



## Not So Far Afield

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### Actions that Empower

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In the face of great social ills, we often hear the admonition that we ♦ *should not just sit there, but do something!* ♦ Certainly, this admonition could be invoked as we stand present to some of the stark facts of hunger and poverty in our world today:

More than 800 million people go to bed hungry every day...300 million are children.

- Of these 300 million children, only eight percent are victims of famine or other emergency situations. More than 90 percent are suffering long-term malnourishment and micronutrient deficiency.
- Every 3.6 seconds another person dies of starvation and the large majority are children under the age of 5.

But many people think that ♦ *just doing something* ♦ can often be detrimental. Some actions and aid that are taken actually worsen the plight of those who hunger and suffer from abject poverty. USAID supplies basic grains to Nicaragua, which is sold at a very low price. However, Nicaraguan farmers cannot compete with these prices with the result that many of them are losing their small farms and being reduced to subsistence farming. And in 2001 Mali received \$37 million in aid but lost \$43 million as a result of lower export earnings from cotton. American cotton farmers receive three times more in subsidies than the entire US Agency for International Development budget for Africa ♦s 500 million people. What is then demanded of those who desire to help others who are struggling with hunger and poverty is not just ♦ *doing something* ♦ but engaging in ♦ *actions that empower*. ♦ As good liberation theologians have helped us to understand, we must be about nothing less than ♦ *enabling people to be the subjects of their own lives rather than the objects of our charity*. ♦

**Aid Can Do More Harm Than Good:** In a 2005 interview with German news source Der Spiegel (<http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/>) entitled ♦ *For God ♦s Sake, Please Stop the Aid* ♦ Kenyan economics expert James Shikwati says that ♦ *aid to Africa does more harm than good*. ♦ ♦ *Huge bureaucracies are financed with the aid money, corruption and complacency are promoted, Africans are taught to be beggars and not be independent. In addition, development aid weakens the local markets everywhere and dampens the spirit of entrepreneurship that we so desperately need. As absurd as it may sound, development aid is one of the reasons for Africa ♦s problems*. ♦ Certainly international aid is needed; certainly people in countries where poverty and hunger are chronic problems must be helped. But not just any kind of help will do.

According to an article from *Education for Justice*, <http://educationforjustice.org/>, Uganda ♦s textile sector used to employ 500,000 people and earn \$100 million in annual exports, but has been severely undermined by imports of second-hand clothing ♦ most of it from leading charities in the US and Europe. In Zimbabwe, some 20,000 textile and clothing jobs have disappeared directly or indirectly due to imported used clothing from the West. Similar losses have happened in South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and Ghana. The article goes on to say, ♦ *hardly a nation in Africa has escaped the impact of the imported used clothing*. ♦ All too often we want to help, to do something for those in need ♦ so we write a check, or bring medicines and supplies into other countries, or give people things we no longer need or want. Without losing



our compassion and generosity, we need to ask if the particular actions we are making to help is doing more harm than good.

**Enabling People To Become Subjects Of Their Own Lives:** It is important for us to think seriously about the aid we offer to others. Giving and doing for others is a very serious endeavor and we cannot easily presume that we know what others need. Many think that the criterion for giving should always be *is this action or this aid going to empower others?* or *with this aid, am I going to create dependency?* When we talk about *empowerment* we are talking about helping another to become the subject of their life; to be able to have some degree of self-sufficiency. As one definition states: *Empowerment is about leadership, not just helping; it's a long process that seeks permanent change. To empower people is to help them become independent of our charity; to become self-reliant so that they can sustain their own development without our help.*

The Hunger Project (<http://www.thp.org/>) puts it well when they explain that *Chronic hunger occurs when people lack the opportunity to earn money, be educated, learn skills to meet basic needs, and have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.* It follows that to do something significant about hunger, our actions need to affect the systems that are creating chronic hunger, whether it be the economic system or the educational system or the political system.

Two particular actions that can be seen as actions of empowerment are the selling and buying of Fair Trade goods and investment in Microlending financial institutions.

Fair Trade dealers must abide by a number of principles which recognizes the dignity of the producer and gives to the producer a comparative advantage, along with the dealer:

- Producers receive a fair price - a living wage.
- For commodities, farmers receive a stable price, at least a minimum set in advance.
- Forced labor and exploitative child labor are not allowed
- Buyers and producers trade under direct long-term relationships
- Producers have access to financial and technical assistance
- Sustainable production techniques are encouraged
- Working conditions are healthy and safe
- Equal employment opportunities are provided for all
- All aspects of trade and production are open to public accountability

Many craft producers, as well as some coffee producers, clothing producers, etc., are working closely with Fair Trade dealers. Testimonies are very reassuring that such a system of fair trade is empowering many people who are trying to escape the confines of poverty. A good example of such a program is the *Work of Human Hands* sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, [http://www.crsfairtrade.org/work\\_of\\_human\\_hands/index.htm](http://www.crsfairtrade.org/work_of_human_hands/index.htm).

Another action of empowerment is social investing, especially the investing in microlending or microcredit institutions. Microcredit refers to making small loans available to the poor through schemes especially designed to meet the poor's particular needs and circumstances. Numerous schemes, in developing countries in particular, have now shown that microcredit can make a significant contribution to tackling poverty. There are many microlending institutions one might invest in; two that have been found very noteworthy are: The NICA Fund of Nicaragua, <http://www.wccnica.org/nica.html> and Fonkoze of Haiti, <http://www.fonkoze.org/>.

**Conclusion:** Actions that empower are sometimes characterized as teaching a person to fish rather than simply giving him/her a fish to eat. However, to carry the analogy a bit farther, not only does a person have to know how to fish in order to be the subject of their own lives, he/she also has to have access to the pond, which needs to be kept clean and fresh, and be able to purchase good fishing equipment, etc., etc.

Yes, it is extremely important that we think through the actions we take to help others, and it is also important that we engage in advocacy on issues that affect the poor, especially those issues dealing with hunger. One of the great benefits of being American citizens in a strong democracy is that we have the opportunity to influence public policy. Organizations like Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/>, provide us with both education and action steps on legislation dealing with hunger and poverty, both nationally and globally. If we really want to help others, we must take **Actions That Empower**.