

# 10 reasons why your good intentions to fight poverty backfire

Good intentions. Bad results.

Good intentions to alleviate poverty are not good enough. Sometimes our helping hurts the “helped”.

I hesitate to write these words, because I know how easily an article like this can be misconstrued, and even used to justify the opposite of generosity.

“What’s the point of giving then?” you might be tempted to ask. “It’s all too complex! The risk is too great!”

Let me say right up front, please don’t use this list as an excuse to give up engagement with the poor or to be stingy with your stash.

In that case, the risk will be to your own soul. As Jesus said rather descriptively, “It is easier to push a large humped animal snorting and spitting through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.”

I have spent most of my adult life living and working in slums and inner cities, grappling with issues of poverty. And I’m convinced something needs to change. We don’t need less engagement between rich and poor, we need more. But not just ANY kind of engagement. We need the right sort of engagement. We need wise giving. I know that’s what you want too.

Honestly, a lot of damage has been done in poor communities by those who blunder in with big hearts and open wallets.

Don’t be like that.

Instead, check out these “Top 10 Dangers” of giving unwisely, as well as some key questions and concepts to help you move towards a more promising approach...

## **Danger #1. CREATING DEPENDENCY**

The most common mistake people make is not being able to differentiate between a True Emergency – a life and death situation that requires immediate outside assistance - and a Situation of Need, where local people can be helped towards a local solution.

Our approach to these two different situations should be completely different, but instead we get them mixed up all the time.

A True Emergency is something like a freak natural disaster or calamity of some sort that requires swift action because people are left momentarily helpless. The problem is that we do-gooders tend to see everything as a True Emergency and every poor person as "momentarily helpless."

As a result, people learn that the solutions to their problems are most easily found outside their own community. So, the outside assistance that is supposed to strengthen them, ironically ends up weakening the very ones we intended to help.

**Ask Yourself:** Honestly, is this an emergency or a situation of need?

**Consider Instead:** In Situations of Need, find ways to supplement and support local solutions, rather than meeting the entire need yourself. Consider that a small gift might be more appropriate than a large gift.

## **Danger #2. UNDERMINING SELF-ESTEEM**

Something happens to communities that are constantly on the receiving end of outside assistance. They come to believe that they have nothing to offer. They internalize the “beneficiary” or “victim” label that has been stuck on them by well-meaning outsiders. And that is devastating to their sense of self.

It’s also not the truth, because those economically poor communities are ridiculously rich in many other ways. They have a great deal to bring to the table. So don’t be blind. Allow God to open your eyes, and the eyes of local people, to see clearly the many resources they already have.

**Ask Yourself:** What local assets, skills, labour, wisdom, faith and resources can the local people contribute? Better yet, ask them.

**Consider Instead:** Include local people as equal partners (preferably the lead partners) in figuring out the solution in a situation of need.

## **Danger #3. STIFLING CREATIVITY**

When a community comes to believe that the solutions to their problems will come from outside donors, instead of from within, they have been robbed of the opportunity to find a creative solution themselves. Which sucks, because there are few things as beautiful, empowering and encouraging as a poor community coming together to solve a problem creatively.

**Ask Yourself:** When this Situation of Need arises again (as it likely will), what will happen? Who will solve it?

**Consider Instead:** Don’t be too quick to jump in with a solution, but hold back and wait to see what local solutions people come up with.

## **Danger #4. UNDERMINING LOCAL GIVING**

When gifts come from the outside that are relatively large, it makes the tiny pittance local people might have to offer seem insignificant. Local believers ask themselves, “Why should I give towards the church building? My offering is chickenfeed compared to what the foreigners bring.” So, they redirect their energy towards finding outside benefactors, instead of seeing their own contribution as important.

**Ask Yourself:** How will my gift be perceived by local givers?

**Consider Instead:** Rather than overwhelming local giving by giving a disproportionately large amount, why not match local giving “one for one” instead?

## **Danger #5. REDIRECTING ACCOUNTABILITY**

Outsiders who bring financial resources into a community quickly become the ones who call the shots, whether they like it or not. Accountability shifts away from local leaders and the people themselves, towards the donors. Reports are written, inspiring photos are taken, and accounts are given, not to the people of the community, but to the donors outside the community who are perceived as the key players.

**Ask Yourself:** Am I strengthening local participation in the project or undermining it?

**Consider Instead:** Agree in advance about where accountability will be directed, and whose contributions will be publicly recognized and how. Be sure to celebrate everyone who contributes, no matter how small.

## **Danger #6. CREATING UNINTENDED POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS**

When certain people in the community (often the ones who speak English) are aligned with outside donors, their power increases. They are perceived as someone with access to resources. This is why you sometimes see developing world pastors posting photos of themselves posing with foreign donors on their church walls (or Facebook newsfeeds).

**Ask Yourself:** What impact am I having on local power dynamics?

**Consider Instead:** Connect with the poor, the marginalized and the disabled.

## **Danger #7. SPURRING SUPERFICIAL CONVERSIONS**

When the church itself is seen as a bridge to foreign donors, it suddenly looks like a savvy investment to become a Christian. The unintended message to the wider community is that joining the church is a smart way to get goodies – jobs, cash and Christmas shoe-boxes. Some local people will participate for those reasons, or as long as the benefits last. Others will be suspicious of anyone who joins, because they may be seen as hirelings of the foreigners.

**Ask Yourself:** Are the benefits of the project open to all?

**Consider Instead:** Ensure that benefits from the project are offered freely to all people, not just believers.

## **Danger #8. UNDERMINING LOCAL MARKET SYSTEMS**

At times our generosity can screw up the livelihoods of hardworking local people. For example, offering free English lessons undermines the local teacher who is supporting his family by teaching English. Distributing free gifts, emergency supplies, toys and trinkets can undermine the local market stalls that usually sell these things and support local families.

**Ask Yourself:** What impact on local people's livelihoods will my giving have?

**Consider Instead:** Be sure to purchase supplies locally whenever possible rather than importing them, even if it is more expensive or troublesome.

## **Danger #9. FOSTERING SUSPICION TOWARDS LOCAL LEADERS**

When community leaders (eg. the pastor) are connected to outside donors there can be a perception that they are receiving financial support. Whether this is true or not it can foster mistrust, create conflict, and undermine support for that local leader.

**Ask Yourself:** Is your partnership with the whole community or dependent on one or two local contacts?

**Consider Instead:** Create a more intentional partnership with community or church leaders that clearly outlines the contributions of each partner, so that giving is transparent and understood by all.

## **Danger #10. TAKING AWAY LOCAL OWNERSHIP**

One of the saddest outcomes when we give unwisely, is that there is a big chance that our outside solutions will not be fully owned by local people. Local ownership is crucial for the ongoing success of the project.

**Ask Yourself:** Do the local people really own and want this solution?

**Consider Instead:** Allow them to come up with a plan and solution, and provide leadership to the project.

Hopefully, becoming more aware of these dangers will help you to avoid the pitfalls inherent in working with a poor community. Use the Questions as a springboard for thinking more deeply about the project and consider the alternatives offered above.

Here is a list of the questions again. What would you add?

1. Honestly, is this an emergency or a situation of need?
2. Ask yourself, what assets, skills, labour, wisdom, faith and resources can the local people contribute? Better yet, ask them.
3. When this Situation of Need arises again (as it likely will), what will happen? Who will solve it?
4. How will my gift be perceived by local givers?
5. Am I strengthening local participation in the project or undermining it?
6. What impact am I having on local power dynamics?
7. Are the benefits of the project open to all?
8. What impact on local people's livelihoods will my giving have?
9. Is my partnership with the whole community, or dependent on one or two local contacts?
10. Do the local people really own and want this solution?

If you'd like to explore these thoughts more deeply, I highly recommend reading [When Helping Hurts](#) or [We Are Not the Hero](#).

<http://www.craiggreenfield.com/blog/unwisegiving>