

Hope for Slum Communities: Community Development

by Scott Bessenecker

Excerpted from forthcoming *The Quest for Hope in Slum Communities*,

The rusted and broken corrugated-tin roof sagged perilously over the bed where the four children slept in the two-room apartment. The parents were afraid of what might happen when it finally gave way. The mother pleaded with me to help. I was leading a team of students to serve the poor. I felt that to ignore her cries would be hardhearted. I asked how much it would cost to repair the roof. Quickly, she summoned the landlord who lived nearby. He estimated the cost to be about \$30. It seemed a small price for the safety of this family. I agreed and handed over the money to the family. What I didn't realize is just how quickly Western money can make a mess of things. When I returned four days later, I discovered that the family had used the money to pay off some debts; they earned only \$1 a day and had borrowed money just to survive. Now the landlord was upset and the men he had agreed to hire to fix the roof were furious. Within minutes the room was crowded with half a dozen people all yelling at each other, with me and \$30 at the epicenter of the controversy. In a number of ways, I mishandled this situation. One of the key problems, however, was using only outside money to solve the dilemma and not involving the family, landlord, and broader community.

By contrast, two students on the team, Justin and Megan, had developed a friendship with another family. This family also had structural problems with their home. Their walls were open in many places, and the rats were coming in and out freely, biting their two-month-old infant whenever the parents laid her on the floor. The students brought in a local carpenter to assess the situation. The cost of repairs was estimated at \$70. Justin and Megan decided that they could put up \$30. The couple looked at one another. With some scrimping they decided they could come up with \$10—quite a chunk of their monthly income. Then came the dilemma: how to come up with the remaining \$30? It would have been very easy at this point for Justin and Megan to increase their contribution to cover the rest of the cost of construction, but they restrained their urge to make up the difference. As they faced the real possibility that this family would not be able to receive these needed repairs, the carpenter chimed in. He also lived a life of poverty in the same slum community and was a Christian. Inspired by Justin, Megan, and the couple's spirit of sacrifice, he said, "I too want to share in this blessing!" With that he offered to donate enough of his time and materials to close the financial gap.

Transformation of slum communities will never happen without a concerted effort on the part of the people who live in the slums. A blessing imposed from the outside is rarely a blessing at all. Outside money and outside help can often create power dynamics that end up doing more harm than good. Those whose lives are most affected need to help identify the problem and play an integral role in the solution.

Robert Linthicum, in his book *Transforming Power*, offers a framework for understanding the anatomy of community organizing. He describes the catalytic potential of someone willing to simply visit individuals, ask questions, and call groups of people from the community together to talk to one another. With a little

leadership, a group of individuals recognizing a common struggle can move quickly to formulating plans for action. Soon the person playing the catalyzing role is in the background and the community has taken ownership of the change process.

Bryant Myers, in *Walking with the Poor*, suggests that a poor community has a story and has developed a strategy for survival, whether spoken or unspoken. It includes addressing physical and spiritual powers. The development workers must merge their own stories with the community's story and must be willing to learn from the community about where they think power lies.

Unless you humble yourself to sit at the feet of the community whom you have been sent to serve, you will seek to enact plans in which you are the central figure. And a plan that can't live without you is not a plan destined to serve the community.