

Joining God's Work

Discuss these questions before beginning this week's unit.

- Imagine that your church or ministry wants to help an individual poor person or a poor community. Who would you ask for advice? Write down a list of the people you might consult to design your approach.
- Was there ever a time when someone recognized a gift or ability in you that you did not even realize you possessed? How did that experience affect you?

More Than Meets the Eye

You have realized that unlike the Indonesian community devastated by the tsunami, the materially poor local community you saw on the nightly news requires development, not relief. But what do you do next? It seems like the next step would be to determine the needs of the individual or community, thus identifying the best way to help. In fact, many ministries do begin this way, using an interview or a survey to determine what is wrong and the best way to provide assistance. This needs-based approach has merit. After all, diagnosing the underlying problems is essential to forming the proper solutions, though other angles need to be considered as we begin the process of helping without hurting. How we engage in poverty alleviation is just as important as what we do.

WATCH VIDEO SESSION 4

www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-4 or Rightnow Media session 4

Look back at your answer to the first preliminary question in this lesson. Who did you ask for advice? Who did you not ask for advice? What, if anything, does this reveal about your views of the materially poor and of yourself?

In light of the quote below, reflect on the materially poor people in your life. What God-given gifts do you see in them? Do you think that these people are aware of their gifts?

"One of the things that we have to come to believe is that everyone has something to contribute in the life of the community, that no one is so poor that they have nothing to bring to the exchange." —Robert Lupton

Consider the quote and definitions below:

"God has given everybody inherent dignity and worth and value, and when you set up a situation where you forget that, where you feel like you are just a little bit better than [the materially poor] ... you are set up [for] failure. You get the nice, polite nods, but you don't get transformation." —Jerilyn Sanders

NEEDS-BASED DEVELOPMENT: A development approach that focuses on the deficits and shortcomings in the life of a person or community

ASSET-BASED DEVELOPMENT: A development approach that focuses on identifying, mobilizing, and connecting the God-given capabilities, skills, and resources of a person or community

- Take a moment to assess how you interact with the materially poor. Do you think that your actions, words, and attitude communicate to these people that they have valuable gifts and assets as image-bearers? In what ways?
- Are there any ways you can move toward an even more asset-based attitude and perspective?

Our basic predisposition should be to see the poor communities around us— including their natural resources, people, families, neighborhood associations, schools, businesses, governments, culture, and so on—as being created by Jesus Christ and reflective of His goodness. Of course, the fall has distorted the inherent goodness of the creation design, damaging these assets. But all is not lost. As Colossians 1 shows us, Christ is holding all things together. He does not allow the effects of sin to completely destroy the inherent goodness of the assets that He created. In the midst of the decay, the assets persist— albeit in distorted fashion— because the Creator of the universe makes them persist. There is plenty of goodness to discover and to celebrate, even in a fallen world! But Christ is not just sustaining all things. He is also reconciling all things. One day all of the assets will be liberated from their “bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). Jesus Christ created, sustains, and is redeeming assets in poor communities. As the body of Christ, the church should seek to do the same.

Asset-based, participatory development is not a recipe for automatic success in poverty alleviation. Nothing is. But because it begins by affirming the goodness of God’s created order and the power of His redemptive work, it unleashes empowering dynamics that are crucial for fostering reconciliation —poverty alleviation—both in the materially poor and in ourselves.

Going Deeper

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!”

1. Do you see asset-based, participatory development techniques at work in this story? How or how not?
2. How might an asset-based, participatory approach change the outcome in the above story? Why?