

5 Best Practices for Global Engagement

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A Parable

A typhoon had temporarily stranded a monkey on an island. In a secure, protected place, while waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed obvious to the monkey that the fish was struggling and in need of assistance. Being of kind heart, the monkey resolved to help the fish.

A tree precariously dangled over the very spot where the fish seemed to be struggling. At considerable risk to himself, the monkey moved far out on a limb, reached down and snatched the fish from the threatening waters. Immediately scurrying back to the safety of his shelter, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments the fish showed excitement, but soon settled into a peaceful rest. Joy and satisfaction swelled inside the monkey. He had successfully helped another creature.

(from *Cross-Cultural Servanthood* by Duane Elmer)

It's such a silly story, but doesn't it perfectly capture the way we far too often approach situations? We mean well but act foolishly. This is especially true in our global interactions. The world is littered with examples of well-meaning outsiders acting like that monkey. It takes more than good intentions; it takes wise action. It's time to turn a corner and discover what a better path looks like. What follows are five best practices to help us channel our good intentions for global engagement into wise actions.

1. Long-Term Rather Than Short-Term

On a recent trip to Kenya, I shared some Psalms with our team during our daily debrief. One thought led to another and, before we knew it, we began to see an eye-opening theme. Take a look.

- “I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you forever and ever.” (Psalm 45:17)
- “For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Psalm 100:5)
- “Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.” (Psalm 119:90)
- “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.” (Psalm 145:13)

As we considered these (and other) passages and rehearsed what we were experiencing in this rural, Kenyan village, we made an interesting observation: God seems to measure time not in minutes or months, but in generations. His involvement stretches from eternity past and continues into eternity future. He’s clearly a God of long-term involvement and impact; most American missions projects are not. They tend to be short-term and shortsighted. We want to have an immediate impact and quickly see measurable results so we lean toward relief rather than development. We tend to focus on projects in place of people and on results instead of relationships. It’s so easy, even with the best of intentions, to get caught up in short-term programs rather than long-term partnership.

Big-hearted people with great intentions, wanting to alleviate suffering, often suggest creative collections. We collect T-shirts, shoes, toothbrushes, Bibles, tools, school supplies, soccer balls, oven mitts and more! The desire to help is always genuine; the passion is always high. Years ago, our church actually followed through with some of those ideas and organized some of the collections. Our gifts were received with gratitude, and we were filled with a sense of accomplishment and feelings of generosity. But some of us began to wonder if these gifts were actually helpful and if they were they making any kind of long-term difference.

Around the same time, our partners in Kenya proposed another kind of project. This one didn’t involve shirts or shoes. It was all about sweaters. In order to go to school, Kenyan students need their own school uniform sweater. That need sparked the opportunity for a local business of a knitting facility that would produce those sweaters locally, right in Karogoto. The local Leadership Council developed the concept. It was their vision, but they needed some help. If we could provide start-up capital, then they could acquire the knitting machines and train local women to knit the sweaters, which would then be sold to families in Karogoto and beyond.

That's exactly what happened! The Blessed Hands knitting facility started small, but has steadily grown and developed. Today they have their own workspace and storefront where 100 women find employment, making not just sweaters, but dresses, hats and scarves as well.

Contrast the two projects. The differences go far beyond shirts verses sweaters. Rather, it's the difference between short-term versus long-term. The first projects provided one item (a shirt, a toothbrush, a backpack, etc.) to many of the residents in the community. That item seemed to meet an immediate need. But it was just one toothbrush. That gift is a short-term gift with a short-term impact. The school sweaters represented much more than that. Establishing a knitting facility took a long time - a really long time. Initial contributions to the knitting facility didn't provide immediate help to anyone. Kids didn't get sweaters on the first day or even in the first year. The business wasn't profitable right from the start. All we had to show for our early contributions were a few knitting machines that only a few Karogoto residents even knew how to use. The project didn't have an immediate impact, but it certainly had a long-term one. Years later, Blessed Hands provides employment, clothing, and commerce for the entire community! The difference is significant. The first kind of project met what we perceived as an immediate need. The other started a process that could offer solutions for generations.



2. *Do With Rather Than Do For*

The second principle is clearly related to the first. When you are interested in the long-term rather than the short-term, you'll find that doing a project *with* someone is much better than doing one *for* someone. It's the difference between relief (doing for people) and development (doing with people). No one has described this distinction better than Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert in *When Helping Hurts*.

They explain that relief is needed in those relatively rare circumstances where people truly are helpless. For instance, when there's been a genuine crisis – an earthquake, a tsunami, or any type of sudden and unexpected catastrophe. In those situations, it's appropriate and genuinely helpful for people outside the situation to step in, take charge, and do for people what they cannot do for themselves. Stop the bleeding. Bring some structure. Restore some semblance of order. This is relief, and in those rare cases, it's the best route to take.

Development is different. Anyone involved in development recognizes that the vast majority of people are not helpless and shouldn't be treated as such. When you pursue development, you lean into the gifts, abilities, desires and assets that people already possess. Development is working *with* people as they move toward a better future. Development has a long-term focus, making a difference for generations.

It's easy to read about that distinction. It makes sense on paper, but for some reason, we have a really hard time making the shift from relief to development. Over and over again in one place after another, we step in, take charge, and do things *for* people who are quite capable of doing those very things for themselves. This approach (offering relief when development is needed) hasn't helped. In fact, it has done quite the opposite. Consider these observations from Bob Lupton's book *Toxic Charity*:

Take Haiti, for example. No other country in the Western Hemisphere has received more charitable aid and services from governments and nonprofits. Yet its poverty and dysfunction continue to deepen. During the four decades prior to the devastating earthquake of January 2010, \$8.3 billion in foreign aid flowed into Haiti. Yet the country has ended up 25 percent poorer than before the aid began. The current earthquake tragedy [of 2010] has ballooned additional aid commitments by another \$9 billion from thirty-nine countries. But the prognosis for sustained improvement is no better today.

"The problem is not goodwill," says anthropologist Timothy Schwartz, longtime Haiti resident who emailed from the midst of the earthquake devastation. "I don't even think the problem is resources . . . The big problem is lack of accountability, lack of a mechanism to pressure aid agencies into effective, long-term development." Schwartz has witnessed it all firsthand. Decades of free aid from well-meaning benefactors has produced an entitlement mentality and eroded a spirit of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency. The outpouring of more aid, though necessary to preserve life in a time of disaster, is ultimately worsening the underlying problem. Humanitarian responses unaccompanied by disciplined development strategies become a curse on a country.

Dambisa Moyo, in her bestselling exposé, *Dead Aid*, writes about assistance to her native Africa: “The reality is aid has helped make the poor poorer and growth slower. Aid has been, and continues to be, an unmitigated political, economic and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the developing world.”

I realize that there are a host of other factors at play in Haiti and the countries in Africa that have received “dead aid.” The results that we see in those places cannot be simply explained. I have no doubt that Lupton and Moyo would agree that these are extremely complex issues. Their central point is one we need to hear though: *Doing for people, rather than doing with people, is usually the wrong choice.* Granted, there are times when relief (aid) is necessary. In those moments of crisis, we should be ready to do whatever we can to help. But every other time we must have the wisdom and the discipline to withhold aid. We must learn to keep our emotions in check and remember the bigger picture. Making ourselves feel better is not the goal. Just “doing something” is not necessarily the best option. If we are truly interested in transformation, then we need to stop doing *for* people and start doing *with* people. That’s much more difficult and will take a lot more time, but it’s a shift that will be well worth the time and effort.



3. *Build Capacity Rather Than Create Dependency*

Two books by Daniel Rickett are immeasurably helpful as you think through global engagement. *Building Strategic Relationships* and *Making Your Partnerships Work* ask and answer the very questions that need to be answered. In *Building Strategic Relationships*, Rickett tells a fictional story that demonstrates the difference between building capacity and creating dependency. The story is about a man who gives his friend a brand-new Mercedes Benz. At the conclusion of the story Rickett writes,

The gift of the Mercedes Benz epitomizes what we all wish we could do for our brothers and sisters in the hard places of the world. If it is in our power to give what our brother or sister needs, we will happily give it for the sake of the gospel. But the story also triggers some disturbing questions.

What makes me think my brother needs a Mercedes Benz? Do I know what he needs because he asked me? Or do I give a Mercedes because I think that's what he needs? Suppose my brother is making \$20,000 a year. How is he going to afford the maintenance on a \$60,000 Mercedes? My intention is to be generous, but my generosity becomes his burden.

To have something to share is a wonderful thing. To give your brother what he needs when he needs it is even better. But because what is needed is not always apparent, giving can be a dangerous business.

Those of us who partner with indigenous ministries face a subtle and constant danger. It's not primarily dependency, although that is the risk for which we are most often criticized. Nor is it paternalism, although we do slip into that more often than we care to admit. No, it is something harder to deal with than either of these. The most challenging question is this: *Have we contributed to the self-developing capabilities of our partners?* The surest way to prevent dependency is to pay close attention to *development*. It is also the best safeguard against paternalism. By focusing on development, we are forced to ask whether our involvement makes our brothers and sisters better able to serve God according to their own gifts and calling. *Are we helping to build their capacity or are we simply relieving their needs?* (italics added)

Do you see the difference between *building capacity* and *creating dependency*? When we give something to someone in need, we have done one of those two things. Our gift can build their capacity, making them stronger, more stable, and healthier, with a greater potential for development and growth. On the other hand, our gift, though heartfelt and sincerely given, can invite them to become dependent on others for their growth, health and development. Our gift really can keep them stalled in a place of helplessness. We are either building their capacity or encouraging their dependency. That is a critical difference that will have a long-term impact one way or the other.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of global examples of gifts and projects that build unhealthy dependency. When we erect buildings, dig wells and start schools with foreign funding, plans, materials and labor, we haven't built the capacity of the national leaders. They don't feel a sense of ownership and healthy pride about those projects, and they're probably not going to repair or improve them. It's like giving a \$60,000 Mercedes to someone who can't afford to maintain it. That's not a long-term solution. It's not doing *with* people. It's the wrong path to take.

Thankfully there is another option. There are projects and approaches that build the capacity of our global partners. Let me share my favorite example from our partnership in Kenya. About five years into our relationship, I was leading a team to serve in Karogoto. On the last day of the trip, we visited one of the eight villages that make up the community of Karogoto. As we approached the village, we couldn't help but notice a crowd of people lining the road. There were probably one hundred people hard at work, digging a three-foot trench that stretched about three hundred yards. After asking a few questions, we discovered that they were preparing to run pipes from the main water tank in the center of Karogoto to a distribution tank they had established in the center of their village of Kahiga. No one from the outside imposed this project on them. No one from the outside even suggested it. They saw the potential. They seized the opportunity. They were digging the trench. They were laying the pipe. And we were thrilled to discover that they had raised the money for it! Each family in this small, simple, rural village contributed whatever they could afford, so that they could have clean water in their own neighborhood. They saw no reason to wait for someone else to dig the trench, lay the pipe, or even supply the funding. They could do all that. And they did!

The primary well and water tank had been drilled and constructed a year earlier. Our church helped significantly with that project, but wasn't needed to help at all with this one. "Thanks! We can take it from here," was the prevailing attitude. Our contributions a year earlier had obviously built the capacity within the community. They were now better equipped to move forward on their own. That's a huge win! And that's what can happen when you build capacity rather than create dependency.

You don't measure your success by what you do for others.

You measure your success by what they are now able to do for themselves.



4. *Empower Leaders Rather Than Address Needs*

Kurt Kandler, Executive Director of The 410 Bridge (a global leader in Christ-centered, community initiated development), says, “We’re drawn to leaders, not needs. In fact, we’re driven by leaders, not needs.” The change in focus that he is describing – from needs to leaders – is a significant one. For some reason, most of us are quick to notice needs. We see how bad things are, the desperate needs and staggering shortages. Those images create a sense of urgency, raise funds, and keep interest high. The needs are always in your face. The needs scream for attention. And they are literally everywhere.

If you’re drawn to, driven by, or focused on needs, you’ll find yourself constantly pulled toward challenges that you will never overcome.

Don’t misunderstand where I’m going here. We cannot ignore the needs that people around the globe are facing. We’re following Jesus, and He didn’t ignore people’s needs. He came to address all the needs that mankind is facing – the spiritual, physical and social needs. The way He did that was remarkable. Instead of focusing on the needs, He focused on leaders. He empowered leaders, and they literally changed the world. We’re called to do the same.

Look for men and women of vision, character, and potential. You partner with the people that God has strategically placed in needy communities. God has prepared the way for leaders to lead their neighbors toward transformation. In other words, instead of looking at the needs, look for signs of God at work and for the people He is working through. Focusing on them isn’t as urgent, but it is exponentially more important. When you mobilize, equip, and empower local leaders, they will create solutions to the current challenges and the obstacles that lie in the future. When you focus on *leaders*, you’ll find the opportunity to build their capacity, working *with* them in an effort to bring about *long-term* change and community-wide transformation!



5. *Focused Rather Than Scattered*

Scattered is easy. Lots of people are scattered, especially when it comes to global causes. It's trendy to "like" a movement, sign an e-petition, go to a film screening, wear a T-shirt or attend a concert. Soon, though, they're on to something else. A new word has been created to describe people with this tendency – slactivists. Slackers and activists rolled into one! They want to change the world, but they keep changing directions. This type of energy and passion is a great start. But it's far from the finish line.

What's desperately needed isn't a sprint, but a long walk in one direction.

When you do a lot of things, it's hard to do any of them really well. On the other hand, when you focus on just a few things, you have a good chance of making a deep impact. Focus is much more difficult but much more effective.

When it comes to international partnerships and sustainable development, a scattered approach just won't work. We would be much more effective and provide much more help if we would focus our time, energy, and resources in one place (or a few places, depending on your size and scope) for a long time. Here are a few suggestions to help you or your church focus your global engagement:

- Rather than supporting dozens of ministries all over the globe, scale back and zero in on just a few. *Go a mile deep in just a few places rather than being spread an inch thin over many miles.*
- Don't expect a ten-day trip to make a life-long difference in a community. Stop putting so much attention on what you're going to fix or build or accomplish in your brief visit. Don't stop going. Just stop sprinting.
- Go back to the same place year after year instead of globe-trotting all over the planet from one summer to the next. Returning to the same place speaks volumes about your commitment to those people in that place.
- Offer clear and consistent opportunities to people to engage in global outreach. They may not respond at first, but a repeated call will make a difference over time.
- Shift your attention from results to relationships, walking the long path of partnership together.

You'll be amazed at how much deeper you can go and how much more effective you can be when you're focused in one place or on one cause rather than being scattered all over map.

Partnership Essentials

If fish could talk, the one who was “saved” by the monkey would tell you that having good intentions is not the same as being intentional. Good intentions are a positive start, but not nearly enough to bring about long-term change. The five intentional actions outlined in this chapter allow us to do less harm and provide more help to our brothers and sisters around the world. Here they are once more: commit to the (1) *long-term rather than the short-term* by doing projects (2) *with people rather than for people*. This shift allows you to (3) *build capacity rather than create dependency* because you are (4) *empowering leaders rather than trying to meet needs*. All this is done in the context of a (5) *focused rather than scattered* strategy of global engagement. These intentional practices will take you down a path toward healthy global partnerships.

