

A Two-Way Street:
Replacing Condescension with Cooperation
To Help the World's Poor

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Bono, Madonna and Angelina Jolie are some of today's celebrities calling attention to the world's poor. However, they are just the latest in a long line of Westerners who have viewed developing nations through their own prism. Some have focused on political reform, using colonization or military intervention (Easterly, 2006, p. 25). Others have sought religious goals, such as spreading Christianity. For instance, a generation ago, Catholic schools urged their students to "ransom pagan babies" (Bacik, 1996, p. 225). Each \$5 collected for the church's mission work allowed schoolchildren to name a baby baptized in a foreign country (Corbet, 2009). Economic aid also remains a major Western focus for "the Rest" (Easterly, 2006, p. 6).

Foreign aid has cost the West more than \$2.3 trillion over 50 years (Easterly, 2006, p. 4). But that aid has not yet helped the United Nations meet its eight Millennium Development Goals. Those goals are erasing extreme poverty and hunger; reaching universal primary-school enrollment; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring a sustainable environment; and developing a global partnership for development (Easterly, 2006, p.9).

What accounts for the gap between the West's money and its good intentions? The answer may depend on whether those intentions were imposed from the top-down or grown from the bottom-up.

According to Easterly (2006), most Western intentions for foreign aid are imposed top-down from people who "have very little knowledge of poor people" (p. 17).

He calls these people “Planners,” while “Searchers” are those who live and work inside the areas they help. Searchers, he said, develop their ideas from the bottom-up. Easterly (2006) explained that “a Planner thinks he already knows the answers” while “a Searcher admits he doesn’t know the answers in advance” (p. 6).

Easterly (2006) contrasted two case studies focused on reducing malaria. Both relied on distributing bed nets to keep mosquitoes from infecting sleeping people. Unfortunately, once a shipment reaches a community, the bed nets “are often diverted to the black market, become out of stock in health clinics, or wind up being used as fishing nets or wedding veils” (p. 13).

Zambia used “the Planner” approach, handing out bed nets free to residents whether or not they wanted them. As a result, 70% of recipients in Zambia didn’t use the nets (Easterly, 2006, p. 14).

However, in Malawi, a nonprofit American group tried “the Searcher” approach. Population Services International (PSI) allowed Malawians in the local PSI office to develop their own plan. That plan let local nurses sell the bed nets for 50 cents each – to women who wanted them – at rural prenatal clinics. For each bed net sold, the nurses earned a nine-cent commission. This gave the nurses an incentive to keep the bed nets in stock, while the modest fee charged to the women assured that only those wanting the nets would get them. PSI subsidized the cost for rural Malawians by selling bed nets to richer city dwellers for \$5 each through the private sector (Easterly, 2006, pp. 13-14).

As a result, Malawi increased its use of bed nets from 8% in 2000 to 55% in 2004. Now other African countries are using the Malawi model (Easterly, 2006, p. 14).

Another example of the Searcher approach is Greg Mortenson's story in *Three Cups of Tea*. A mountain-climber, Mortenson traveled to Pakistan with the goal of reaching the peak of K2. After a failed attempt, he found himself dangerously exhausted, but the people of a local mountain village nursed him back to health. One day, he saw school-age children in the village kneeling outside in a circle, scratching their lessons in the dirt. With the blessing of the village, Mortenson determined to build those children a schoolhouse (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 33).

Mortenson built the village not only a school but also a bridge and a women's vocational center. Through his relationships with Pakistanis and Americans, Mortenson built more schools throughout Pakistan, as well as vocational centers and safe water supplies. He cooperated with villagers who provided their ideas, land and labor for the projects, while he provided the funding.

Despite his experiences growing up with missionary parents in Africa, serving in the U.S. Army, and working as an emergency trauma nurse, Mortenson said he learned the most important lesson of his life from Haj Ali, leader of the village that saved his life:

Haj Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects.

He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them. (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 150)

Doris Janzen Longacre would agree. The author of *Living More with Less*, Longacre, now deceased, was a member of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). After working overseas with the MCC in Vietnam and Indonesia, she wrote that North

Americans usually experience shock in their first encounter with an economically poor country. Then they start thinking of “development projects” for problems they see. But she warned of the “danger of misreading needs and running ahead or to the side of those actually involved.” She added that North Americans “rarely realize that persons from other countries often go through a similar thought process” when they live in North America (Longacre, 1980, p. 31).

Longacre (1980, pp. 30-31) quoted Romeo Maione, a Canadian Catholic activist who had addressed the MCC’s 1978 Annual Meeting in Kitchener, Ontario:

We think we know it all, the poor peasants know nothing,
and we are going to go and tell them what to do. Many of
the world’s poor survived for thousands of years with none
of our technology. That feat takes wisdom worth learning
about.

Longacre (1980) filled her book with practical wisdom that Mennonite missionaries learned from the people they came to help. For instance, an Asian missionary found that Filipinos use thermos bottles as “an energy-saving tool,” filling them each morning with hot water to avoid the fuel costs for reheating water for tea or coffee (p. 156).

A Western woman in India found it practical to dress like a native. Wearing a sari allowed her to slide easily behind the wheel of her car without burning her legs on the hot seat, and “the flowing gauze-like cloth dampened by perspiration also served as an air conditioner” (Longacre, 1980, pp. 105-06).

Another missionary cut utility costs back at home by using the clothes-drying techniques she learned in Hong Kong: “We hung shirts, blouses, and dresses on hangers before putting them on the line” (Longacre, 1980, p. 152).

After tapping into the wisdom of “the Rest,” Westerners may discover that they themselves are poor in ways they never imagined. Author Helena Norberg-Hodge, an American who lived in the remote Himalayan village of Ladakh, said she found that the villagers had a “remarkable joie de vivre and an amazing tolerance and harmony” (Walljasper, 2001). Comparing Westerners to the Ladakhis, she said:

Westerners suffer their own form of impoverishment. People everywhere face less economic security, less free time, less community, less connection to natural rhythms, and more stress, more junk food, and deeper feelings of inadequacy about their income and physical attractiveness. (Walljasper, 2001)

When Westerners realize that poverty is a two-way street, then perhaps bottom-up cooperation may replace top-down condescension as the model for foreign aid – and the West and “the Rest” can learn how much they need each other.

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