

WHEN  
HELPING  
HURTS

HOW TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY WITHOUT  
HURTING THE POOR . . . AND YOURSELF

STEVE CORBETT and BRIAN FIKKERT

MOODY PUBLISHERS  
CHICAGO

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Editor: Cheryl Dunlop  
Cover design: Maralynn Rochat  
Cover image: iStockPhoto  
Interior design: Smartt Guys design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Corbett, Steve.

When helping hurts : how to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor-- and yourself / Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8024-5705-9

1. Church work with the poor. 2. Poverty--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Fikkert, Brian. II. Title.

BV639.P6C67 2009

261.8'325--dc22

2009009076

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1 3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

*Printed in the United States of America*

# Contents

Foreword	11
Preface	13
Opening Exercise	19
Introduction	21
<b>PART 1: Foundational Concepts for Helping Without Hurting</b>	
1. Why Did Jesus Come to Earth?	31
2. What's the Problem?	51
3. Are We There Yet?	75
<b>PART 2: General Principles for Helping Without Hurting</b>	
4. Not All Poverty Is Created Equal	103
5. Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, and Their Assets	125
6. McDevelopment: Over 2.5 Billion People NOT Served	141
<b>PART 3: Practical Strategies for Helping Without Hurting</b>	
7. Doing Short-Term Missions Without Doing Long-Term Harm	161
8. Yes, in Your Backyard	183
9. And to the Ends of the Earth	201
Concluding Remarks	219
Notes	221
Acknowledgments	229

# McDevelopment: Over 2.5 Billion People **NOT** Served

**Wanting** to assist a village in Colombia with its rice production, a nonprofit organization gathered the villagers into a cooperative and bought them a thresher, a motorized huller, a generator, and a tractor. Rice production boomed, and the cooperative sold the rice at the highest price the farmers had ever received. The project appeared to be a tremendous success. The nonprofit organization then left the village, but several years later one of its staff members returned to find that the cooperative had completely disbanded and that all of the equipment was broken down and rusting away in the fields. In fact, some of the equipment had never been used at all. Yet, as the staff member walked through the village, the people pleaded with him, “If [your organization] would just come help us again, we could do so much!”<sup>1</sup>

The sad truth is that this story is extremely common. All around the world one can find donated equipment that is rusting away, latrines that have never been used, community associations that have disbanded, and projects that disintegrated soon after the nonprofit organization left town. Despite an estimated \$2.3 trillion in foreign aid dispensed from Western

nations during the post-World War II era,<sup>2</sup> more than 2.5 billion people, approximately 40 percent of the world's population, still live on less than two dollars per day.<sup>3</sup> And the story in many North American communities is similar, with one initiative after another failing to meet its intended objectives. Indeed, forty-five years after President Johnson launched the War on Poverty, the poverty rate in America stubbornly hovers around 12 percent, decade after decade, year after year.

Yes, there has been progress in the global fight against poverty, but the “bang for the buck” has been appallingly low. There are a lot of machines rusting away in fields. Why?

## LEARNING PROCESS VERSUS BLUEPRINT APPROACHES

This book has already explained a number of reasons for the slow progress in poverty alleviation, but another reason needs to be highlighted: *inadequate participation of poor people in the process*. Researchers and practitioners have found that meaningful inclusion of poor people in the selection, design, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention increases the likelihood of that intervention's success. Unfortunately, the majority of post-World War II approaches to poverty alleviation have been highly nonparticipatory, using a “blueprint approach” in which the economically non-poor make all the decisions about the project and then do the project *to* the economically poor. The ultimate goal of the blueprint approach is often to develop a standardized product and then to roll out that product in cookie-cutter fashion on a massive scale. It's “McDevelopment,” the fast-food-franchise approach to poverty alleviation, and it has resulted in more than 2.5 billion poor people not being well served.

Although the blueprint approach *appears* to be very efficient, it often fails because it imposes solutions on poor communities that are inconsistent with local culture, that are not embraced and “owned” by the community members, or that cannot work in that particular setting. The

fact that the equipment worked well in Kansas simply does not mean it will work well in the cultural, economic, and institutional context of sub-Saharan Africa. “We’re not in Kansas anymore!”

For example, the staff worker of a nonprofit organization working in a Latin American country describes how the nonparticipatory approach of a short-term mission team resulted in a house being built that may soon go unused:

One team came here to build the house of a low-income pastor of a local church. In the design of the house, the team put the bathroom in the middle of the house, which runs counter to local culture in which bathrooms are located in the back of the house. The pastor had not seen the plans of the house in advance. When he discovered this mistake while the team was building the house, he objected to the team leaders to no avail. The short-term team felt happy that they gave the pastor a much needed house, but the pastor is ashamed of his house and is not sure he wants to live in it.<sup>4</sup>

And the cultural barriers are there on our own soil in places we might not even anticipate. Consider the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) program that attempted to provide housing loans for poor people in the rural southern United States. The FmHA specified that every house in the program would be standardized, having carpets on the floors and small kitchens that included washing machines. Research on the program’s efficacy found the following:

[The FmHa’s] specifications for how houses may be built . . . actually defy community wisdom and experience. Many applicants [for housing loans] consider it unsanitary to cook and wash laundry in the same room. They know that overflowing, secondhand washing machines are best located in a storage or utility room outside the house. They know that there are other advantages to putting the washers outside. You can take off your work clothes before you go into the house, and your clean laundry is closer to the clothesline. People who live on dirt roads, who work the land, or who are employed in poultry processing

plants or in lint-filled mills often prefer vinyl floors that can be swept. But they can't have them [in this program].<sup>5</sup>

Because of these types of pitfalls, many practitioners have abandoned the blueprint model in favor of a “learning process” approach to development, an approach that seeks to facilitate an action–reflection cycle in which poor people participate in all aspects of the project: proposing the best course of action, implementing the chosen strategy, evaluating how well things are working, and determining the appropriate modifications. The role of the outsider in this approach is not to do something *to* or *for* the economically poor individual or community but to seek solutions together *with* them.

A learning process approach increases the likelihood that the project will work well, for two main reasons. First, like all human beings, poor people are more likely to have a sense of enthusiasm for and ownership of a project if they have been *full* participants in it from the very beginning. When the project is “theirs,” they are more likely to sacrifice to make it work well and to sustain it over the long haul. Second, poor individuals and communities are highly complex and not well understood by the materially non-poor. Hence, the knowledge and skills of the insiders—the materially poor themselves—are vital to getting things done and to making things work well. People living in North American ghettos, in Appalachia, in slums in Mexico City, and in rural India really do know a lot of things about those contexts that outsiders will never understand. It is simply foolish to ignore their insights.

Ironically, while a learning process approach typically takes more time to produce tangible results than a blueprint approach, the learning process approach is often more efficient in the long run because it is more likely to result in workable and sustainable interventions. Put another way, participation can reduce the likelihood of unused equipment rusting away in the fields.

### ***Not Just a Means but an End***

While it is good when the equipment is used and the rice output increases, viewing participation solely as a means of achieving those ends misses the fundamental reason that participation is so vital to poverty alleviation:

**Participation is not just the means to an end but rather  
a legitimate end in its own right.**

Why? It all goes back to the definition of poverty alleviation. Remember, the goal is to restore people to experiencing humanness in the way that God intended. The crucial thing is to help people to understand their identity as image bearers, to love their neighbors as themselves, to be stewards over God's creation, and to bring glory to God in all things. One of the many manifestations of such holistic reconciliation is that people exercise dominion over their individual lives and communities, constantly seeking better ways to use their gifts and resources to solve problems and to create bounty in service to God and others. Thus, the goal is not just that the equipment gets used and that rice output goes up, but rather that poor people are empowered to make decisions about the best way to farm, to act upon their decisions, to evaluate the results of their decisions, and then to start the decision-making process all over again. Hence, participation in its fullest sense is not just a means to an end but the most important end!

It is impossible to accomplish such reconciliation of relationships in a blueprint approach in which the outsiders are the ones deciding what to do, how to do it, and how well it worked. Such an approach undermines the action-reflection cycle for poor people, denying them the opportunity to be what God created them to be: image bearers who, through trial and error, unpack and unfold the wonders of God's creation.

Furthermore, the blueprint approach implicitly communicates, "I, the outsider, am superior; you are inferior; I am here to fix you." A participatory approach, in contrast, asks the poor at each step in the process,



“What do you think?” and then really values the answers that are given. The very fact that the question is being asked is a powerful statement that says, “I believe you have value, knowledge, and insights. You know things about your situation that I do not know. Please share some of your insights with me. Let us learn together.”

We saw an excellent example of a ministry using a learning process approach—both as a means and an end—in developing an entire community. Recall from chapter 3 that Mark Gornik and Allan and Susan Tibbels moved into inner-city Baltimore and then worked *with* the community residents using a participatory process that took four years to produce a single house. This participatory process created the energy and ownership that eventually led to the rehabilitation of hundreds of homes in the subsequent years, but these homes were the by-product of the central goal: *getting community members to participate more fully in all that it means to be human.*

A learning process can also be used when ministering to individuals one-on-one. For example, the director of a home and ministry for single mothers in Knoxville, Tennessee, describes his ministry’s approach as follows:

Instead of having a one-size-fits-all blueprint for each family, [our ministry] tries to journey alongside a single mother and her children, believing that the family’s unique strengths, history, and future goals need to be understood and appreciated. The mother meets weekly with a Family Advocate, who helps her begin to explore the areas of her family’s life that are in need of restoration. While the Family Advocate facilitates the process, each single mother participates in the process by working to envision the family’s future and setting goals and initiating the action steps necessary to achieve them. The Family Advocate is then able to help hold the mother accountable, as well as contribute to the family’s long-term plan through resource development.<sup>6</sup>

The single mothers in this program desire to someday purchase their own homes and to be self-sufficient, but the very fact that these mothers

are dreaming, planning, and striving toward that end is a major success in its own right.

### ***A Cautionary Word***

A word of caution is in order. Secular arguments for participation often rest on two faulty assumptions. First, given the postmodern belief that truth is relative, some argue that poor people must participate in the process because they need to construct their own reality. Who are we outsiders to impose our ideas on poor people? they say. Second, a humanist faith in the inherent goodness of human beings leads some to believe that participation, like democracy, will necessarily produce positive results. Both of these assumptions are wrong from a biblical perspective. The Bible clearly teaches that there is absolute truth and that—to the extent that we know it—we are to speak such truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Moreover, all of us, including poor people, are sinful; participation does not have the capacity to overcome the basic corruption in the human condition. Individuals and groups make bad decisions all the time!

However, a participatory approach is consistent with a biblical perspective concerning poverty and its alleviation. The scriptural truths that all of us are broken and that all of us retain the image of God are affirmed by a process that solicits and values the positive contributions of everyone, both insiders and outsiders. Furthermore, the fact that participatory approaches enable the materially poor to “teach” the materially non-poor helps to overcome the inferior-superior dynamic that typically characterizes the interactions between them. As a result, the dignity of the materially poor is affirmed, and the god-complexes of the materially non-poor are dispelled.

### ***Types of Participation***

Table 6.1 summarizes a continuum of different levels of participation that are observed in practice. Reading the table from top to bottom, the approaches move from doing things *to* poor people, a blueprint approach,

## A Participatory Continuum

Mode of Participation	Type of Involvement of Local People	Relationship of Outsiders to Local People
<b>Coercion</b>	Local people submit to predetermined plans developed by outsiders.	DOING TO
<b>Compliance</b>	Local people are assigned to tasks, often with incentives, by outsiders; the outsiders decide the agenda and direct the process.	DOING FOR
<b>Consultation</b>	Local people's opinions are asked; local people analyze and decide on a course of action.	DOING FOR
<b>Cooperation</b>	Local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities; responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process.	DOING WITH
<b>Co-Learning</b>	Local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create appropriate goals and plans, to execute those plans, and to evaluate the results.	DOING WITH
<b>Community Initiated</b>	Local people set their own agenda and mobilize to carry it out without outside initiators and facilitators.	RESPONDING TO

TABLE 6.1

Adapted from B. de Negri, E. Thomas, A. Ilinigumugabo, I. Muvandi, and G. Lewis, *Empowering Communities: Participatory Techniques for Community-Based Programme Development. Volume 1(2): Trainer's Manual (Participant's Handbook)* (Nairobi, Kenya: Centre for African Family Studies, 1998), 4.

toward doing things *with* poor people, a learning process approach. When the poor have been completely empowered, they are in the “community initiated” category in which the projects are being directed by the poor themselves, and they determine the role of any outsiders in their initiatives. Unfortunately, the top-down, blueprint methods that are typically used in poverty alleviation make the community-initiated mode of participation a rarity, but both the existing literature and our own experiences demonstrate that achieving this mode is not impossible.<sup>7</sup>

There is not a “one-size-fits-all” level of participation that is best for all churches, missionaries, and ministries in all settings. The appropriate nature and degree of participation depends on a host of contextual factors, including the mission of the organization, the type of intervention being considered, and the capacity and culture of the poor people involved. It takes wisdom to discern the best type and level of participation in each setting. That having been said, outsiders should normally seek to foster the “cooperation” or, better yet, “co-learning” modes of participation in hopes of achieving the “community initiated” level, the point at which the outsiders are no longer the key players.

Christians rightly understand that the church is the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and that unbelievers are people who “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18). By the grace of God alone, we really do have knowledge that unbelievers do not have. Unfortunately, this reality can create not just an unwarranted sense of pride in spiritual matters but also a sense of condescension toward unbelievers in all matters. We are often “know-it-alls” in situations in which we really do not know more. Naturally, it would be ludicrous to let an unbeliever determine the best way to administer the sacraments just because we want to use participatory methods! We really do know more about the right way to do this than they do. At the same time, it would be equally ludicrous to assume that we know more than an unbeliever in Thailand about the best way to plant rice in his country. As image bearers, unbelievers often have a lot of good ideas. To deny this is an affront to the One

whose image they bear. And many times, those we seek to help are fellow believers who have important spiritual insights to teach us.

Seek the highest level of participation possible in each situation.

## GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

In many poor communities, there is considerable diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, age, religion, and socioeconomic status. Hence, it is important to make sure that each group has meaningful participation both because each group may bring a unique perspective and because participation is an important goal in its own right. In particular, it is vital to give a “voice to the voiceless” by looking for ways to make it safe for those on the margins to express their views throughout the process.

As mentioned in chapter 5, one of the central methods that can be used to engage a community is Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), a mind-set and associated set of tools that enable an outsider to facilitate a learning process in poor communities. PLA engages people, creating a safe and fun way for them to share their knowledge and to construct their own solutions to the problems they are facing.

The importance of engaging a diversity of perspectives in PLA is illustrated in figure 6.1, which shows the result of a PLA exercise conducted in a rural Paraguayan village. Men and women from the *same* village were separately asked to draw maps of that village and to note on the maps the frequency with which they visited each spot. Clearly, the men and women had quite different perceptions of their community! It appears that “men are from Mars and women are from Venus” in Paraguay too. A failure to include multiple voices in the PLA process would have caused everyone involved to have a distorted view of how the community as a whole viewed itself.

## DONOR ALERT!

It has become commonplace in charitable giving to ask: What is the most highly leveraged way to invest money in order to have the greatest

## Community Maps of a Village in Paraguay

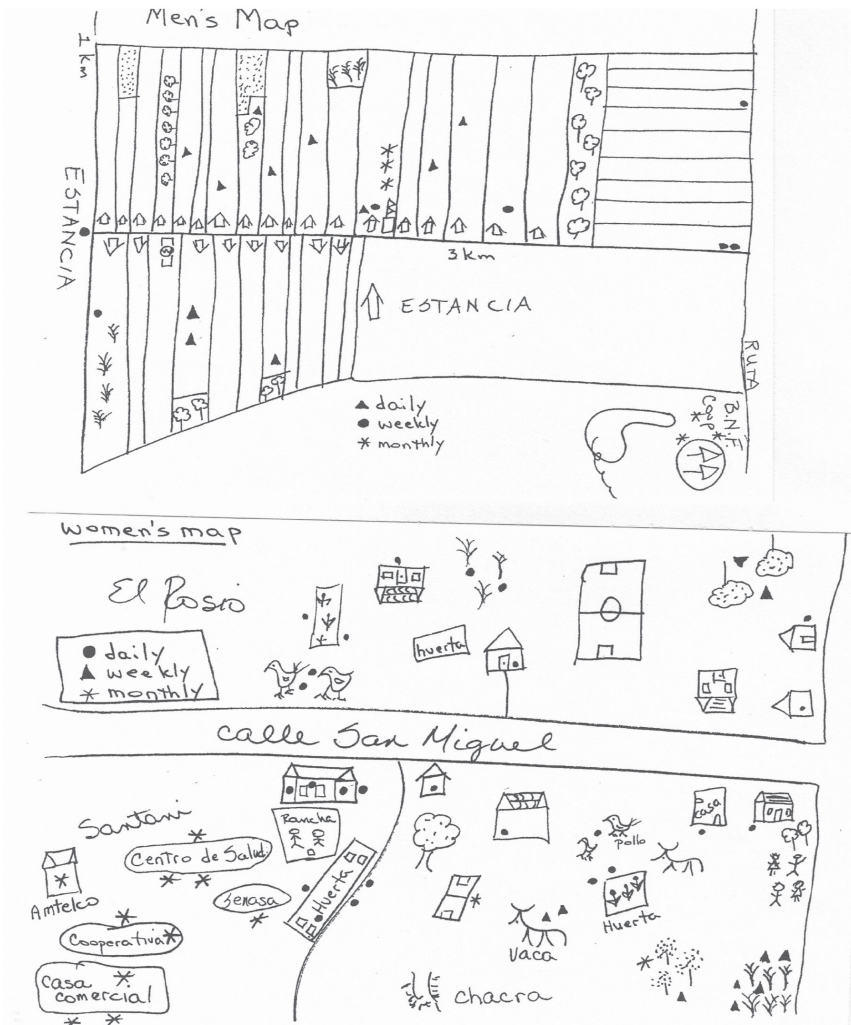


FIGURE 6.1

Peace Corps, *Gender and Development Training: Booklet 5* (Washington, D.C.: Peace Corps Information and Collection Exchange, 1998), 14-15.

impact for the kingdom? The question is legitimate, and it often reflects a godly desire to steward the Lord's resources faithfully. However, donors need to remember that reconciling people's relationships with God,

self, others, and the rest of creation is simply not the same as producing and selling widgets. Deep and lasting change takes time. In fact, fully engaging the poor in a participatory process takes lots of time. But if donors do not want the equipment to rust in the fields, they are going to have to accept a slower process, a process in which the poor are empowered to decide whether or not they even want the equipment in the first place. It might help donors if they remembered that creating decision-making capacity on the part of the poor is a return—arguably the chief return—on their investment.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

**Please write responses to the following:**

Review your answer to the question in the “Initial Thoughts” at the start of this chapter.

- (a.) Whom did you ask for advice?
- (b.) Whom did you not ask for advice?
- (c.) What, if anything, does this reveal about your views of the poor and of yourself?

#### **Extended Exercise: Indonesia Reconsidered**

In the “Opening Exercise” at the start of this book, you were asked to design a project for your church to help with the restarting of small businesses in the city of Meulaboh, Indonesia, four months after the 2004 tsunami. We have covered a lot of ground since then, and it is now time for you to examine the plan you wrote. Please discuss the following questions with the group of people with whom you originally designed the project for Indonesia. If you are reading this book individually, then consider these questions on your own.

1. What implicit assumptions about the nature of poverty and its alleviation are reflected in your plan?

2. In chapter 2 we discussed an equation that captures a common dynamic that is often present when the materially non-poor interact with the materially poor:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Material} & & \text{God-complexes} & & \text{Feelings of} & & \text{Harm to Both} \\ \text{Definition} & + & \text{of Materially} & + & \text{Inferiority of} & = & \text{Materially Poor} \\ \text{of Poverty} & & \text{Non-Poor} & & \text{Materially Poor} & & \text{and Non-Poor} \end{array}$$

- (a) Were you aware that the materially poor often have feelings of shame and inferiority when you designed your project?
- (b) If not, how might such an awareness have modified your plans?
- (c) Do you see any evidence of a god-complex in the way you designed your project?
3. In chapter 4 we discussed some of the implications of a relational understanding of poverty and its alleviation. How might this framework alter the approach that you took? Specifically:
- (a) Did you focus on “people and processes” or just on “projects and products”?
- (b) Did you address the brokenness in both individuals and systems?
4. Review the distinction between relief, rehabilitation, and development and consider the following:
- (a) Did the design of your trip reflect an accurate assessment as to which of these three approaches was appropriate for the context?
- (b) Did you provide relief in the context in which rehabilitation or development was the appropriate intervention?
- (c) How might a more accurate assessment of the appropriate intervention alter the plans that you made?
- (d) How could you have approached your project from a more “developmental” perspective? (Review the material from chapter 4, “Doing Relief and Rehabilitation, Developmentally.”)



- (e) Were you at all paternalistic in your approach to this project?
5. Did you use an asset-based or a needs-based approach to this project? In particular, consider how well your project exhibited the four key elements of an asset-based approach:
- (a) Did you identify and mobilize the capabilities, skills, and resources of the people in the city of Meulaboh?
- (b) As much as possible, did you look for resources and solutions to come from within Meulaboh and not from the outside?
- (c) Did you seek to build and rebuild the relationships among local individuals, associations, churches, businesses, schools, government, etc.?
- (d) Did you only bring in outside resources when local resources were insufficient to solve pressing needs?
6. Consider the extent to which you used a participatory approach to your project:
- (a) With whom did you plan to speak in determining whether or not to do this project?
- (b) Does the design of your project reflect doing things *to*, *for*, or *with* the people of Meulaboh?
- (c) Where would your approach fall in the categories of participation described in table 6.1?
- (d) How could you have selected, designed, executed, and evaluated your project in a more participatory manner?
7. Stop and reflect on your answers to the previous six questions:
- (a) What have you learned about yourself?
- (b) Are there any changes you would like to ask God to make in you?

- (c) What have you learned about your church’s approach to ministry?
- (d) Are there any changes you would like to ask God to make in your church or ministry?
- (e) What specific things would you like to do to pursue any of the changes that you desire in yourself, your church, or your ministry?

The following section describes what really happened when the Chalmers Center for Economic Development, the research and training center for which Steve and I work, was asked to help with the tsunami recovery in Indonesia. Please read this section and then answer the questions at the end.

### THE REST OF THE STORY

Four months after the tsunami hit, a Christian relief and development organization working in Indonesia asked the Chalmers Center for help in designing a small-business recovery program. We sent two young staff members to the region and provided technical backup support to them from our home office in the United States. We share this story not to show you how smart we are—our failures outnumber our successes!—but because we believe the story illustrates many of the principles presented in this book. At various points in what follows, we have included references to the relevant questions and principles in the learning task you just completed. For example, “4a” at the end of a sentence means that this sentence illustrates the principle discussed in question 4 point *a* in the extended exercise above.

In considering whether or not to accept this request to work in Indonesia, we were greatly influenced by the fact that a well-respected relief and development organization on the ground was requesting our help. This organization had an outstanding track record of soliciting input from the local people, so we knew from the outset that our presence was in response to the wishes of the community and not something we were forcing on them (6a-b). While such a participatory approach is always important, it was particularly crucial in this case because this militant

Muslim region was notorious for its hostility to outsiders in general and to Christians in particular.

The region had been devastated, but the downward spiral had stopped for the most part. Hence, rehabilitation and development, not relief, were the appropriate next steps (4a). In an attempt to identify the relevant local assets and the most significant obstacles (5a), our staff interviewed and consulted with the local leaders of ten small-business associations, individual business owners, and the mayor (6), discovering the following:

- They had a strong history of people using their own savings for business capital.
- In contrast to most settings in the Majority World, a remarkable bank had a history of providing savings and loan services to very poor people and it was well-trusted. Unfortunately, the bank's offices had been severely damaged, and it was low on loan capital.
- Businesses in the region were organized into strong guilds organized by the type of business: a baker's guild, a carpenter's guild, a rickshaw guild, etc.
- The mayor had an attitude of wanting to work with these guilds and with the Christian relief and development organization.
- There was a strong sense of community spirit exhibited in Gotong Royong, a practice of coming together as a group to solve problems, not unlike an Amish barn raising.
- Local labor was in abundance, as many had lost their livelihoods.
- Local construction firms existed but had been damaged by the tsunami.
- A lack of capital was identified as the primary obstacle to restarting the small businesses.

The obvious solution in such a situation would be to bring in construction crews to rebuild the businesses' shops and to set up a microenterprise development program to lend money to these businesses. Right? Wrong.

This approach might undermine the local construction firms, the culture of savings, the remarkable bank, local knowledge and authority, and community spirit (2, 3a, 4e, 5). While the level of devastation did require outside resources to restore the city and these businesses to their pre-tsunami conditions, the trick was to introduce such resources without undermining the assets that had been identified (5d) and the stewardship abilities of the Indonesian people (4e, 6b). In particular, how could business capital be introduced quickly without undermining the culture of savings and the local bank?

Toward that end, it was decided that Phase I of the program would involve giving minigrants of capital to small-business owners to enable them to restart their businesses. However, receiving such grants was conditional upon the business owners' presenting evidence of having had a small business before the tsunami, of opening a savings account with the local bank, and of participating in a Gotong Royong to clean up buildings and streets, including the office of the local bank (5a-c). The evidence presented was reviewed by a committee of leaders from the guilds and local government (4e, 6). By design, the first grants were given to the local construction firms so that they—not outsiders—could rebuild the devastated buildings and homes, thereby reestablishing their construction businesses (4e, 5c).

Phase I also included a short series of small-business training sessions for the low-income entrepreneurs. These lessons included important technical material and related biblical principles. Thus, Muslim small-business owners received an exposure to the Scriptures in a practical way (3b). As discussed in chapter 3, poverty-alleviation efforts often need to address both broken systems and individuals, including a clear articulation of the gospel and a biblical worldview.

Phase II began eight weeks after Phase I and consisted primarily of a matched savings program to provide additional business capital while encouraging local savings and the reestablishment of the bank (5). Recipients of the minigrants in Phase I again had to present evidence of a

consistent pattern of savings over the eight weeks to the local review committee (6). Each individual's savings were then matched with outside funds at a two-to-one ratio, with the matching funds being placed into their savings accounts at the bank (5c). Another series of small-business training classes incorporating a Christian worldview was offered (3b).

As with any program there were ups and downs, but the overall success was significant. Hundreds of businesses received assistance, local institutions were strengthened, and the midterm project evaluations indicated improvements in people's relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation (3). Moreover, the highly participatory approach enabled the Christian relief and development organization to establish a great deal of trust with the normally suspicious Indonesians, resulting in the organization being able to expand the small-business recovery program to other parts of Indonesia. Even a major, secular, international humanitarian organization was impressed with the results and invited the Christian organization to submit a grant proposal for funding to scale up the program.

The principles outlined in this book are not a magic formula for success. But they are powerful, and they have been used by God in even extremely difficult settings that are quite hostile to the gospel.

8. Now that you know "The Rest of the Story," consider again the way that you designed your church's project for Indonesia at the start of the book:

- (a) What is good about the way that you designed your project?
- (b) What damage might your project have done?
- (c) How might your approach have strengthened or weakened the four key relationships?

9. List any specific action steps you will take to improve your church's current poverty-alleviation efforts.