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How to Avoid Negative Donor-Impact in Development and Mission to Africa

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Abstract

MDWs (missionaries and development workers), the poor in Africa, and Western donors, are engaged in a three-way dynamic fundamentally different from the work of change-agents of old. Donors hope to increase human flourishing by funding programs which ease the plight of the poor. They want that to happen in visibly quantifiable ways. They often do not realize how strongly their money determines paths and outcomes of the intervention. When a project is funded by generous outside donations, the donors operate from a culturally invulnerable position. What a donor advocates is desirable, whether-or-not it makes sense to locals. MDWs should be culturally “vulnerable”, resulting in contextual knowledge that could contribute to the success of a project. The poor, with good reason, however, prefer to communicate directly with those providing funds. Generous donor-backing of often poorly thought-out projects erases the space of MDWs’ contextual wisdom. MDW contextual vulnerability, achieved either through their disengaging with donors, or donor’s disengaging with their local populations, is indicated as the solution to this dilemma. This paper is limited to the analysis of donors of goodwill and does not include a policy of donors with political or self-serving aims.

Let us start with two simple examples of unproductive donations that local knowledge could have helped a visitor to avoid. Such examples could be multiplied, in variety and in size.

'Here's a bicycle for you' said the visitor to the child who was having to walk three miles to school every day. 'Thank-you very much', said the excited child. A month after the visitor had gone, the bicycle was permanently in his parent's attic, as no money could be found to repair it.

"Do you need a water filter," asked the visitor? Everyone said 'yes'. After all, you do not stare a gift horse in the mouth. If he was going to purchase a water filtering device for them, why should they refuse? Were they to say no, he might spend his money on someone else. The expensive filter stood unused in the corner of the kitchen for three years, until one day a cat jumped onto it, and it fell and broke.

Two similar species of cross-cultural workers seek to help the poor in Africa and elsewhere to advance. Those are missionaries and development workers (from hereon MDW). Differences between them, while consequential in some ways, in others are not so great. Missionaries seek to build the church. Development workers seek to add prosperity through engaging the secular realm. Both lean too heavily on a Western worldview.

With perhaps rare exceptions, MDWs cannot do without another kind of person. That person is the foreign donor. MDWs can add contextual understanding to assist donors' activities amongst the poor. Donors influence the activities of MDWs through their holding of purse-strings.

The other group of people involved in our simplified view of intervention into the lives of the poor in Africa, are the poor themselves. They are not, of course, without their own agency. They seek to influence the ways in which they are being *missioned* and the ways in which they are being *developed*. Their relationships with workers they meet on the ground (MDWs), plus their relationships with donors, are key means for them to have such influence.

This essay looks at interactions between these three groups of people, and especially at how those interactions affect, facilitate, interfere with, or even forestall, development and mission endeavors. While this analysis is rooted in theory, it is also deeply practical and draws on the author's personal experience of many years of grassroots engagement in Africa.

Our main concern in analyzing the activities of these three groups is to point to the peculiarities that arise from there being three, and not simply two. I suggest that some features of this tripartite division of labor are peculiar to our era; roughly post-1950s, since the global community has been encouraging poor countries in the world to *develop*. The donors are the 'new' group in the equation. Poor people were there before 1950. People making efforts to assist the poor were there before 1950. What makes the third group, foreign donors, peculiar to

the post-1950s era, is ways in which they seek to engage with people over whom they have no formal authority or jurisdiction, who are culturally, relationally, and physically distant.

Traditionally, according to Speckman in his book entitled *A Biblical Vision for Africa's Development*, any 'help to the poor' was given in a framework of the mutual obligation of patron-client systems. According to such systems, 'help' offered created indebtedness to the giver. It would have made no sense for wealthy people in one community to seek to intervene in the lives of the poor in another community with whom they had no patron-client relationship. Christian teaching has, according to Speckman, contributed to bringing us charity in the modern sense. Geographically and culturally distant donors giving to the poor has been a post-1950s innovation.

From here, I will discuss biblical examples of change-agents (prophets) and then show how contemporary change-agents (MDWs), from an African viewpoint, are not fundamentally distinguishable from prophets.

Biblically speaking, the prophet who cries out on behalf of the disadvantaged, has been the classic voice for intervention in the lives of the poor, Speckman tells us. The Old Testament prophets Amos, Jonah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah were men who heard from God. They had little or no donor backing. The same model is extended to the New Testament. Hence we get people like Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul. Ancient and contemporary Africa, too, has its prophets, seers, and others who deign to intervene in the lives of others, often claiming divine authority. I here consider those who did not have powerful backing, which is the majority of our examples.

A person who seeks to intervene in a community not their own without formal (e.g. governmental or generous donor) backing is vulnerable. Such a person typically has no practical means with which to enforce their ideas. They must endeavor to win people over, to persuade, to claim divine backing, and even to threaten divine retribution. Such people might be accepted, or rebuffed, ignored, or even attacked. Prophets could claim God's backing yet targeted communities could reverse that claim and consider them to be sent by the devil. Prophetic figures could be and often were, repulsed, often violently, especially if violence seemed to be the only way to shut them up.

We have many biblical examples of the vulnerable prophets. Amos met opposition (Amos 7:10-12). People hated Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11:18). John the Baptist was beheaded (Mark 6:14-29). Jesus himself was accused of working by the power of Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24). Paul was endlessly persecuted (2 Corinthians 11:16-33). The powers that Jesus threatened were jealous of him (Matthew 27:18). The death of Jesus that resulted is the epochal defining moment of the Christian church.

There is little doubt that these kinds of experience would make one think twice; shutting up may seem more attractive than being beheaded. Proclamation of God's word required considerable guts – stakes were high. Many people preferred a quiet life, toeing the party line! Those who stood against the status quo in a community were at the very least, if sometimes foolish, also brave.

Parallel dilemmas can be found in contemporary Africa. The African worldview is said to be holistic, unlike the Western one which is dualistic. This means, amongst other things, that physical causation is always seen as an outcome of an overarching spiritual causation. Things have “a magical and religious hold over ... [recipients]”, Mauss tells us in his classic *The Gift*, in which he explains how ancient and contemporary majority-world people exchange things for *hau*, a kind of spiritual bond. Hence certain African people seek to help others by working through the spiritual domain. They look to undo the activities of evil agents, those untoward spirits, and witches who seek to bring spiritual imbalance. Being an expert in alleviating such imbalance is, however, a risky business – at least because someone who claims to have the power to undermine spiritual evil may become the prime suspect when evil arises; if one can get rid of evil, then it is assumed that one also has the power to bring it. Thus, witchdoctors become prime suspects in witch-hunts. So, Jesus, Paul, and contemporary missionaries could, because they carry a spiritual message, be suspect should bad things happen. That is to say – MDWs are in parts of Africa at risk of being accused of being witches.

Accusations of witchcraft were a contextualizing tool of traditional societies. That is; people whose message did not suit the context could be sanctioned by the threat of witchcraft accusation. Unpalatable messages resulted in the rejection, injury, or even death, of the messenger. Sometimes communities could test a message by the level of determination of a messenger in the face of persecution. This is the position of a martyr; if someone was ready to be martyred for their faith, then they must have truly valued what they were saying: They may be most clearly heard once they are dead. Next, I will explore how, on the other hand, contemporary MDWs who strive to find ways to make their message appropriate, relevant and desirable in the context it is meeting, inadvertently use donated funds to bypass traditional sanctions.

Secularism is a relative new-comer to the historical stage, arriving during the 17th century according to Cavanaugh in his book entitled *The Myth of Religious Violence*. The notion that a ‘change-agent’ should endeavor to perform their task without claiming divine guidance is a novel idea to holistic societies. In holistic context a ‘secular’ development worker is anomalous, hence in this article considered to be parallel to the category of ‘missionary’, using the acronym MDW. Our particular concern in this essay concerns when the local people, i.e. the poor, develop a relationship with an MDW's western donors or agents from back in the West, as well as with the MDW.

Donors are motivated by the theory that their money and resources will further enable good things that are already happening. They seek to multiply someone's reach. For example, giving pastors motorbikes is thought to enable them to witness Jesus to more villages more quickly than on foot. Donors, in order to donate, require a view that what is happening is *good*. Contextualization is not a donor's primary concern; they rarely consider that empowering a messenger with resources can render something that is good to be less good or even to be a handicap.

In our globalized world, and especially one in which English is widely known, the two-way interaction of charitable engagement between the poor and the MDW has become a three-way engagement. A 'poor' recipient can have independent information about and direct access to the donor through technology and use of the English language, bypassing the MDW. Often, that donor is someone on whom the MDW is also dependent. The donor we are particularly concerned about is a relatively poorly-informed foreign donor. Their authority typically exists as a result of their donation; such donors, once they cease to give, become irrelevant, as noted by Jones in Uganda in his article on 'the making of meaning' in Uganda. In this sense, donors do not actually have a choice of, 'donate or not', but only a choice of 'donate, or be off the scene'; the basis for their relationship *is* money.

A direct relationship between the poor recipient and the donor can by some be considered to be the holy grail of cross-cultural engagement, thought to indicate the recipients' agency and ownership of their future. Direct dialogue with the recipients is rewarding for the donor, giving a sense of agency in making the world a better place. When donor and recipient communicate directly with each other, there is no longer a need for input from an MDW, who has been told that his goal is to work himself out of a job. Unfortunately though, making MDWs 'redundant' does not reduce dependence on the West. What it does is to the ignorance of those in the West on which one is dependent.

Before 'locals' bypassed MDWs, MDWs being the agents of the donor, were in effect the donor as far as local people were concerned. Hence 'donors' were contextually informed. In the absence of MDWs, the distance between donor and recipients becomes much greater. Instead of having eyes and ears on the ground, donors become limited to trying to understand what lies behind the communication of people whose culture and history is vastly different from their own, with no real knowledge and minimal engagement within the context concerned. In effect, both donors and MDWs have become blind.

Outside financial support has rendered proposals made by MDWs acceptable by default. "You don't bite the hand that feeds you," is another way of saying the same thing. MDWs have, on account of the outside support they enjoy, *bought* people, making them into 'yes men'. Lies to please the donor, or hoodwinking donors because of gross dependency on their funds, has become the new normal.

As this situation creates a dependency of poor communities on Western donors, it also creates dependencies of MDWs on the same largesse. Outside donor help that supposedly models indigenous ways to 'develop' or be 'Christianized', has unfortunately modeled ways that are dependent on foreign charity. Such has become the mainstream. This has made alternatives that do not use donor funds much more difficult to envisage never mind implement. Poor communities nowadays evaluate MDWs sent to them based on how much donor money they control.

Once an MDW agrees to fund something the understanding of which he has acquired only through the use of English (i.e. while contextually ignorant), the utility of learning an indigenous language is questioned. If money can be obtained in this way, and money has now become the key desired ingredient, then an MDW who wants to learn language and context can become a hazard to the community, lest as a result of newly acquired understanding they interfere with money-flow. An MDW who remains ignorant of what is going on is a precursor to the foreign-based donor who only comes occasionally to check on things or take some photographs.

The above scenarios have developed to such an extent, as often to render informed decision making very tenuous. If an MDW suggests a different path than the donor's, a local community may quickly, almost out of necessity, side with the donor. What then has become of the role of an MDW? An MDW has become a conduit for funds who is obliged always to agree with the perceived view of donors, whenever this is supposed by local people to be in their interests. Should he not so agree, then foreign donor and locals agreeing become a pincer to force him out. Today typically, the MDW has little knowledge of local languages. Short-term MDWs abound, who do not remain in the community long enough to grasp contexts. As a result, *donors are increasingly forced to accept communication they receive from nationals without any contextual interpretation*. Simultaneously, their provision of money constrains the logic of development to one in which acquisition of foreign funds has become a primary aim. The possibility for indigenously driven sustainable development has become about zero. Development and mission have become a money-game sustaining a mirage of African similarity to the West.

Long-term MDWs are pulled into the above-mentioned pincer trap. Donors want to give. Poor communities in Africa want to receive. The truth that might interfere with donor flows is, of necessity, bent. Donor-dependent conscientious MDWs find themselves in an impossible position. As soon as discussion ensues between donor and recipient, MDWs, unless they are simply maximizing an incoming flow of funds, can easily be condemned, squeezed out, splattered in the middle, or pushed backward to where they fall into a hole: Why send an MDW, if later one will reject what they say on the basis of the word of nationals? If one is not ready to reject what an MDW says on the basis of the word of nationals, then why talk to the nationals?

Amongst reasons donors want to engage directly with locals, is to show they are not condescending or racist. 'Poor Africans', after all, can these days speak English. But then, if one can so effectively engage with trustworthy nationals, why evaluate what one is doing at all?

In practice, MDWs' successes have been achieved through their use of *collateral*. Foreign funds have protected MDWs from the kinds of attacks, lynching's, criticism, beheadings, and burnings they might otherwise have experienced. This means that people have accepted prescriptions for their lives from the West that make little or no sense to them but come with money. They are not sustainable and cannot, given majority world contexts, be indigenously run. That is to say; local peoples are almost-required to choose options that require more and not less donor money. Because the system they have been nurtured on does not produce sustainable indigenous means to development, local people should not be expected to be able to work in that direction in their relationships with foreign donors.

The tripartite system of poor African, MDW, and the donor has been shown to be unworkable. Here are some brief suggestions regarding what might make it workable:

1. Donors should draw their information from MDWs, not from nationals being reached, who are in a dependency bind (must say yes to money).
2. MDWs and donors should not have a common language with 'poor Africans'. (Thus effectively preventing unmediated communication between donors and indigenous people.)
3. An MDW should not use donor funds. At least, not any donor funds that will require accountability in the West. Typically, this will mean thriving on a shoestring.
4. Once the above pincer has been removed, MDWs should take advantage of their new-found freedom to ensure contextual relevance of what they do, through use of indigenous languages.
5. MDWs without donor collateral will soon realize that forcing foreign packages onto people will earn resistance. Going forward will require a grasp of local contextual knowledge. Sometimes opposition can be faced head-on, perhaps resulting in "martyrdoms." Local knowledge will transform what is being advocated.

About the Author

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