

Helping Others Help Themselves: Christian Community Development

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Evangelical Christians are recognizing that social action and evangelism are not opposite poles. They are complementary partners in the task of the church. The task of the church cannot be split into the “social” and “spiritual” dimensions. We are to be the preserving “salt of the earth” as much as we are to be the evangelizing “light of the world.” In many cases, costly service must accompany the gospel proclamation. In almost all cases, tremendous benefit to the well-being of society can and should result from making obedient disciples.

But just what is meant by “social action?” Mentioning the term brings to mind tired warnings against diluting the truth with the “social gospel.” Social action is best associated with constructive social change, but the term is used to mean anything from working for women’s rights to delivering baskets of food to poor families at Christmas. The term is sufficiently vague to be nearly useless.

Another term is headed to the oblivion of multiple meaning: Development. We hear of International Development, and Christian Development. We read of Developed Countries and Less Developed Countries, and even Least Developed Countries.

What Is Development?

There are basically four strategies of alleviating the suffering of a needy world. Each of them has been called development. These can be considered on a matrix setting two basic methods against two basic foci of action. Our tactics can bring aid from outside the country or we can seek changes in the structures and life patterns of the people, helping them to effect the changes that they desire. We can either focus on socio-political structures or on meeting basic needs.

Method Focus	Help From Without	Change From Within
Structures	Strategy I Economic Growth	Strategy II Political Liberation
Needs	Strategy III Relief	Strategy IV Community Development

The matrix only begins to attempt to distinguish the four approaches. A complete definition of each is beyond the scope of this article.

Each of the approaches has a certain validity. They are, to a great extent, interdependent and complementary. A look at the potential of each approach can help the Christian worker meet basic needs.

Strategy I: Economic Growth

“Economic Growth” often is reflected by improvements in the macro-statistics of a country such as higher per capita income level or an improvement in the balance of trade.

The concern for economic growth in the sense of Christian Community Development is for “micro-economic” factors such as adequate food, fuel and health for each family provided locally on a sustainable basis. Any economy must reach decisions about what goods are to be produced, in what quantities and by what methods, and how much of these goods will go to each person or family.

In the Third World or developing countries an accurate assessment must be made of both human and natural resources, along with present problems or limiting factors. The people must be motivated toward development and involved in planning for economic development or growth. “Finally, the people must then be adequately trained in the best systems of efficient and sustainable use of the natural resources about them.

One basic problem often overlooked is the effect of grossly inadequate production of many if not most basic items in developing countries. This makes the choice among alternative uses of scarce resources much more difficult. The distribution in most Third World countries becomes inadequate, with many (poor) people being left out and confusion setting in.

The 1960’s “Decade of Development” was a period of massive injections of wealth into the economies of the less developed countries. It was thought that benefits derived from booming industry and trade would “trickle down” to the poor. The effort largely failed to bring substantial improvement to the quality of life for the suffering masses. The blessings rarely trickled down to where they were most needed. But economic growth is indeed a viable course of action, when accompanied by careful attention to development on the community level.

Strategy II: Political Liberation

Strategy I aims to bolster the national economy and government. Strategy II tends to see the basic problem to be this very system of national government and commerce. - The call is for liberation from oppressive regimes and international trade agreements which intensify the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” So many have so little. And the gap is widening. The “haves” continue to accumulate. The “have-nots” get poorer. But strategy II is overwhelmingly complex. It includes a wide spectrum of activity from violent revolution to quiet lobbying for human rights.

Christian missions have been a powerful force in matters as varied as land reform, refugee’s rights, and the abolition of slavery. Christian missions should continue to be this kind of force. But they must help “cultural insiders” take the leading role in such change; otherwise, such force is a reverse imperialism that still imposes the will of

outsiders on the people. Today's missionary force is wise to avoid such interference. Yet, in still another sense, few oppressive political structures stand apart from certain multi-national corporations and international trade agreements. Christians can and should seek to end the injustices in international trade and commerce.

Strategy II is indeed complex, but one thing is clear. It holds little promise of lasting hope without Strategy IV. Time after time, one regime is replaced by another even more oppressive. The liberation all men seek can only be known in the perfect rule of the Messiah Himself at the end of the Age. We are justified in working toward justice and peace; we know that we work with God in doing so. But our efforts will never usher in the Kingdom. Even redeemed humanity cannot govern with the righteousness we ultimately long for.

The converse is also true in many places. (Strategy IV is in some ways contingent on the success of Strategy II) Development efforts can often come to naught without some attention to the system that may prevent people from partaking of the fruits of community development. It is one thing to give a man rice (Strategy III), it is another thing to help him grow more rice (Strategy IV), and then it is quite another thing to ensure that he may partake of the harvest of rice (Strategy II).

Both Strategies I and II are concerned primarily with structures. A direct focus on either strengthening or overturning structures can often backfire; even with an intention to see needs met. Injustices can be reinforced on the one hand or repeated on the other. Unless people are enabled to help each other live better lives, changes in the system will make little real difference.

Strategy III: Relief

Strategy III aims at survival for victims of war, disaster, and prolonged injustice. Massive relief efforts have been launched by Christian organizations, but they have been called nothing more than a "band aid" on the desperate wound of humanity. Many such efforts treat the symptoms rather than the disease. Some even feel that relief, if continued, is detrimental in the long run because it takes away the incentive for local production and development. Some say doomed communities should be allowed to pass away to insure the survival of others. However this "lifeboat" mentality has no place in Christian strategy. It amounts to genocide at worst and the "euthanasia" of an entire community at best. Some have justly criticized relief efforts coupled with evangelism for producing "rice Christians." A "rice Christian" has become a Christian to assure himself and his family of getting a daily dole of food. This is obviously not the best sort of evangelism. At worst it is rank manipulation. If done in this way, evangelism aggravates the situation.

But relief is necessary to break the vicious cycle of survival. An infusion of aid is needed to help people stop "eating their seed-corn." Otherwise there is no hope for long term growth and life. But it is this long-range hope that moves Christians to search for answers to deep-seated problems.

Strategy IV: Community Development

Many factors point to the need for "Community Development." In the Third World the poorest and those unreached by development are mostly (80% plus or minus) in remote rural areas which suffer from lack of transportation and communication. There is little hope for them to enter into the international trade and buy their basic needs --=

they must be shown how to produce and meet their own needs themselves in the context of Christian sharing. Development seldom continues well or far if the spiritual needs are not simultaneously being met.

Many people in developing countries become defeatist or fatalistic and think of themselves as poor and incapable. They think their country or area is also poor and lacking in resources. The challenge for the Christian (who ideally is also a developer) is to help the local people see hope – for the abundant life here on earth as well as for life eternal. After hope comes the need for the local people to become motivated to contribute to their own development. Then comes the adequate assessment of their own personal talents, abilities, and resources as well as the natural resources about them. This can bring release from the syndrome of “we’re a poor people in a poor country and cannot improve.”

Another factor hindering development is the tendency of many people to look at factors limiting food production, for example, and then blame the lack of adequate programs or performance on the “flood, drought, pests, diseases, etc.” The challenge is to adequately assess the problems, make plans to overcome them, and begin adequate production on a renewable basis. The tendency to “find a scape-goat” must be overcome if adequate development is to take place.

There is a place for Christian involvement in all four strategies. But Strategy IV, i.e., Christian Community Development, is the key. Evangelism, in turn, is the key to Strategy IV, when people are freed from their fears or indifference – or even hate – to truly help one another. Community development begins when and where there are hearts of love and hope in a community.

Physical Development Factors

Christian Community Development efforts must address themselves to the whole need complex of a community. Care must be taken to work with the cultural “givens” of the community. Changes must be proven to be desirable,. The survival patterns of many communities are so fragile that unforeseen side effects of improvements can prove disastrous. The risk of doing things differently often appears too great to those at or under a subsistence level of living. Any tools, foods, and new technology must be carefully studied to insure that they are appropriate culturally, and are renewable and sustainable physically. But most community development is a simple matter of a partnership of strengths and common-sense of different cultures. Several basic development factors should be coordinated for holistic development:

1. **Water:** Pure drinking water is a daily necessity, and water for at least garden irrigation is desirable. Non-potable water is perhaps the greatest purveyor of human physical misery. Diseases and parasites from the water lead to lethargy. Pure water can often be provided by constructing protected wells. Communities can be instructed on how to boil, filter, or chemically treat their water.
2. **Sanitation:** The prevention of contamination of water and food by diseases and parasites is largely a matter of education. Simple instruction in proper washing of hands and food and the proper disposal and isolation of human and animal wastes can make a great difference.
3. **Food** Both the amount of food, i.e., total calories, and the nutritional balance are important. Many people do not have enough to eat but many more suffer from

- nutritional deficiencies of protein, vitamins and minerals not present in the usual basic diet of cereals, or in roots and tubers, which are high in carbohydrates and starch but deficient in the other necessities. Thus, improvements must be made, both in the amount of food and in a proper balance of protein, vitamins, and minerals. These nutrients can be provided by such foods as grain legumes (beans, peas, etc.), green leafy vegetables, and other fruits and vegetables that can be grown in intensive home gardens if not generally available. Simple plans for crop rotation and storage can alleviate the “feast and famine” syndrome.
4. **Fuel** Wood is by far the number one cooking fuel in the world, particularly in the “hungry half.” Native forests are rapidly being cut down in many developing forests, and are long gone in more ancient areas of civilization. The hope for renewable firewood production lies in several promising species of fast growing tropical trees including Eucalyptus, Leucaena, Melina, and Pinus species. Several of these are already widely used and are being replanted on hundreds of thousands of acres each year.
 5. **Health** Westerners are conditioned to think of health as a gift. Health care then is focused on curing diseases with expensive hospital and clinic complexes. In community development efforts, the stress should be in preventive medicine. Important components are: teaching sanitation and public health, inoculations, parasite and disease control, and nutrition training. These should be added to whatever curative medicine is present.
 6. **Shelter and Clothing** These should be designed and provided by making maximum use of local crops, e.g., cotton for cloth and bamboo for buildings. Many other plant materials can be used in addition to rock, clay bricks, etc., where available for buildings.
 7. **Income Production** Cash crops are the primary exports and cash earners for most developing countries (except oil-exporting countries). Typical cash crops include coffee, cocoa, sugar cane, rubber, tea and palm oil, as well as some of the very food crops developing countries need most, such as beans. “Cottage” industries and village cooperatives can be encouraged. Using local labor and materials, these arrangements hold great promise with good marketing technique.
 8. **Education** In many needy countries there is insufficient education, and literacy rates are very low. Thus literacy often gets first attention in education improvement. Next comes the choice between so-called classical education toward skills useful only at government desks (the biggest employer in many countries) or education toward meeting the needs of the people. The latter desperately needs expansion.
 9. **Communication and Transportation** These two interacting factors are almost unbelievable in their negative effects on the welfare of the people in remote areas. The majority of the people in developing countries live in these areas. Regional or national programs are often necessary to make improvements but the possibilities for local action should be thoroughly studied.

A Team Strategy

There are three kinds of gifts that are needed in Christian Community Development. One is the gift of bringing others to Christ and planting churches.

Another is a gift in a needed technical area like food production, health care, literacy or vocational training. The third is a gift of administration in order to design, implement and evaluate programs to help the people.

A key strategy is to organize teams that have people with special gifts in these three areas of church planting, needed technical expertise, and management. While all these gifts may be found in one person, it would be more advisable to have these tasks assigned to specific members of a team.

Each committed Christian should strive to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ as his first priority. Each member of a team is best trained first as a “generalist” in addition to being trained as a specialist in a specific task. General training can be given to teach basic and practical skills and information that can be shared with the people. This can be on witnessing for Christ, small-scale family food production, health promotion, disease prevention, first aid and simple treatment. Each member can also be trained to be more effective in planning and organizing his or her own work, in leadership, and in controlling (or getting the desired results). The latter means getting information on how the program is doing in order to improve areas that are not doing well.

The Hungry Half, and The Unreached Peoples

Thus, while all four strategies for development are necessary, and while all four have weaknesses, community development holds the most promise for the Christian worker desirous of promoting fundamental change in human societies. Community development is consistent with the posture of humility and involvement that Jesus modeled for his disciples. Community development revolves around vigorous yet sensitive evangelism. And the “hungry half” that are most in need of community development are more often than not the “hidden peoples” that are justly receiving increased attention by the Church of Jesus Christ today.

¹ Winter, Ralph D. and Hawthorne, Stephen C. Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader Revised Edition 1982 Pasadena, CA William Carey Library p213ff © Institute of International Studies