point is to distinguish between aid and development. After a disaster, images of need flood airwaves. Donors rally together to provide an outpouring of support. Relief, a rapid provision of temporary resources to reduce immediate suffering, is required. Earthquakes, tsunamis, war, and natural disasters call for a full force and timely response.

On January 12, 2010, Haiti was struck by an earthquake more forceful than any it had seen in two centuries. Its magnitude: 7.0 on the Richter scale. The earthquake killed more than 200,000 people and left more than 300,000 injured. In this case, short-term relief was entirely appropriate. People needed immediate access to medical care, food, and shelter. However, the earthquake in Haiti also offers insight into Haiti’s need for development, as illustrated by another earthquake: one that struck in 1989, during the warm-up of the third game of the World Series between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants. The world stopped to rally around San Francisco—the city at its epicenter—as it watched the disaster on television. The tragedy killed sixty-three people and collapsed viaducts and bridges. Its magnitude: 7.1.

Though it was terrible tragedy, why did only sixty-three people die in the 1989 earthquake, while over 200,000 people were killed in the 2010 earthquake? A major part of the difference is poverty. San Francisco was prepared, its infrastructure ready to deal with disasters. Haiti was not prepared. With over eighty percent of Haitians living in poverty, the country’s population already suffered from poor sanitation, disease, inadequate healthcare, and malnutrition. As demonstrated by the 7.0-magnitude earthquakes in Haiti and San Francisco, while relief offers immediate return, it may take months, years, or even generations to see the full results of development.

Giles Bolton, a veteran African diplomat, described the difference between relief and development in *Africa Doesn’t Matter*. “In consumer language, [development] is a bit like making an investment rather than an immediate purchase... It’s al much better value if it works because it gives poor people control over their own lives and enables them better to withstand future humanitarian disasters without outside help.” Development is a long-term investment; it’s not flashy.

WORK AS VOCATION

Throughout history, the church has underappreciated the role of work; however, in Genesis the Creator gave the initial mandate to work. From the beginning of creation, God elevated the role of work. Before sin entered the world, “God took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order.” Work is a gift and a calling from God. Both the Old and New Testaments promote employment. One example is the emphasis on gleaning. At harvest, farmers were commanded not to “reap to the very edges of your field” so that the poor could gather the remainder (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; Ruth 2:9) God provided for the poor in a manner in which they were active participants—not passive recipients—of charity.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonians, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” Paul recognized that everyone capable of working should provide for themselves and their families. Likewise, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “Let those who are stealing, steal no longer, but rather let him work, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” In this situation, employment was the tool that helped turn even thieves into generous givers. Elevating the role of work is not only part of the church’s mandate, but dramatically transforms the global landscape from poverty to empowerment.
A NEW MODEL

According to the Brookings Institution, seventy million people—approximately the population of Turkey—are lifted out of poverty every year.\(^1\) Between 1981 and 2005, the World Bank reported the number of people living in extreme poverty (or living on $1.25 or less per day) decreased from fifty-two percent to twenty-six percent.\(^13\) In one generation, poverty has been cut in half, not through charity but through job creation. Economic heavyweights like China, India, and Brazil have fueled the reduction of poverty.

For example, in 1981, eighty-four percent of China’s population lived below the poverty line, and only four other countries in the world had a greater percentage of people living on less than $1.25 a day. By 2005, the percentage of China’s population living beneath the poverty line dropped to twenty-five percent, according to World Bank. During this timeframe, China’s GDP increased tenfold. Brazil and India followed the same path, as their poverty rates were cut from seventeen percent to eight percent, and sixty percent to forty percent, respectively, between 1981 and 2005, the changes being powered by economic growth.\(^14\)

For too long, capitalism was treated as a bystander in poverty alleviation and human development. Rock stars and aid activists were calling for more charity and a greater response from the global community, but few were calling for investment in entrepreneurship and policies that promote economic development. “Our wrong, careless, romantic vision of the poor is that they’re being so exploited that they should just be left to retreat into self-sufficiency, you know, the organic, holistic peasant, uncontaminated by the dirty business of a market economy,” said Paul Collier, an author and economist at Oxford. “And of course, that is just romantic nonsense.”\(^15\) A “romantic vision” of the poor has often led to a broken system of aid.

Recent history has exposed the underside of aid. On a macro scale, economist Dambisa Moyo reported in Dead Aid that Africa has received over $1 trillion in aid in the past fifty years, and in many countries, growth has stagnated—even plummeted. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa still rank at the bottom of poverty indexes, such as World Bank’s Doing Business report and the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI).\(^16\) Aid doesn’t transform poverty to prosperity; it has actually hindered economic growth worldwide. Desmond Tutu, human rights leader and former Anglican bishop, has commented that, “[Aid] becomes a way of colonizing the economies of the poor countries—a system of economic slavery.”\(^17\)

In economist Bill Easterly’s book The White Man’s Burden, he writes about the ongoing “tragedy” of aid: “… the West spent $2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get twelve-cent medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths. The West spent $2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get four-dollar bed nets to poor families. The West spent $2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get three dollars to each new mother to prevent five million child deaths.”\(^18\) One reason aid is ineffective is that the individuals benefiting from aid often do not decide how to address the problem of poverty.

WHITE SAVIOR INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX \(^19\)

In 2005, Bob Geldoff, organizer of Live Aid, defined the global aid community’s response to poverty when he said, “Something must be done; anything must be done, whether it works or not.”\(^20\) From G-8 Summits to Live Aid, the West has sought solutions to help the poor. Solutions from the West are often innovative but impractical, owing to a failure to listen to the poor themselves. Consider this example. Philanthropists saw the need to provide clean water for communities in Africa and designed PlayPump. The concept appears straightforward. Promising to “harness the energy of children at play,” PlayPump is a children’s merry-go-round that operates a water pump. PlayPump was the darling of the world’s most powerful people: Laura Bush, Bill Clinton, and organizations like Save the Children all supported it. Many, such as Clinton, were overwhelmingly generous. During its campaign to provide clean water in 2006, the Clinton Global Initiative gave $16.4 million to PlayPump. Unfortunately, PBS investigations several years later exposed the fact that PlayPump was not highly effective. Many PlayPumps broke. Often a PlayPump was placed over the only existing water supply in a village. When the water pump broke, few in the community chose to fix it, and the entire community lost access to
water. In one village in Mozambique, Amy Costello, a PBS correspondent, reported on what happened after the PlayPump broke. “They had to walk 40 minutes to the next village in order to get their water now, which was putting additional pressure on that community,” Costello said. “They resented the 150 families that they were now having to share their water source with.” PlayPump seemed like a good idea, but its effectiveness is judged by local communities, not the international aid community. The local community did not have ownership and was not as impressed with this solution. While the intention was to help, those supporting PlayPump sometimes knew they did not make a lasting impact. In a short amount of time, communities were once again without a water source. An outside solution, PlayPump was not widely successful because those receiving its services were not involved in its ideation and implementation.

Thankfully, there has been a rediscovery of the danger of outside solutions—which sometimes results in what Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole calls the “White Savior Industrial Complex”—to an approach focusing on individuals helping themselves.

Even the global aid community has begun to change its rhetoric. Consider Bob Geldof, the ringleader of Live Aid, who said that “Something must be done; anything must be done, whether it works or not.” Today he’s singing a different tune. Investing in Africa’s economy, the former aid advocate has established a $200 million private equity firm. “The next part of Africa’s development is jobs,” says Geldof. From Geldof and Bono to Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda, and economists like Paul Collier, there is a new model to alleviate global poverty: job creation. And the change already has influenced economies on a macro scale. According to World Bank, nations in Africa are on the verge of the same remarkable path toward wealth creation as China was thirty years ago. From 2000-2011, trade between African nations and other countries grew 200 percent. Through increased investment, African countries are being revitalized. According to the International Monetary Fund, on average the GDP of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa grew from five to seven percent in 2012.

Investments have a huge role to play in the progress of Africa. According to The New Africa: Emerging Opportunities for Business and Africa, the impact of investments has already bypassed the effect of aid, generating 1.7 million jobs from 2003 to 2010. Beyond investments, on a micro scale, financial tools, such as business training, saving and small loans are empowering those like Fadzai to have a voice.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Providentially, Fadzai was told to go to Central Baptist Church, Harare, for a very different form of assistance. Embracing its mission to care for the widow, the orphan, and the vulnerable, this church recognized that there are ways to help those in need beyond starting a soup kitchen. The members discovered a new approach to assisting Fadzai through the seemingly audacious belief that even impoverished people are capable of contributing to their own development. This approach was based on the belief that the greater gift they could give would be to equip Fadzai to provide for herself. Fadzai was open to a new opportunity and gathered with a group each week to participate in a training and savings program.

When she first heard about the program and the requirement that every week each member save some amount of money, she thought, “How do these people think I am going to get money for this?” Fadzai received business and biblical training as she gathered with eighteen other members. She understood grace and forgiveness through the gospel message. She was coached and mentored as she learned basic accounting. If she could not contribute the necessary savings for one particular week, another member covered for her. As this group started accumulating a greater amount of savings, they started making investments in each other’s businesses. Eventually, Fadzai was able to receive a small loan to purchase farming supplies, seeds, and equipment and to begin farming a small plot of land with other members. Believing she had skills and abilities, she began to dream about the future—seeing a pathway out of poverty. But Fadzai also realized that change is more than economic. “I was also taught to pray about everything,” she explained. In her case, God answered these prayers in ways she never thought possible. Miraculously, even Fadzai’s husband came back. Fadzai’s
life is spiritually and materially different because a local church stopped simply pitying her. Willing to invest in her, the church saw what she had—and who she was in Christ—rather than what she lacked. Fadzai learned to forgive in relationships and now attends church regularly with her family. In her words, “For me, that's a very big deal.” This hardworking mother, who used to be dependent on handouts, is now weekly earning a far greater amount of money than she ever received from charity. And this all occurred in less than a year’s time. Despite the pain of the past, the future looks bright for her. Thankfully, more and more organizations are working to create an alternative to the charity trap.

AROUND THE WORLD
These principles apply not only in Zimbabwe. As needs are addressed overseas or in downtown Chicago, providing a job is more beneficial than offering a handout. Recognition is growing in post-industrial nations that the welfare mentality has handicapped the poor. Instead of being a ladder out of poverty, charity puts the most vulnerable in bondage. Churches and faith communities increasingly aim to provide essential tools to equip a family to work its way out of poverty, which include business training and job preparedness, financial literacy, business mentoring, and access to capital.

CONCLUSION
Though the West’s efforts through international aid have been well-intentioned, they have often done more harm than good. By focusing on what the poor lack, instead of what they have, the underlying message sent to the poor is this: you are incapable. When Fadzai walked through the door of Central Baptist Church in 2011, her head was hung low. She was skeptical when asked to save. Her dependency on aid, coupled with the injustice committed against her, rendered her feeling helpless. As she questioned her existence, her capacity, and her potential, she wondered—Do I have anything to give?

Today Fadzai stands tall. Under a tree outside Harare, a group of women gather. They sit huddled on blankets strewn across red-dirt ground as Fadzai walks among them, teaching. She leads the savings and loan process and also communicates through a curriculum how each one is made in the image of God. Like her, they have purpose. Fadzai’s story reflects a changing philosophy on poverty alleviation. From handouts to enterprise, the new paradigm focuses more on the dignity, creativity, and capacity of the poor, rather than their material deficit.

It is also a paradigm that is changing the economic landscape. Between 1981 and 2005, global poverty rates were cut in half, primarily through job creation. Even Africa, which The Economist called “the hopeless continent” ten years ago, is now seeing signs of economic growth through job creation and investment. Sustainable development through business is on the rise not only internationally but also domestically. Business training and mentoring, as well as access to capital, are universal principles empowering individuals through a hand up. It’s a paradigm giving opportunity, responsibility, and dignity to the poor. No longer do we look to presidents, nonprofit organizations, the World Bank, and the U.N. to address poverty. Rather, the leaders of this new movement are individuals like Fadzai—those who are creating jobs, providing for their families, and bringing hope to their communities.

Adapted with permission for use in Oikonomia—Economics for Life and Purpose
This article is adapted from the ebook by Peter Greer: Stop Helping Us! A Call to Compassionately Move Beyond Charity(Published by The Institute for Faith, Work & Economics).

As President of HOPE International, Peter Greer is at the forefront of helping churches discover how to do charity both biblically and effectively. HOPE International is a global non-profit organization focused on alleviating both physical and spiritual poverty through Christ-centered microfinance.
The Institute for Faith, Work & Economics is a Christian research organization committed to promoting biblical and economic principles that help individuals find fulfillment in their work and contribute to a free and flourishing society. IFWE publishes a daily blog featuring a variety of contributors who advance Creativity, Purpose & Freedom, equipping readers with a Biblical theology of work and economics.

1 John 3:17.
2 James 2:16.
3 Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett, When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 53.
7 Giles Bolton, Africa Doesn’t Matter (New York: Arcade, 2008), 76.
8 Genesis 2:15.
9 Leviticus 19:9.
10 2 Thessalonians 3:10.
11 Ephesians 4:28
18 William Easterly, The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4
20 Quoted in Easterly, White Man’s Burden, 4.
21 Africa Rising,” Time Magazine, December 3, 2012,
26 “The sun shines bright: The continent’s impressive growth looks likely to continue,” The Economist, December 3, 2011.