The Dark Side of Compassion:

How We Hurt Those We Help

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to investigate the ways in which the aid industry can (and often does) negatively affect its intended beneficiaries. In this paper I explore issues surrounding privilege, dominance, and subjugation—ultimately revealing that whether it be due to a lack of accountability or an immunity to critique, problematic programs in the nonprofit world continue to be perpetuated. It is my goal to not only prove that the predominant methods used in humanitarian work are indeed inherently unequal and domineering, but also to demonstrate alternative models that can be used to combat this injustice. Through my endeavor I hope to show how the philosophical community supports my argument, citing some major fields of ethics and social philosophy. I also plan on considering and answering questions such as: What are the relevant needs/rights that people have in reference to charity? How do our actions create or combat suffering? And, why are our intentions important when it comes to philanthropy? I will likewise be including questions and relevant expertise from the areas of psychology and economics to prove my theory.

Introduction

Compassion is one of the most defining characteristics of the human species. It is a common thread found throughout every community around the world, and unites us in an almost inextricable way. The ability to see through another's eyes and sympathetically experience their emotional struggle is an incredible affective ability. It is an illuminating quality of the human experience—shining solidarity into the loneliest corners of the world and motivating compassionate action and self sacrifice when all other hope is lost. Through this ability, we as humans have been able to enact great change in the world: coming to the aid of both friend and foe and infusing love into the darkest and most desolate of situations. However, despite all the successes associated with human compassion, an astonishing amount of harm has been done in the name of empathy as well.

As social creatures, we are hardwired for compassion and kinship—it is what has propelled us into our evolved state today. Through cooperation and innovation we have been able to overcome massive physical and intellectual hurdles. Unfortunately, a major human obstacle that has yet to be even remotely overcome is world hunger and poverty, but why? Some $300 billion dollars a year are donated by the United States alone to charitable causes (“Giving”). And every year hundreds of thousands of people dedicate their time and energy to building solution models to combat the social issues that plague our society. However, what we have witnessed is an overall stagnation of poverty in the United States and worsening desperation abroad (Ben-Ari). In 1987 The World Bank, an organization dedicated to the elevation of economically crippled countries, admitted that more than 75 percent of their agricultural endeavors in Africa were complete and utter failures (“Twelfth Annual”). And sadly their success rate is not uncommon, in fact it’s the norm. Thousands of new projects are started every year attempting to combat economic disparity in the world, yet very few accomplish what they set out to. Despite the overwhelming degree of complexity that surrounds most social justice issues, it is still
 alarming that after all the money and time that people have dedicated in the last half century, we have yet to make any serious headway in combating world hunger and homelessness.

The truth of the matter is that despite the billions of dollars of aid flowing into impoverished countries, starvation, illiteracy, and disease continue to run rampant. Charitable efforts targeted towards Africa is a great, large scale example of this. In the last fifty years, the continent of Africa has received over $1 trillion in benevolent aid. However, despite the awash of resources, Africa's per capita income as a whole has plummeted since the 1970s, with more than 350 million Africans living on less than a $1 a day (Lupton 3). So it is clear that the swarms of experts, volunteers, and consultants, not to mention the countless tons of food, has made little to no difference in the fight against poverty and hunger. African economist and author of Dead Aid, Dambisa Moyo, argues that the assistance which was intended to promote health and prosperity in Africa has become “the disease of which it pretends to be the cure” (Lupton 3). In fact Moyo argues that foreign aid has not only been very unsuccessful but greatly damaging:

Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that aid to Africa has made the poor poorer, and the growth slower... [Our] insidious aid culture has left African countries more debt-laden, more inflation-prone, more vulnerable to the vagaries of the currency markets and... it's increased the risk of civil conflict and unrest ... Aid is an unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster. (WSJ)

However, foreign aid is not the only form of aid that has been massively ineffective. Even here in the United States where charitable giving has hit an all time high, the percentage of people in poverty has stayed the same if not increased in the last decade (“Income”). With nearly 600,000 people experiencing homelessness and 50 million people living below the poverty line, the United States has been growing its nonprofit sector and attempting to widen its welfare programs in order to address the growing income inequality (“The State”). Unfortunately, despite all of the targeted efforts throughout the country, charity has failed to make a substantial difference.

Many have postulated as to the reasons behind such failings both here at home and abroad: some arguing that there are simply too many handouts going to poor communities for them to ever become financially stable and independent, while others push for even bigger budgetary measures and philanthropic responsiveness. However, what both sides tend to ignore is the general ineffectiveness of top-down solution models. The large majority of philanthropy is done without the input of the people that it actually intended to help, thus a very out of touch and largely bureaucratic system develops that is at the very least massively ineffective but often largely oppressive and degrading. So why, despite the monumental failings of western assistance programs, do we tirelessly support their efforts without questioning the underlying cause for their lack of success? The answer is that we as humans value empathetic concern so much that we allow good intentions to be necessary and sufficient for our support.

As social creatures, empathetic concern is one of the most celebrated and morally praiseworthy behaviors that we can engage in. Thus we exalt those who give of themselves, paying little to no attention to the consequences of their 'selfless' sacrifice. However, regardless of all of the good intentions in the world, many modern philanthropic practices have proven to do much more harm than good. From increasing subjugation to systematically denying people dignity, it is often the case that organizations that claim to be on the front lines of social change, actually fail to alleviate real need—making communities sometimes worse off than they were prior to so called 'assistance' efforts. One of the main perpetrators of the oppressive impact of
altruistic nonprofit work is the giver-receiver relationship present in most aid organizations. It is one of the most harmful elements of humanitarian work, yet sadly, it is one of the most common and unquestioned. The inherent inequality of this hierarchical approach reinforces subjection and in the end fortifies unhealthy power dynamics—supporting if not creating societal issues stemming from the disempowerment of groups and individuals.

Most people do not find volunteering at a soup kitchen or an African orphanage to be anything but praiseworthy. However, I would argue to the contrary. Without properly understanding your own privilege or the quality of power you bring to a situation, even an action as simple as handing out food can be tyrannical. On a deeper level, what the giver-receiver system is symptomatic of is the underlying belief that we as westerners or people of a certain economic standing or skin color, know better how to problem solve than the people whose lives are actually being affected. Therefore, by coming into a community and imposing beliefs and infrastructures onto the population, whom you have no prior relationship with, you are actively disregarding and disempowering the individuals there. It is no wonder that most philanthropic programs fail to alleviate any of the problems they originally hoped to overcome. Unfortunately, due to the nature of humanitarian endeavors, accountability is severely lacking, leading to millions of dollars being poured into organizations that have less than satisfactory track records when it comes to enacting authentic change.

As previously mentioned, one clear reason for this is that we as humans, respect and trust those who are acting from empathetic concern and thus frequently do not carefully analyze or criticize their behavior as much as is necessary. But another crucial explanation for this lack of oversight is the fact that many people believe philanthropy to be supererogatory and therefore immune from critique. Critics of humanitarian efforts are met with an incredible amount of hostile resistance when attempting to call attention to faulty practices. They are called callous and calculating in comparison to those on the ground fighting for change. This is due to the fact that, according to pop culture, it is the idealist that holds the moral high ground, while the skeptic occupies a more pessimistic and demoralizing ethical valley. However, this defensiveness is incredibly counterproductive and extremely detrimental to the very people that assistant programs are designed to help; for hubris and general non-receptivity to reform is what ultimately alienates and objectifies the recipients of aid organizations.

1. The Problem

1.1. What is Poverty? The Poor Speak Out

Poverty: 1) the lacking of sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society
2) the state of being inferior in quality or insufficient in amount.

Following World War II, Europe was in desperate need of economic assistance. The devastation they experienced had destroyed their infrastructures, drained their economies, and left millions without adequate food or housing. In response, the Allies created the World Bank, an organization designed to combat poverty and promote trade by pouring capital into struggling nations. Thankfully, the World Bank’s efforts were massively successful—allowing Europe to
recover in record time. However, when the WB turned its attention to countries experiencing more long-standing poverty like India or Nigeria, the outcome was less than satisfactory. In an effort to understand these mixed results, the World Bank decided to consult “the true poverty experts, the poor themselves” (Corbett, Fikkert 49). To do this the WB asked over sixty thousand economically disadvantaged people from fifty low-income countries one simple question: what is poverty? And what they found was extremely illuminating. The overwhelming majority of participants described poverty not as a lack of material resources but rather as an emotional state of being, with 'inferiority', 'shame', and 'powerlessness' being the main descriptors:

“For a poor person, everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, and shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of” --MOLDOVA

“When one is poor, she has no say in public, she feels inferior” --UGANDA

“[We the poor have] a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make ourselves heard” --CAMEROON

Interestingly, when community development specialist, Steve Corbett posed the same question to dozens of middle-to-upper class audiences in the United States, his results were entirely different. Instead of describing poverty in primarily psychological or social terms, as the poor themselves do, the participants focused almost entirely on a lack of material possessions such as food, money, or housing. Appropriately, the Merriam-Webster dictionary, documents both perspectives when defining the word poverty—allowing the word to inhabit dual meanings: one describing a material lack and the other an inferior state of being. Now the definition that one prescribes to in not simply a matter of semantics, for the way we define poverty strongly influences the ways in which we choose to combat it.

According to Corbett, “the mismatch between outsiders' perceptions of poverty and the perceptions of poor people themselves can have devastating consequences for poverty alleviation efforts (Corbett, Fikkert 51). For if I define poverty as simply a lack of material wealth, the only way I will attempt to alleviate it is by giving money and possessions to the poor. And while there is a material dimension to poverty, there is an equal if not greater emotional aspect to it as well. As shown in the World Bank study, individuals experiencing poverty feel more defined by their lack of self-esteem and independence than by their monetary standing. Therefore, when people are attempting to combat economic disparity by only addressing material needs, they are effectively ignoring the deeper wound: the profound sense of personal worthlessness and despair present in the poor community. This wound runs deep, and applying band-aid-solutions to it will never assist in its healing: In the same way that one trip to the doctor's office and a bottle of pills cannot hope to relieve a deeply rooted and complex condition, we cannot hope to solve poverty with a simple monetary prescription. We need to restructure our definition of poverty in order to effectively address it—allowing our solution models to go beyond the material.

Following World War II, the World Bank's limited understanding of poverty caused them to ignore the more convoluted social justice issues at hand. However, despite their newfound
insight after the 1990's research, the WB's bureaucratic systems remained largely unchanged. To this day, the World Bank and organizations like it continue to futilely pour capital into low-income nations—imposing their own ideas of economic development on to countries with little regard to the thoughts and opinions of the residents themselves. Their definition of poverty persisted unaltered and thus their methods of addressing it were also unshaken. This is a clear example of one of the reasons why poverty has endured so unflinchingly: the groups and individuals attempting to combat it, refuse to acknowledge the more obscure causes beneath the symptomatic surface. Corbett expanded upon this issue in his book *When Helping Hurts*, arguing that as long as we define poverty as simply a lack of material possessions we will continue to “misdiagnosis the disease and apply the wrong medicine”. In other words, just as a doctor can harm a patient by either treating symptoms rather than underlying causes or misattributing symptoms to an incorrect cause, compassionate people can greatly damage poor communities by failing to acknowledge the deeper issues at hand (Corbett, Fikkert 52). But how do we even begin to reach a sound diagnosis for such a complex illness?

1.2. Our Perception of the Poor

One of the first steps in understanding the root causes of poverty is evaluating society’s perception of poor people, as our feelings and projections have a tremendous impact on the perpetual disempowerment of certain groups. It is clear by the primary definition of poverty, that those outside of economic depravity have a difficult time conceptualizing the emotional dimension of social status. This disconnect seems unusual, seeing as empathy is such a common human emotion. However, in order to feel empathy for another person you must first be able to imagine yourself in their shoes. This presents a great hurdle for many people as being in a true state of poverty is not a realistic possibility for them. Therefore, it becomes fairly easy to objectify and minimize the poor--defining them only by their need. In this way, the poor are viewed as somewhat less than human: back alley dogs whose entire existence is based on finding their next meal. As such, we may pity the poor, much like we pity the starving dog, but we do not empathize with them because we cannot truly connect with their plight.

The way that we view the poor can perhaps be partially explained by psychologist Abraham Maslow’s popular theory concerning the hierarchy of needs. In Maslow’s proposal, a human being must first acquire the basic needs for survival such as food, shelter, and clothing, before proceeding to higher levels of need such as the need for safety or love. Often depicted as a triangle, Maslow’s system ranks the different levels of human need, placing self-esteem and self-actualization at the top of the pyramid.
Therefore, based on this theory, people who are struggling to meet their more basic needs, are not only incapable of achieving higher levels of thought and personal development, but they are not even motivated to do so. This stratified system of needs implies that a person’s psychological complexity is limited by their social station. It is as if their struggle for food and employment diminishes them to a one dimensional state: we do not imagine that poor people have any other qualities or desires besides their poverty. They have no sophisticated spiritual, emotional, or intellectual pursuits similar to our own, they are simply an outstretched hand. Consequently, those who occupy higher positions in society are lead to believe that they inhabit a more evolved state of mind than those who are struggling to meet basic needs. This credence allows the wealthy to dehumanize the poor and reduce their existence to an animalistic state of survival. In this way, our society systemically infantilizes people in poverty—denying them both autonomy and agency.

Defining a person by their need is one component that contributes to how we treat those experiencing poverty; however, another reason that we as a society deny low-income people agency and autonomy is that we have a tendency to attribute their low economic standing to a personal moral failing. In countries like the United States, where the “rags to riches” story is idealized more than any other, poverty is often believed to be the result of laziness or ineptitude. This belief system is largely based on the undying faith in the “American Dream”, a concept originally put forth by James T. Adams declaring that any person, regardless of “fortuitous circumstances of birth or position”, can transcend social boundaries through hard work and perseverance (214-215). However Utopian this notion may be, it is far from reality. Despite countless years of hard work and determination, many people face insurmountable odds when it comes to accomplishing economic prosperity. Unfortunately, the stories that dominate our perceptions of the poor exist on the extreme sides of the spectrum. Again and again, our news outlets tell tales of poor immigrants becoming billionaires while entitled high school dropouts take advantage of our public assistance programs. These narratives pervert the truth and lead us to believe that a good work ethic is invariably sufficient to draw someone out of poverty, and consequently, poor people are just simply not working hard enough. This is by no means to say that it is not humanly possible for people to lift themselves out of poverty by working hard, in
fact we could find countless anecdotes describing such cases. However, just because it is possible does not mean that our system is good, the process is often unnecessarily difficult. Unfortunately, people desperately want to believe in the enduring truth of the American dream, leading them to cherry pick narratives that support their beliefs while ignoring the larger body of evidence. This largely is due to the fact we like to trust that we live in a just society and that people generally get what they deserve, only this way are we able to avoid guilt associated with an inequitable class system that bends to our advantage. Ultimately, by prescribing to the belief that a poor person’s situation is entirely of their own making, we decidedly distrust their decision-making ability in much of the same way that a parent distrusts a child’s. This is perhaps why it is so natural for us to make decisions regarding the poor without their input or approval. In any other context, when a person aspires to do something for someone else, the process is dialogical; you feel compelled to ask about their opinions, needs, and wants. However, when we strategize about helping “the needy”, they are very rarely included in the conversation as we actually do not value their input.

Consequently, as people tend to blame the poor for their social position, they also tend to attribute their own privilege to personal virtues. For it follows, that if I believe that you are personally responsible for your poverty, then I am correspondingly responsible for my wealth. As such, rich people are believed to contain virtues of intelligence, diligence, and aptitude that qualify them to make decisions regarding what the poor want and need without their consideration. This belief allows people to condescend to the poor and elevate themselves to positions of moral authority. This is based off of the argument that if your situation completely a matter of choice, then your relative success must be a reflection of personal virtues (or lack thereof). Likewise, if the poor are at fault for their economic deficiency, then helping them is not a matter of public duty. Instead, it is only a supererogatory pursuit that you may be morally commended for. As a result, people often develop savior-complexes that act to further diminish the poor and elevate the rich (an issue I will explore in depth later on).

In the end, we justify our power over others by prescribing to the belief that we are in fact deserving of our privilege--that somehow we earned our superiority. Philosopher Immanuel Kant illuminates this point further by asserting that respect for others, especially those in inferior social positions, is often reluctantly given as it acts to highlight the injustice of institutionalized inequality. Kant argues that this reluctance manifests itself as people “try to find something that will lighten the burden of [respect], some fault to compensate for the humiliation which such an [injustice] causes” (82). Here Kant is speaking of the human tendency to dehumanize and criticize people who are in subordinate social positions as a means of escaping guilt, while reinforcing our perceived right to an elevated rank. According to Kant, when one recognizes the moral worth and virtue of a “humble man”, even if one’s spirit bows, one’s body does not, “so that he may not forget my superior rank” (81). It is here that we fail to recognize the equalizing power of humanity; for our inherent worth as humans is based not on our personal accomplishments but on our mutual sentience and personhood. In this way, everyone has a need and a corresponding right to dignity and respect. Unlike what Maslow’s theory suggests, belonging, love, and dignity are not supplementary human needs, they are equally as important as food and shelter, because without them, our lives are reduced to an animal state. Regardless of social position, your inherent worth as a human remains unchanged; as such, we have a duty to respect our fellow man and refrain from elevating ourselves over those who we wrongfully define by their need. Unfortunately, it is not only the wealthy that demonize and objectify the poor. Many times people in poverty internalize the diminishment they experience from society and recycle it in their own communities.
Being labeled as “poor” or “lower class” is derogatory and shameful in nature, and thus people avoid such an assignment at all costs. In fact, in a recent study done by the General Social Survey, it was found that only 8.9% of the population self-identify as “lower class” while in reality, 14.5% of US residents are living below the poverty line (Jonsson). The reason for this discrepancy is that people living in poverty recognize the social stigma associated with being labeled as “poor” and very often believe in its connotation. Therefore, in order to combat the conclusion that their poverty is due to a moral failing, they will deny the first premise altogether: mainly that they are not in fact poor and thus cannot be accused of an ethical deficiency. This strategy is understandable as our collective default assumption is that poverty is a result of poor stewardship. We automatically believe that if you are chronically poor, then it must be due to personal shortcomings. Perhaps we believe this because we desire to belong to a just universe, one that rewards some and punishes others based off of moral merit; or alternatively, that we have control of our fate and that our lives are not terrifyingly random. Regardless of the reasons behind our default assumption, our unanimity does not verify its truth. In fact, if not properly corrected, many such presumptions would persist over time. The Earth for example, is most certainly presumed to be flat by any person that is not otherwise informed, yet this is clearly false. Unfortunately, our reflexive beliefs about poverty are not so easily debunked. As previously mentioned, even the poor themselves prescribe to the degrading narrative of poverty being a sin or failure. Veritably, this belief is so ingrained that many economically depressed people will invest their limited capital in order to maintain middle-class appearances. I witnessed this phenomenon first hand during my time in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere, yet it has one of the most negative, persisting cultural images of the poor. With over 42% of the population living in abject poverty, the country still maintains a strong sense of shame surrounding its lower class, even manifesting in people’s food choices (“Central”). One of the staples of the Nicaraguan diet is a dish called gallo pinto—a simple kind of red beans and rice meal. The red beans used in gallo pinto are upwards of five times the cost of black beans; however, culturally, black beans are associated with a desperate kind of poverty and thus are avoided at all costs. Hungry families will actually sacrifice the amount of food they can buy in order to maintain a sense of dignity and pride. Even those families who are forced to buy black beans, will always retain a small store of red beans for entertaining guests. It is clear here that the need for dignity trumps the biological need for food in many cases, arguably making it one of the most basic needs a human can possess. People are so worried that they will be associated with “poor people” that they surrender a portion of their meager income to avoid such a prescription. Therefore, going back to my first argument, even if we were to accept Maslow’s idea of a need hierarchy, it would still prove faulty to limit one’s basic needs to the biological. Humans are incredibly complex, emotional beings, who value autonomy and agency as their birthright. Ergo, when these things are threatened or compromised, one is alienated from the heart of human experience.

With this in mind, when attempting to alleviate poverty, dignity should always be one of the first needs that is addressed. For it is apparent that the antithesis of dignity, humiliation, is a main contributor to the atrophy that impoverished people experience. Psychologist Evelin Lindner argues that “many of the observable rifts among people stem from the humiliation that is felt when recognition and respect are lacking”, and it is this lack of recognition that causes deeply hurtful divisions between classes, races, genders, and the like (1). Even intra-community relations are affected by this. In poor populations for example, people so badly do not want to be affiliated with poverty that they will judge and debase fellow caste members in an effort to
disassociate themselves and retain a small amount of dignity. People will even go so far as supporting legislation that will further their economic depression in an effort to prove their separateness.

What sets us apart as humans is that we are autonomous, rational agents who are capable of setting goals, making decisions, and participating in reason. Therefore, when people are patronized and treated as subordinate, a deep sense of humiliation results. Now people react in different ways when they feel consistently humiliated. Some react in anger and express themselves in violence, leading to particularly aggressive and dangerous communities in the economically depressed world. However, many more internalize their humiliation and digress into a state of despair or apathy, making it that much more difficult for them to overcome the excessive hurdles that they already face. Educator and activist Paulo Freire, writes in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> So often do [the poor] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything--that they are sick, lazy, unproductive--that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness (63).

The truth of the matter is that your social status is not a reflection of who you are, it is a result of a matrix of circumstances usually outside of your control. Many use a “boot straps” argument to combat this claim--asserting that the poor need only pull themselves out of their situation through hard work. However, what such claims fail to recognize is that our birth lottery greatly affects the quality and even presence of these so-called boot straps. Everyone begins their life on a different rung to the social and economic ladder and thus some have a significantly longer climb than others. Due to this fact, many philosophers believe that the only way that the ideals of a just society can be clarified is to imagine yourself behind a “veil of ignorance” where all of your personal qualities and attributes remain shrouded. This way, when deciding on how society should be organized, one is impartial and thus committed to constructing societal norms that reflect equality and opportunity for all. Originally proposed by John Rawls, the “veil of ignorance” is meant to reveal how our own bias affects our perception of justice, and when it is removed, how our thoughts on social status change. In other words, the “veil of ignorance” illuminates that personal status is irrelevant when determining the truth of human worth and principles of justice. Unfortunately, until we accept this fact and amend our perceptions of the poor, we cannot hope to combat poverty as an institutionalized reality of the world.

### 1.3. Who are the Poor? (WHH)

> Privilege: unearned access to social power based on membership in a dominant social group  
> (Dr. Walker of the University of San Francisco)

In order to deconstruct the misconceptions that our society has about the poor, we must first illuminate the true underlying causes of poverty. When exploring this topic, one is inevitably led to the fact that poverty inarguably affects various populations and communities differently. In the United States alone, income inequality has grown exponentially in the last 40 years, with the top
1% multiplying their adjusted after tax income by 160% over the rest of the population (Stone et al.). This increase has skyrocketed the wage gap to an all time high and propelled the United States into the fourth most financially inequitable nation in the world (“Social”). However, despite the overall gap growth, the divide has disproportionately affected women and racial/ethnic minorities. For instance, as of today, African American families make an average of 41% less than White American families, while Latino families make a corresponding 30% less (“Income”), but the inequalities don't stop there. In the United States, unemployment, education, housing, and healthcare are all areas in which class, race, and gender play major roles in treatment and opportunity.

In his book Privilege, Power, and Difference sociologist Dr. Allan Johnson examines systems of “unearned advantage” and how they affect our societies’ allocation of resources. He also explores how different forms of oppression are institutionalized, revealing some astonishing truths about how one's earning potential, job prospects, and educational opportunity can be greatly affected by one's birth lottery. Here are just a few relevant findings:

- A black college student has the same chances of getting a job as a white high school dropout. (Bessler)
- White male representation in government and the ruling circles of corporations, universities, and other organizations is disproportionately high (65% in government and 85% in Fortune 500 companies)
- Most whites aren't segregated into communities that isolate them from the best job opportunities, schools, and community resources.
- Whites can choose whether to be conscious of their racial identity or to ignore it and regard themselves as simply human beings without race
- Women make an average of 22% less than their male counterparts with the same qualifications and job description
- Women are continually slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with their gender such as elementary education, secretarial positions, nursing, and clerical work (25-28)

Race and gender chasms run deep and have greatly affected our nation's development—causing decades to go by without many significant improvements in social equality. Certain groups and individuals are offered unearned privileges based solely on their membership to one or more social categories, while others are diminished due to their membership to others. This is why we see the statistical trends listed above: arbitrary rules and prejudices govern social mobility and keep certain groups in positions of power while others are kept subservient. Simply put, this relationship is an institutionalized system that allows for the powerful to remain in control by dominating and objectifying other social groups. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that when defining poverty the poor express an emotional experience rather than a material lack, because for them, being poor is a symptom of the oppression that they endure—for them, poverty is a manifestation of their disempowerment.

It is obvious that poor communities are not exclusively composed of racial and ethnic minorities, however as previously mentioned, poverty does impact these groups disproportionately more than others. This is precisely why properly understanding power structures and systems of privilege is crucial when diagnosing the root causes of poverty. Oppression, whether it be due to one's race, class, or gender is a reality that must be addressed as it is highly relevant to one's social and economic mobility. The system inherently places hurdles in front of certain social groups and not others. Unfortunately, many people are blind to the privileged nature of their paths—assuming that the obstacles that they face are congruent with
most everyone else's. This supposition is incredibly harmful as it creates a false reality which obscures the truth of others' experiences—limiting one's perspective to the bubble one's own social group.

This phenomenon is largely due to the fact that we all participate, consciously or not, in a “matrix of domination” as sociologist Patricia Collins coins it. In said matrix, individuals often inhabit a wide variety of privileged and oppressed identities simultaneously, granting them insight into some social injustices while blinding them to others. For instance, a middle-class, white, homosexual woman may be hyper aware of gender inequality and heterosexism, while her race and class privilege may blind her to the plight of other oppressed groups (Johnson). As Johnson argues, “The ease of not being aware of privilege is an aspect of privilege itself, what some call 'the luxury of obliviousness’” (Johnson 22). This obliviousness is a major contributor to the misdiagnosis of the root causes of poverty. As previously mentioned, in much of white America, economic hardship is believed to be a personal character flaw resulting from a poor work ethic and a lack of determination.

For people whose race and class have afford them unseen advantages, it is often inconceivable that other groups would have a different set of hurdles to overcome, leading them to the conclusion that poverty must be a result of poor stewardship. This perspective is largely due to the fact that socially based disadvantages and discrimination are largely alien concepts to those who do not experience them themselves. Just as a person born at the top of a mountain would have no concept of the treacherous nature of reaching its summit without consulting every person who made the climb, no privileged individual can understand the plight of the oppressed without intense inquiry. This is precisely why a field of philosophy called Feminist Standpoint theory, argues that research regarding power dynamics and privilege should begin with the marginalized position.

Termed ‘epistemic privilege' Feminist Standpoint theory argues that “knowledge is socially situated” and thus it is possible for marginalized groups to see society more holistically and to speak to its injustices than the non marginalized, giving them an epistemic advantage (Bowell). The revolutionary element to this theory is that it takes the idea of epistemological truth and puts it in a social context where inherent biases and prejudices are taken into account. As professor of philosophy Tracy Bowell puts it:

The social situation of an epistemic agent—her gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and physical capacities—plays a role in forming what we know and limiting what we are able to know. They can affect what we are capable of knowing and what we are permitted to know. The influence of social location on epistemic content and capacity can be felt throughout our epistemic practices, shaping not only the way in which we understand the world, but also the way in which it is presented to us via experience.

A common example used to illustrate this point goes as follows: Person A approaches a building and enters it unproblematically. Her experience is simple and mundane—a familiar activity hardly worth noting. However when Person B approaches the same building, she is confronted with a great barricade of stairs with no ramp in sight. Therefore, as a person with a disability, the structure presents itself differently to her than to the able-bodied person. In this way, a routine activity such as entering a building becomes an obstacle—requiring Person B to depend on others and surrender a portion of her autonomy (Bowell).

What this illustration captures is that an individual or group that experiences inequality is often more equipped to explore issues surrounding social injustice than those who are in the
privileged position. This theory is in many ways inspired by the Marxist view that certain social locations allow for a more comprehensive vantage point and thus contain an inherent power for rectifying misconceptions and illuminating concealed truths. Many critics of social inequality—claims, often use the isolated opinion of a member of an allegedly oppressed group that counters the majority’s testimony in order to undermine their standpoint. However, Marxism and Feminist Standpoint theory share the belief that a standpoint is not obtained simply by one's membership to a social group but rather one's active participation in the collective struggle. In other words, both personal perspective and analytical reflection are required to contribute to the development of a “shared critical consciousness” where true epistemic privilege lies. Now this is not to say that those who occupy dominant perspectives are incapable of participating in epistemic endeavors regarding power structures and oppression, only that their primary role should exist on the listening side of the conversation. Failing to listen and instead projecting our own dominant views, only serves to dilute our compassion with misunderstanding. Therefore, when attempting to combat poverty and other social injustices, we must ask the opinions of the oppressed themselves, or we risk limiting our perspective to the powerful and thus dooming any of our proposed solution models to fail. Paulo Freire illuminates this point by asking:

Who are better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressed society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the need for liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through praxis of their quest for it.

(27)

So what would we learn if we stopped to listen? And how would our solution models change as a result? As aforementioned, when poverty is defined by the poor themselves, they describe it as a disempowered state of being versus a lack of material possessions. What this means is that the powerlessness that they feel (most often due to their membership in an oppressed group) is inextricably linked to the root cause of their financial insecurity. The objectification, alienation, and humiliation that the poor experience, deeply undermine their sense of being and thus their social and financial mobility. As a result, poverty becomes a part of a person's identity—sinking them deeper into a state of dependency and discouragement. As Corbett attests, “While there is a material dimension to being poor...there is also a loss of meaning, purpose, and hope that plays a major role in the poverty in North America” (Corbett, Fikkert 52). Therefore, as groups are continually oppressed, poverty becomes all but cemented in our nation's roots, and as long as we refuse to take notice of the blockades that prevent people from rising out of impoverishment, we will never be able to amend this injustice.

1.4. Do Intentions Matter?

As we come to better understand the meaning of poverty and how our privilege impacts our perspective, it is imperative that we take a closer look at what our underlying motivations are in helping the poor. People feel compelled to connect with charity work for a variety of reasons: for some it may be pure compassion for the less fortunate, while for others it may be a desire for self-glorification. But more often than not, it is a combination of a plethora of feelings, beliefs, and intentions that motivate us. The tricky thing is unraveling it all and analyzing what our core or primary influencers are. The reason that this process is so salient is that depending on what we
desire from our philanthropic experience, will greatly impact the quality and success of our efforts.

From an outsider’s perspective, it would appear that those who commit themselves to the service of the less fortunate are infused with a compassionate spirit and are worthy of praise. However, what people seldom notice is what might be lurking beneath the surface of compassion: perhaps a desire to be recognized, a need to be needed, or a craving for significance? Sadly, one of the most common and insidious of all hidden motivators for people involved in charity work is self-exaltation. Often concealed by an aspiration to “make a difference”, many people who feel compelled to help others harbor a strong desire to be glorified and recognized for their moral accomplishments.

As an emotionally social species, humans greatly esteem those who act out of empathetic concern--revering it perhaps more than any other human behavior. From memorable historical figures to fictional super heroes, our society’s model citizens are those who use their powers for the good of mankind--often putting themselves in harm’s way for the sake of others. The reason that we grant these individuals such favor is that we view their behavior as an ethical triumph over the dichotomy of the human psyche. This dichotomy is characterized by our competing carnal and moral desires. On the one hand, we are animals, intent on self-preservation and survival--prioritizing our own needs, desires, and egos to the point of violence and villainy. However, on the other hand, we are cooperative creatures with an evolved moral compass that sets us apart from all other earthly entities. We know that the most elevated state of our society is one of mutual respect, equality, and camaraderie. Therefore, we recognize and promote those who seem to be propelling our evolution by exhibiting moral mindfulness. Charitable people are the most clear examples of this and are thus given a great deal of positive attention and affirmation. However, this regard is frequently misattributed as many individuals covertly seek personal glorification while flying a banner of altruism. They desire to be elevated not only as a hero to the downtrodden but in the eyes of their peers as well.

Now some may argue that people’s desire to feel significant and recognized is a natural impulse and is ultimately benign. In fact, one could attest that the need for esteem is probably going to play a role in any occupational choice. Whether it be an artist, a doctor, or an athlete, wanting to feel recognized and necessary is certainly prevalent in most human pursuits. Indeed, this craving of consequence is applauded in most fields as well. If I wish to be a famous musician for instance, I am encouraged if not admired in my quest for glory--as I am simply siphoning from the collective desire for a life of meaning and corresponding affirmation. Consequently, one could also point out that a major issue with poverty is that many poor people abandon this pursuit of significance as a result of a depleted self image--resolving them to a stagnated and depressed state. So why then would it be repugnant for an agent in the philanthropic field to harbor such a natural and arguably positive human desire? I would reason that there lies a crucial, albeit subtle, difference between people acting out of a self-fulfilling inclination in a personal vs. a humanitarian context. In humanitarian service, the assumed focus is on the people you are trying to help. Again, this is the reason that we as a society so unquestioningly support charity work, as it seems to be in direct opposition to selfish motivations. People appear to be ascending beyond their own desire for glorification and altruistically giving of their time and energy in support of other people. Therefore, individuals who dedicate themselves to the welfare of the less fortunate are unflinchingly trusted--granting them a kind of Jesus-like reverence present in no other context.

Take, for example, the aspiring musician. Their chasing after glory and popularity is
unveiled, and therefore they are vulnerable to a variety of critiques. We may criticize the quality of their craft, their dedication to their work, or their integrity in general, but ultimately we question if they are worth our recognition at all. In this way, there is a great deal of acceptable judgment and discouragement that goes along with someone’s pursuit of glory in an open setting. However, this is not the standard for those who seek recognition more subversively such as in the field of philanthropy. Charity work is widely uncritcized and as such, a person entering the field will likely never experience disparagement regarding their work, their motives, or their integrity. People immediately are on their side and feel compelled to esteem and revere them. Therefore, nonprofit work is the perfect field to enter if you desire affirmed significance and a decreased risk of ego deflation.

Still, my opponents may remain skeptical as to the negative impact that selfish motives have on charity work. They may question the significance of people’s intentions if their actions remain the same. I would have to respond by arguing that actions do not remain the same if one’s motivations change. Having at the center of your motivation, self-glorification will only increase the likelihood of your perpetuating oppressive power dynamics, becoming resistant to critique, and having a fragile resolve. For if an agent is primarily motivated to “help” others as a way of reinforcing their own elevated ego, then they will never be receptive to the wisdom that instructs or the humility that equalizes.

A major coinciding consequence of self-centered motivations is the rescuer mentality, or as activist Teju Cole coins it, the “White-Savior Industrial Complex”. Cole argues that the white-savior is one who seeks to alleviate their own guilt and confirm their position of power by assuming the role of benevolent sovereign in disadvantaged communities. They chase heroism and purpose by ways of imposing themselves on the less fortunate, all the while never truly committing to creating change. In illustration of his point, Cole speaks of Africa specifically:

> Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism. From the colonial project to Out of Africa to The Constant Gardener and Kony 2012, Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of "making a difference." (Cole)

Cole goes on to explain that in a culture dominated by the belief that privilege and wealth are earned advantages, a sense of authority and ordination can develop with regards to the poor. Consequently, poor people are actively denied agency and authorship of their own lives as we continually exclude them from the discussion and make decisions on their behalf. Many people who are involved in philanthropy unconsciously participate in a corresponding narrative that reinforces their dominance by seeing themselves as god-like --anointed to bestow their “selfless service” and wisdom on the poor. In this way, the economically wealthy also suffer a “poverty of being”--one in which they use their social position to reinforce supremacy over those in subordinate social groups—alienating and elevating themselves at the same time (Corbett, Fikkert 61).

God-complexes allow people to feel important, powerful, and self-satisfied by highlighting their position as one above the masses. They provided an avenue for individuals to distinguish themselves as “set apart” and morally commendable, while shielding them from critique. Unfortunately, god-complexes are hard to detect, especially in ourselves. Therefore, it is critical that we ask one another the tough questions: what is it that truly motivates us when we
are assisting the poor? Are we simply acting from empathetic concern, or are we satisfying a belief that reinforces our domination? Author Steve Corbett explores these personal inquiries in his book When Helping Hurts, leading him to some enlightening conclusions:

I confess to you that part of what motivates me to help the poor is my felt need to accomplish something worthwhile with my life, to be a person of significance, to feel like I have pursued a noble cause...to be a bit like god. It makes me feel good to use my training in economics to “save” poor people. And in the process, I sometimes unintentionally reduce poor people to objects that I use to fulfill my own need to accomplish something. (62)

We all wish to be seen as virtuous, to have a life of purpose and meaning, and to be affirmed by our peers; however when these desires corrupt our compassion, our helping can turn to hurting. Self-centered intentions are natural and may only be one component in a matrix of interacting incentives, but if their presence is not properly identified and addressed, their impact can be powerful. To be clear, I am not attempting to demonize all but the most pure among us, I only wish to call attention to a rotting of our more noble desires. A tree’s roots for instance, will always be accompanied by natural fungus and other decomposing agents--most of which are benign or even helpful; however, if left unattended, some fungus can get out of control and compromise the tree’s very integrity. Similarly, by refusing to recognize our more elusive motivations, we will inevitably cause harm to others as well as ourselves. Corbett explains this cycle of mutual harm and mistrust with a simple equation:

\[
\text{Material Definition of Poverty} + \text{God-complexes Of Materially Non-poor} + \text{Feelings of Inferiority of Materially Poor Materially Poor and Non-poor} = \text{Harm to Both}
\]

(64)

I witnessed this process first-hand during a food security project in college. As a student, I participated in a number of community service endeavors, one of which was delivering expired baked goods to a local, low-income housing complex each week. The project began in an effort to reduce waste and meet food insecurity needs in the area; however, what started out as a group of enthusiastic young people who were hungry for purpose, devolved into a lot of kids whose savior complexes had given way to disdain and revulsion towards the very community they were intent on helping: “Why should we even keep helping them?” my friend burst out one day on the drive back to campus, “They don't even appreciate it! We've been giving them free food every week for two years and nothing ever changes. They just expect it now. They don't deserve our help.” I admit, at the time, I shared his frustration. It wasn't until I had a very frank conversation with one of our recipients that my perspective began to change.

Her name was Rosa. She was a middle-aged, single, Latina woman with three children. Rosa was one of the more friendly people we had met at the complex, so I was surprised when I saw her scowling at us as we handed out the baked goods. I walked over and tried giving her a package of cookies but she wouldn't take them. So I asked if something was wrong: “You kids come up in here every week like you own the place and give away food you wouldn't even eat. Don't fool yourself. You're not helping anyone. We don’t need your pity.” I was floored. No one had ever challenged us before. In fact, we received nothing but praise from our friends and
family. People were always impressed when I told them how I spent my Saturday mornings. I still remember the sense of pride that would well up in me as I described my efforts to “help the needy.”

Later, on the ride home, my classmates and I reflected on what had happened. When my initial offense eventually wore off, I realized just how right Rosa had been. Who did we think we were? We never asked the community if they wanted us there or what they actually needed. We had just assumed that they would appreciate our efforts and welcome us with open arms. It had never occurred to us that they might find our actions to be disrespectful or hurtful in any way. We relied so much on our “good intentions” to help the poor, that we failed to do our due diligence both outwardly and inwardly. Unfortunately, what resulted was the mask of compassion becoming fatigued as our deeper needs to feel important and necessary were unmet by our futile endeavors.

Some may argue that it is impossible to know whether a person suffers from a “god-complex”, or not. However, I would disagree. There is a plethora of behavioral evidence that points to the presence of such a delusion. Take for instance the mere absence of a dialogue in the majority of aid efforts. As with humans’ relationship to the gods of traditional religion, there is no discussion. God makes decisions single-handedly, and humans are grateful for any effort that God makes to reach into their lives. Clearly this is the relationship of choice for most philanthropists. There is almost no thought given to the needs and desires of the recipient community. We assume that they will be grateful for whatever halfhearted effort we make to improve their lives, and we call them entitled when they are withholding of thanks. It is peculiar that this norm is so prevalent in the aid industry seeing as a lack of dialogue seems wildly inappropriate in other contexts of assistance. For example, if my friend is moving and needs help packing, I would not show up to her house unannounced and, with no regard for her schedule or opinions, begin throwing things in “keep” and “toss” piles based on my own preferences. The only way to properly proceed in such a situation would be to ask my friend how I can help and to offer supportive assistance in her decision making process. Therefore, it is evident that by understanding the need for dialogue in the proposed example but not in the context of charity, that our god-complexes play a major part in our approach to aid work.

1.5. To Hell with Good Intentions, What About Good Effects?

“The evil that is in the world always comes from ignorance, and good intentions many do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding” (Camus 124)

Let us assume for a moment that not everyone suffers from the alleged “god-complex”. Perhaps some people have nothing but the purest of intentions at heart. However, even so, having magnanimous motivations still does not imply that your actions are above reproach. You still assume the same responsibility that you would in any other context, and unfortunately, charity work is one in which a great deal of harm can be done. Author of “Investigating Urban and Community Needs”, Carol Maybach asserts that:

The ubiquitous call for serving others in the service ethic has denied the implications and results of service for so long that we have come to describe worthy projects with terms such as a good cause. What about good effects? (227)
We need to begin to understand how our efforts to fight economic insecurity can actually worsen the lives of those we are attempting to help. It goes without saying that the majority of people who are involved in philanthropic endeavors are at least partially motivated by a desire to do good (regardless of perhaps a tandem desire for personal glorification). Very often their sympathetic feelings for the less fortunate run deep and encourage them to support a cause for social justice. However, what most people fail to realize is that the majority of common charitable acts are oppressive in and of themselves. Soup kitchens, holiday gift drives, donation centers, mission trips, student-service excursions and the like, all have one thing in common: the giver-receiver relationship structure. In the vast majority of charitable organizations and projects there are inequitable power structures that are inheritorly established at the program's inception.

It is an extremely common process: a compassionate person sees a need in their community or in the world, they feel moved to become involved in an effort to meet said need, so they organize resources and a group of like-minded individuals to combat whatever injustice they deem worthy of their attention. Now one of the things that this process is missing is due diligence. Many compassionate people dive into philanthropic work without properly engaging the community and or doing the necessary research and personal reflection required to actually make a difference. As previously discussed, privilege and oppression are inextricably linked with issues of poverty; however even if you as an agent recognize this, you may still not fully understand your own unintentional participation in power dynamics. Sometimes even a person's mere presence can diminish a community's dignity.

Take for instance the experience of author and minister Robert Lupton, who for years ran a popular gift drive during Christmas. Every year Lupon and his church group would collect presents from the congregation and deliver them to struggling families in the Atlanta area. However, after years of watching these families' financial situations continue to be stagnated, Lupon decided to move into the urban neighborhood himself and get to know the community he was attempting to serve. When Christmas rolled around that year, instead of driving van loads of presents around the city and organizing food drives, Lupton quietly celebrated the holiday with one of his new neighbors. Sometime during the evening, a knock came at the door: the church's 'gifters' had arrived. The children crowded around with brimming anticipation for the presents they were about to receive—an experience that Lupton had witnessed and enjoyed on countless occasions. But this time he was on the other side of the door, offering him an entirely new perspective:

I was witnessing a side I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family, how a wife is forced to shield her children from their father’s embarrassment, and how children get the message that the “good stuff” comes from rich white people out there and it is free. (33)

Only after committing himself to becoming a neighbor and not just a benefactor, was Lupton able to see the toxic emotional impact of this kind of charity. He finally understood that even the most kindhearted of actions can yield unintended consequences. In this case, the well-meaning church members did not simply give presents to local poor children, they diminished the dignity of their parents and reinforced oppressive race relations. Such an impact is most certainly unforeseen and inadvertent, but nevertheless it remains inexcusable. By entering into such a situation, one assumes the responsibility of privilege-awareness. Unfortunately, this
can be an incredibly daunting task which often requires a considerable amount of self-reflection and evolving cognizance.

Unfortunately, on the world stage, unforeseen consequences can be even more deleterious. Termed “orphan tourism”, it has become increasingly popular for white, First World volunteers to make their way to orphanages around the world and offer their “help”. Hoping to coddle crying babies and read to cuddly toddlers, many volunteers are blissfully unaware of the corrupt industry that they may be supporting. In Cambodia, 77% of children in orphanages are not in fact orphans. Convinced by orphanage directors that their children will be better off in their care, many parents send their children to live in such homes. These corrupt predators then capitalize on Westerners’ desire to have a “meaningful experience helping the poor” and invite volunteers to come and spend time and money at their facility. Many orphanages are even purposely kept disheveled so as to attract more capital, denying beds and adequate food to the children in their care (Stayton).

However, even if the corruption did not exist, what do volunteers hope to accomplish on their micro-trips abroad? Largely unskilled, volunteers flood into communities and mostly just occupy space. You playing with children and swinging a hammer that could be otherwise wielded by a local does nothing for long-term development, it is about you, and volunteer establishments know this. Often more concerned with the experience of the paying participant, many legitimate organizations cater to the impact that a trip will have on a volunteer and instead of the receiving community. Many formidable organizations’ websites offer “reasons to volunteer” lists in hopes of enticing program participation. Astonishingly, some of the most common reasons that organizations list are: to feel needed, to build your resume, to gain recognition, and to act out a fantasy (Ellis). This is perhaps why critics of these recruitment techniques have begun to launch their own crusades against self-interest-focused volunteerism. In a UNICEF-sponsored ChildSafe campaign, potential volunteers are challenged to rethink their excursions before entering possibly harmful situations, especially in regards to orphans and children. They claim that children are often exploited by foreigners in order to fulfill a fantasy--all the while, lasting improvements remain disregarded.

![Children Are Not Tourist Attractions](https://example.com/children_not_tourist_attractions.png)
[Figure 2]

In support of the UNICEF campaign, author and editor Michele Stayton writes:

...orphanages and slums aren’t a tourist attraction, so they should not be treated like one. They are not a destination to be checked off one’s do-good/feel-good bucket list. They house real people with often devastating backgrounds who are in need of care longer than you can provide, more food and medical treatment than you’re equipped to give, and a more sustainable community that is less susceptible to things like war and disease. They do not need your pity, temporary attention, or to be featured in your Facebook profile photo for a month.

Despite this campaign and those like it, short term mission trips and service excursions have been on the raise. Growing exponentially in the last two decades, the US now exports between two and four million volunteers abroad every year (Lupton 67). We raise millions of dollars to send our bright-eyed youth around the world in colorful T-shirts to build houses and play with orphans, all the while, never truly considering the deleterious effects these trips may have. Volunteers enter a community with very little understanding of the culture or history and proceed to impose themselves on the locals—making decisions concerning their welfare and ignoring regional wisdom. In this way, we again, patronize a group of people by projecting that even as foreigners, our ideas and contributions to their community far exceed their own. In his address at the Conference on InterAmerican Student projects in 1968, Austrian philosopher and activist Ivan Illich, protests the presence of American “do-gooders” in Latin America and asks that we rethink the value of voluntary service activity:

It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don’t even understand what you are doing or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as “good” a “sacrifice” and “help”. [So] I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status, and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. but do not come to help (Illich).

Illich goes on to implore his audience to stop thinking of their benevolent vacations abroad as “development opportunities” and to humbly accept their own powerlessness in enacting lasting change. He challenges us to stop being so self satisfied by our humanitarian efforts and to take a hard look at the negative consequence that follow in our naive wake. Here, Illich is speaking directly to the offensiveness of short-term service trips done by ignorant volunteers. However, I believe his point can speak to a much larger audience. Even those who commit to more permanent posts, are still vulnerable to the same critique. Peace corps volunteers for instance, go through comparably rigorous training before the are sent on assignment. However, despite their briefing on a region’s culture, history, and economics, they are still ill-equipped to plug into a community they’ve never known and give “expert” advice. In an op-ed for the New York Times, writer Robert Strauss illuminates this point by challenging his readers to imagine if the shoe was on the other foot:

In Cameroon, we had many volunteers sent to serve in the agriculture program whose only experience was puttering around in their mom and dad’s backyard during high school. I wrote to our headquarters in Washington to ask if anyone had considered how an American farmer would feel if a fresh-out-of-college Cameroonian with a liberal arts degree who had occasionally visited Grandma’s cassava plot were sent to Iowa to consult
on pig-­raising techniques learned in a three­­month crash course. I’m pretty sure the
American farmer would see it as a publicity stunt and a bunch of hooey, but I never heard
back from headquarters. (Strauss)

To become a valuable contributor in a community you must have more than noble
motives and a college diploma. You need to be truly familiar and invested. This is why the
money raised to send people abroad could arguably be much better spent as means of investment
in local entrepreneurs and agencies. On average, it costs around $2,500 per volunteer to
participate in an short term charity experience (totaling $20,000 to $40,000 per trip). This amount
of money could easily fund more than ten indigenous aid workers for an entire year in many host
countries (Corbett, Fikkert 161). Furthermore, local workers are endowed with a much larger
sense of personal investment due to the fact that it is their community that will benefit from their
efforts. As such, their work typically has a much greater impact than the work done by foreigners
that come for a few weeks to build an altar to Western idealism only to then quickly leave.
During his time spent in Cuba, Robert Lupton accounts the irony that many of the communities
face when hosting U.S. volunteers:

A new group of twenty youth and adults had just arrived, eager to lay tile in the new dormitory
addition. Not one volunteer had experience in tile work [and] the grout lines were crooked and the
tile had to be reset. No matter that skilled tile layers sat outside the seminary gates, waiting to see
if there would be any work left for them after the volunteers left. These volunteers had paid good
money to come all the way from the States, and they were expecting to do “meaningful” work.
(Lupton 17)

Some argue that sending volunteers abroad is an investment that yields an increase in
future giving, more long­term endeavors, and lasting cross-cultural relationships. However,
studies have shown that the impact on the volunteer post-trip is short­lived. People do not keep
up with their “new friends” nor does their support often yield significant future commitments
(Corbett, Fikkert 162). Therefore, in finality, the returns to do not appear to match the
investment. This does not imply that humanitarian-focused trips should be altogether abandoned,
only that we must seriously reformat their design and implementation. Trips should be focused
on being present and learning from a community, not simply on volunteering--only then can we
hope for a more honest, holistic exchange.

In the end, your good intentions are simply not enough when it comes to the complex,
interacting system of poverty and subjugation. Just as a doctor’s intentions are not sufficient to
wield a scalpel in an the operating room, a humanitarian’s goodwill is not the only requirement
when participating in aid work. She cannot merely hope to heal, she must do her due diligence
and enter the situation with all of the information available--knowing the full range of potential
risks she is taking by becoming involved. That being said, there is always a risk that a “helping
action” will make things worse, but again, entering into a situation without proper preparation
and awareness is simply irresponsible. You cannot sue a doctor for malpractice if they have done
everything in their power to prepare for your surgery and have informed you totally as to the risk
you are taking by going under the knife. However, you most certainly can sue a doctor if they fail
to notify you of surgical dangers and did no preparation whatsoever. Being fully prepared does
not ensure a positive outcome but it does minimize the chances of damage.
2. “Solutions” and Their Downfall

2.1. A Top-Down Approach

Many people have come and gone on the world stage claiming they have the solution for solving world poverty. From development economists to celebrities, the global audience has entertained thousands of individuals who spout ideas about Utopia and how they plan to deliver us there. We are seduced by their grandeur and idealism—pouring millions upon millions of dollars into their project proposals. Their promises stimulate our imaginations and awaken our hope for simple solutions to enduring problems. Especially in an age of technocratic innovation, it is easy to be convinced by charismatic performers that our scientific evolution is the key to unlocking global development. However, in the last five decades, the West has spent over $2.3 trillion on foreign aid projects, and yet somehow global poverty has persisted relatively unchanged (Easterly, “White Man’s” 4). With nearly $1 trillion going to Africa alone, there has been zero growth in per capita income during this time. In fact, average wages in Africa are lower today than they were in the 1970s, with more than 350 million people living on less than a dollar a day—a figure that has nearly doubled in two decades (Moyo). So why, despite years of research, obscenely large sums of money, and millions of volunteers does our economic conundrum fail to be solved?

In 2005, a highly applauded, American economist named Jeffrey Sachs claimed that he possessed the answer. According to Sachs, the reason that global efforts to end poverty were failing was due to the fact that investment and education are simply not sufficient in creating lasting sustainable solutions. In his book, The End of Poverty, Sachs argues that extreme impoverishment can be solved by 2025 through carefully crafted development-based aid. He articulates that if poor countries were able to reach the “bottom rung” of the development ladder and enter the global marketplace, then their need for aid would be greatly reduced or eliminated. Therefore, by targeting our aid dollars to building various infrastructures in poor communities, we will be able to lift them up and out of the “poverty trap” and grant them economic autonomy and prosperity as a result.

Sach’s proposal was accompanied by a step by step plan that outlined how, if provided the funding, he would implement his ideas in communities across Africa. His outline was extremely appealing as it took very complex ideas and simplified them into a few data points ready for digestion. So after becoming a New York Times Bestseller, his project, coined the Millennium Villages Project, was quickly funded by the World Bank and other private donors. With $120 million raised, Sachs set out to systematically and holistically lift up fourteen villages in ten sub-saharan countries by addressing education, health care, and marketplace development simultaneously. Over the next five years, Sachs received countless awards and appointments for his efforts in the Millennium Villages, including honorary degrees from over twenty universities and being named one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World by Time Magazine. His celebrity status attracted ever more donors and shielded him from possible critique. However, when a revealing exposé on Sachs’ project was published in 2013 by journalist Nina Munk, a cloud of doubt was cast on his self-reported successes.

Munk claimed that in her six years following Sachs’ project, she failed to see any lasting improvement in the Millennium Villages and in fact, believed that many of the villagers were worse off than before the project began:
It's one of the cruelest things in the world to come to a group of people, set their hearts on fire saying I'm going to change your life; there's magic coming--it's the magic of expertise, wisdom and money... And to take that dream, which every human being has of a better life, especially for their children, and to smash it through your own hubris... the fact of the matter is that Jeffrey Sachs, in oversimplifying problems and in amplifying his abilities, really not only sets himself up for failure but in so many ways, [has] cruelly disappointed and harmed the people he supposedly set out to help. (Munk, Roberts. Econ Talk)

In her book, The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty, Munk details how one man’s arrogance and blind idealism inspired thousands, but ultimately failed to live up to his proposed Utopian expectations. Originally optimistic about the project, Munk was sadly disillusioned by the results especially after believing so wholeheartedly in Sachs’ enthusiastic message. Like so many before him, Sachs’ well-meaning intentions and top-down approach were unsuccessful in sustainably meeting the needs of his beneficiaries. Seemingly faltering at every turn, Sachs faced unending complications and setbacks, from dying livestock to rotting harvests.

One such complication involved the cash crop system that was implemented in many of the villages. Originally believed to be the perfect solution for the subsistence farming economy in the areas, the cash crop endeavor turned out to be a massive debacle. The high yield crops succeeded in keeping the villagers fed, but they also caused a host of other problems: from attracting rats and other vermin to driving market prices to all time low, the program’s implementers failed to account for the cultural differences and the lack of trade infrastructure in place. For example, in the village of Ruhiiira, the community was instructed to grow maize, a product in very low demand as it is culturally considered prison food. Therefore, the villagers were unable to sell their excess product and with no storage facilities, were forced to let it rot in the Sub-Saharan sun--causing a rat infestation and corresponding disease. Now from Sachs’ perspective, maize was a simple solution to an enduring problem--mainly that poor farmers were barely able to produce enough food to feed their own families, much less make a profit, and maize was a resilient cash crop, rich with starch and fairly easy to grow. As such, it would appear to make perfect, imminently good sense to invest in growing a product that could potentially enable farmers to not only survive subsistently, but to increase their economic stability as well. However, by not consulting the locals, Sachs alienated his tactical approach to a bird’s eye view--one that looks for “quick wins” and doesn’t pay attention to the details on the ground.

Unfortunately, such accounts litter Munk’s book--illuminating just how easy it is for a seemingly brilliant idea to quickly give way to a labyrinth of never-ending problems and insufficient solutions. However, what is even more regrettable it that Sachs has been widely unreceptive to critique and has mounted a full scale defense against Munk and her supporters. He accuses them of being callous, indifferent, and pessimistic toward the poor and the fight against poverty. Surprisingly, this kind of response is not uncommon in the philanthropic community: people who tout solutions--the idealists--are given the moral high ground as they are the ones out doing something, while those who raise questions and challenge said solutions are treated as heartless and uncaring. This dynamic is extremely unproductive as it blockades any meaningful evolution in the aid industry. In an infamous encounter with Jeffrey Sachs, Munk witnessed him stand up and scream at a colleague who was opposing a malaria bed net initiative (as he believed that it could destroy the local bed net market), “These deaths are on your hands!” (102). This attempt to vilify his opponent did nothing but alienate Sachs and his view to a false moral high ground while silencing what could have been a beneficial perspective.
To this day Sachs has refused to admit defeat and continues to implement his “expert models” in villages across Africa--touting cherry-picked statistics in order to justify his sustaining the endeavor. Unfortunately, The Millennium Villages Project (MVP) has failed to provide any adequate testimony from the villagers themselves as to the effect the effort has had on their lives. However, the celebrity status that people such as Jeffrey Sachs receive, tend to shield them from scrutiny and support an unending funneling of funds. This allows failed endeavours to go on indefinitely and answer to no one. This issue is only compounded by the fact that there exist no feedback mechanisms that allow community members to speak their concerns or be included in the decision making process. Regrettably, this is not isolated to the MVP and occurs throughout the aid industry.

2.2. Feedback and Accountability

There is shockingly little effort being made to communicate with the recipients of aid. Solution models are dreamt up in the air-conditioned offices of universities and government buildings, without any input or approval of the intended beneficiaries. This not only creates a chasm between the dreams of hopeful philanthropists and the harsh realities of poverty on the ground, but also subjects poor communities to the paternalism and subjugation of Western idealism. This condescension is damning and continues to isolate communities and undermine results. For in any other context, consumers can force a company to amend their practices by refusing to buy their products, but as aid recipients are receiving things for free, they have no buying power and affectively, no voice. As a result, a “tyranny of experts” are able to dictate technocratic solution models that fail to comprehensively address the core issues of poverty and in the end, reinforce systems of disempowerment (Easterly, Econ Talk).

This is one of the main problems with top-down solution models: in addition to there being no built in feedback mechanisms, there is also no corresponding accountability. Bureaucracies, no matter how noble the cause, are mainly motivated by the same thing: to perpetuate their own existence. Many compassionate, good-hearted people in aid agencies understand that if they were to survey recipients and get negative results, it would be disastrous publicity for their fundraising efforts. This knowledge causes organizations to rely on non-comprehensive statistics that offer misleading results, or even to fabricate outcomes altogether. Unfortunately, this kind of behavior is largely unchecked as their is no major oversight in the philanthropic industry. Therefore, if it is true that “conscience is the feeling that someone is watching” as the saying suggests, then the aid industry is shockingly conscience-free. This goes back to our blind trust of charitable causes and people, as we tend to believe that if your goal is at all altruistic, then your actions need no exploration.

The same issue applies on a grander scale to government agencies. A government or regime, no matter the political style of leadership, is fundamentally motivated by a desire to stay in power. Therefore, in a liberal society, where citizens are free to appoint their own government officials, leaders are forced to comply with the demands of the people in fear of being removed from their position of power. In this way, a voting populace can force their states to be

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2 The Millennium Villages Project responded to Munk’s assessment in an official statement on their website. However, I consider their response to be insufficient based on the fact that they simply refer to biased, self-reported success and completely neglect to address the core of Munk’s argument.
benevolent by punishing those who fail to solve problems and rewarding those who do. Unfortunately, even in “free” societies there can be issues surrounding power distribution and a dedication to social welfare. In the United States for example, people making less than $20,000 a year are more than 30% less likely to vote in official elections (Weeks). As such, candidates are increasingly inclined to focus their efforts on promoting policies that help the middle and upper class rather than elevating the poor. This creates a stronghold of power, as it allows the rich to accumulate further wealth and the poor to become ever more voiceless. The issue is further compounded as even the poor themselves are disinclined to advocate for their own community, since outwardly identifying as “lower-class” remains repugnant. Therefore, even active voters in poor populations will come out against public policies and programs that could assist them in fear of being associated with such an oppressed group. As previously mentioned, impoverished communities tend to internalize the humiliation and degradation they experience from society. This can present itself in a number of different ways, one being a total disassociation with their community, or another, a complete lack of motivation to participate in politics; but regardless, the political power of poor populations is being diminished, as politicians have no motivation to advocate for them.

In the same way that politicians in the U.S. lack the motivation to champion a fight against poverty, autocrats around the world also have insufficient incentive to significantly alter the status quo. In fact, as a nation, we rarely hold recipient countries accountable for the aid that we give them or keep track of how it is spent. We require no feedback from their intended beneficiaries and thus continue to grant money to corrupt governments that fail to serve their constituents. For example, in nations such as Rwanda and Somalia, more than 70% of total government spending comes from foreign aid. Therefore, as a source of easy money, many autocracies channel the international funds meant to assist struggling populations to instead further support their bloated bureaucracies. As recently as 2002, the African Union estimated that corruption and embezzlement were costing the continent over $150 billion a year (Moyo). However, as mentioned, the obvious corruption hasn’t seemed to affect the unmitigated flow of capital from the international community. With many leaders found guilty of lining their pockets with aid dollars, it is confusing as to why the IMF and the World Bank continue to fund nefarious governments around the world. In 1978 for instance, after being tirelessly warned about the runaway corruption in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), the IMF gave the country the largest loan it had ever given an African nation, and it is hardly better today (Moyo). In 2009, Malawi’s former president, Bakili Muluzi was indicted for stealing more than $12 million worth of aid money, and yet the country was still given over $80 million in grants the following year (Randall et al.).

Many global economists and international development specialists have spoken out against such reckless behavior, calling international aid not only a massive failure but a damaging endeavor as well. Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian-born development economist and former World Bank employee, argues that foreign investment has in fact trapped many African nations in cycles of corruption, slower economic growth, and poverty:

> A constant stream of “free” money is a perfect way to keep inefficient or simply bad governments in power. As aid flows in, there is nothing more for the government to do...no matter that its citizens are disenfranchised, all a government really needs is to court and cater its foreign donors to stay in power... Stuck in an aid-world of no incentives, there is no reason for governments to seek other, better, more transparent
ways of raising development. (Moyo)

So the issue remains, that without accountability, whether it be from the poor themselves or from donors, a government will never be motivated to enact lasting change. This is a fundamental point that many technocrats do not understand, for as long as the people are denied political power, society cannot and will not evolve. Therefore, as the “experts” draft programs and fund projects, the on-the-ground situation remains unchanged. Furthermore, if feedback loops continue to be unutilized, then no infrastructure can be created to combat such stagnicity.

2.3. Order Isn’t Everything

Another issue that arises with top-down solution models is the lack of attainable information that would be hypothetically necessary to craft perfect fixes for enduring problems. This is why according to political philosopher Friedrich Hayek, planned orders are greatly inferior to organically arising social systems as they can never account for the endless complications that emerge in humanity. He argues that the obstacle to effective central planning is that it is in fact impossible to understand the widely dispersed and ever changing factors that cause a society to evolve. In the same way that a biologist cannot dictate an organism’s specific evolutionary path, an economist cannot prescribe a set of circumstances to create a certain societal outcome. Therefore, the puppeteering that social planners use in attempt to create a Utopian society, is futile in a world filled with free agents and conflicting agendas. As Hayek explains, “the reason for this is that the ‘data’ from which the economic calculus starts, [is] never for the whole society ‘given’ to a single mind which could work out the implications and can never be so given” (Hayek 519). In his work, Hayek also uses an excerpt from Adam Smith to illustrate this point:

[a man of system] seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might choose to impress upon it. If those two principles coincide and act in the same direction, the game of human society will go on easily and harmoniously, and is very likely to be happy and successful. If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder. (Smith 234)

This misconception that there exists a formulaic set of “chess moves” that will rid the world of poverty and injustice is not a new concept. In fact, historically speaking, the top-down expert model has been at the center of many major social movements. Dating back to Plato in ancient Greece, philosophers and economists alike have perpetuated the idea that society need only be engineered by a few specialists to achieve the Utopian goals of equality and efficiency. However, from the French Revolution to the Russian Communist state, social engineering has failed time and time again--often creating even more destruction in its wake. Unfortunately, the romance of Utopia is timeless and enduring.

Billions of dollars and man hours have been dedicated to pursuing a nonexistent equation that promises success and prosperity. This is largely due to the fact that people are impatient and demand that problems be solved overnight. As such, those who make the grandest plans and the
most extensive promises tend to steal the show. In his book *The White Man’s Burden*, noted economist William Easterly terms these people the “planners” of society, and argues that their ignorant and often arrogant approach to development is misguided and naive. Siding with Hayek, Easterly claims that cause and effect are often elusive and as such, by relying on the infallibility of technocratic solutions we are effectively denying the inevitable social, political, and psychological elements that influence economic progress. Consequently, there is simply no way that a group of experts can possibly conceive the intricate set of issues that face their constituents, especially when no feedback mechanisms are in place. Sadly, many organizations operate under the illusion that can in fact wholly understand the issues and successfully implement solution models without the direct involvement of their recipients. Take the World Bank for instance: a large, top-down bureaucracy that attempts to direct resources administratively but has no real accountability or democratic process to keep them in check. They rely on committees and researchers to instruct their decisions all the while ignoring local wisdom and investing in an expert’s calculus. Ergo, organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF end up hemorrhaging funds and failing to meet the actual needs of their intended recipients. Easterly argues that this creates an unintentional tyranny that neglects the rights of the poor and fails to direct lasting improvements.

The antithesis of the “planner” method is embodied in what Easterly calls the “searcher’s” approach-- a far less romantic tactic that utilizes a trial-and-error methodology and accounts for the outsider’s ignorance and general limitations. It seeks to operate on the ground floor--incorporating the autonomy and agency of the recipient communities and always assuming a posture of humility. The “searcher” is one who seeks sustainable solutions that are gradual and evolutionary and understands that no proposed plan can ever be implemented without the knowledge and ownership of the community it seeks to assist.

What both Easterly and Hayek understand is that the path of economic and social evolution is widely unpredictable, regardless of our understanding the fundamental principles regarding growth. We can argue that the most successful societies and economies are ones that operate freely, honor the rights of their citizens, and utilize current technologies. However, we cannot prescribe freedom, dictate governance, or impose innovation. These things must arise organically and through natural selection. In hindsight, it is often very clear as to why a system proceeded and succeeded the way that it did; yet, no matter how logical the process appears in retrospect, it does not follow that future changes will be foreseeable. Just as the evolution of humans and other organisms seems rational, our future development can only be postulated, not decided. This is not to say that the fight against poverty should be abandoned or that the current system is completely devoid of success or virtue--surely there have been many successes due to aid industry efforts, the sharp reduction in infant mortality and malaria deaths worldwide just being some. However, if a business had a 20% investment return rate, we would not consider it to be above improvement. In the same way, our aid efforts, though beneficial in some areas, are in desperate need of reevaluation and amendment. From this standpoint, we may begin to discuss how to address poverty and other social injustices. (However, before we can enter into such a conversation, we must distinguish the various forms that poverty, as not all poverty is created equal.)
3. Moving Towards Recovery

3.1. Crisis vs. Chronic Poverty

When a devastating earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, millions of people were left without food, housing, or clean water. In response, thousands of volunteers flooded the country to lend a helping hand. From doctors to soldiers, the world banded together to aid in the crisis—raising roughly $9 billion, 39 countries sent countless resources to deal with the disaster. Thankfully, these efforts were massively successful in bringing the country back to pre-earthquake conditions. However, after the initial calamity was dealt with, volunteers quickly realized that the country had been in disarray long before the earthquake hit. With a crumbling infrastructure and a non-existent economy, Haiti had topped the charts as the poorest country in the hemisphere more than ten years running. Receiving over $8 billion in aid over that last four decades, the country had only become 25% poorer than before the aid began (“Rebuilding”). Yet, with all of the additional people having witnessed the devastation and squalor that the Haitian people were living in, many volunteers remained in Haiti to found even more charity organizations and service projects. Unfortunately, the awash of aid that helped relieve the desperate need of the earthquake survivors, continued to remain impotent when the chronic issues came to the surface.

Similarly, as hundreds of thousands of Americans face homelessness each year, volunteers and organizations spring up everywhere to address the lack of adequate food, housing and clothing for this community. Unfortunately, the homeless population has remained steady in the last decade despite the millions of dollars that have been used to aid the issue (“The State”). So the question remains: why is capital investment a successful tactic in some situations, such as aiding tsunami victims, and not in others, like developing an economy or combating homelessness?

On the surface, it would appear that the earthquake survivors in Haiti and the homeless population in the U.S. suffer from the same problem, mainly a lack of sufficient food, clothing, and shelter. However, intuitively, we know that these two groups face very different situations and in turn, require very different kinds of help. On the one hand, the devastation that the earthquake victims suffer from is caused by an immediate and unanticipated disaster; whereas on the other, the issues that the American homeless face are largely created by long-standing issues regarding discrimination, healthcare, job opportunities, and affordable housing. As such, each situation warrants a completely distinctive response. Comparably, before treating an injured patient, a doctor must evaluate the existing injury and its corresponding urgency in order to formulate a plan. Triage doctors for example, are trained to assess wounds and determine the most pressing issues that face the patient prior to deciding on a course of treatment. With a gaping flesh wound for instance, it is imperative to stop the bleeding by immediately applying a tourniquet; however, a tourniquet is not a long-term solution: if left unattended, a constricted limb will quickly turn septic. As such, the first priority when addressing poverty is to assess the situation and assign degrees of urgency. Then, we must avoid relying on temporary fixes to treat long standing problems, as we will never see any improvements, and in fact, ultimately, we will cause long term harm.

Crisis-style poverty management is a tourniquet: a short term fix to a problem that requires long term care. It works to stop the bleeding but not to heal the wound. Therefore, a
“crisis-response” is only effective in a handful of situations, most of which are a direct consequence of an unforeseeable catastrophe. According to community development specialist Steven Corbett, this style of management is called “relief” and should only be employed as an urgent and temporary form of aid that aims to reduce [the immediate suffering caused by natural or man-made crisis. Typically this form of aid is appropriate as a reaction to a war, famine, epidemic, earthquake etc. It is not an effective solution to suffering that results from enduring political and economic instability. “Rehabilitation”, on the other hand, is an alternative tactic that can be used when beginning down the road to recovery. Corbett argues that rehabilitation begins as soon as the bleeding stops as it “seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions” focusing primarily on working with victims as they participate in their own recuperation (Corbett, Fikkert 100). Finally, when rehabilitation methods are no longer applicable to a given situation, “development” tactics are called for. Development is a crucial component in the recovery model as it focuses on the long term and overall health of a community. Instead of assigning the roles of “giver” and “receiver” as in the relief phase, the development phase encourages the empowerment of all individuals involved, promoting independence and increased community resilience. In the end, each approach needs to be increasingly participatory.

![Figure 3]

### 3.2. The Poison of Paternalism

Unfortunately, many times organizations will fail to discern whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is called for before engaging in their poverty-alleviation efforts. As a result, millions of dollars are wasted on programs that treat chronic problems as crisis--ultimately ignoring the root causes and perpetuating paternalism. So often when we fail to fully assess the situation by not choosing to first listen, we underestimate what people are capable of doing themselves and thus intervene in unhelpful and disempowering ways. For instance, a soup kitchen may serve an immediate need of a hungry person, mainly by providing them food, but at what cost? A food charity operation that works under strict rules and infantilizes the poor, may feed the needy but it also reinforces their oppression and position of inferiority.

As cordial and genuinely friendly as givers may be, the poor remain on the outside. Resources are owned by insiders. Rules are devised by those in control...The recipient must figure out the rules of the system, determine the kind of appeal most likely to secure maximum benefit, and [devise a] language that best matches the dispenser’s values...Givers, then, must continually tighten the rules,
close off loopholes, guard against favoritism, and be ever vigilant to detect manipulation or outright fraud. The system lends itself to adversarial relationships. (Lupton 62)

My opponents may argue that despite some minor imperfections, charities like soup kitchens serve a critical purpose in serving the poor and homeless in the United States, and thus shutting them down would be a great disservice to the community. While I agree that soup kitchens address an immediate need for some people, I do not believe that funding their operation or even volunteering at one of their locations is ultimately advantageous. Those suffering from food insecurity in the United States are for the most part, not in crisis. They will not die or be seriously harmed if they do not receive daily provisions, nor is their situation caused by a sudden disaster. Therefore, “relief” is not appropriate nor beneficial. Instead, what is beneficial is that such people participate in their own recovery by growing their autonomy and agency. This can only occur through the development of symbiotic relationships based on mutual respect and recognition. Most soup kitchens, food pantries, and the like treat their beneficiaries like faceless people at a feedlot or greedy children that require coraling. In this way, they patronize their beneficiaries and create systems of dependency that assume the patron’s incapability of engaging in their own assistance. This is not to say that the operators of such programs are in any way unfeeling or purposefully paternalistic, only that in an effort to develop efficient systems, they sacrifice developing equitable relationships and instead force poor people into another toxic pattern of reliance. In this way, the problem is not a lack of good will, it is the absence of a mechanism that holds aid agencies accountable to committing to long-term development by ways of building lasting, equitable relationships. Robert Lupton, in his poignant expose Toxic Charity, explains how relationships that are built from need quickly turn rancid:

Relationships built on need do not reduce need. Rather, they require more and more need to continue. The ways that victim and rescuer relate become familiar communication paths. The victim brings the dilemma; the rescuer finds the solutions. When one problem is solved, another must be presented in order for the relationship to continue. If the victim no longer needs a solution, the rescuer is no longer needed. And the relationship ends or must dramatically change. [Therefore] Relationships built on need are seldom healthy...The recipient feels controlled by the strings attached by the giver, and the giver feels deceived by the recipient’s lack of candor. (Lupton 60-61)

One-way giving is a trap that binds both giver and receiver into a cycle of unhealthy power dynamics, as doing things for people that they could otherwise do for themselves is damagingly condescending. Apart from disaster response, working with rather than for those in need is an imperative element to successful rehabilitation and development. Otherwise, people begin to identify as “victim” or as “rescuer” and become complacently satisfied with the established roles, making it increasingly difficult to change them. However, if we abandon our pursuit of quick fixes and simple solutions and instead focus on cultivating relationships, we will establish authentic parity between the economically rich and poor. By working towards recognizing each other’s shared human experience, we will break down the walls of misunderstanding and begin to transform our pity towards the poor into true empathy. We will see our fellow man not as separate, but as an extension of self--loving and accepting people’s flaws as we learn to accept our own. Through this process, we cease categorizing the poor as “other”, allowing our paternalistic practices to begin to come to light. According to Lupton, this process is called “holistic compassion” and allows for relationships to be built on reciprocal
exchange. Unfortunately, detoxifying pathological relationships can be incredibly difficult and surprisingly uncomfortable, however, it is necessary in order to enact real change.

3.3. Meeting Resistance and Assuming Responsibility

In an effort to establish practices that foster healthier relationships, Lupton decided to end his church’s adopt-a-family gift drive as well as their food pantry. This created some serious pushback from community members and church goers alike: many recipients felt cheated, as they had come to depend on the church’s charity, and the parish expressed frustration about his proposed alternatives which were much more involved (to be discussed in more detail later on). Lupton was somewhat confused by the adverse reactions, especially from the congregation. Many people he had spoken to were aware that giving away free food and other handouts could foster dependency and need-based relationships but seemed unwilling to amend their practices. During a conference, Lupon asked his audience why they thought that churches continue to invest in handout-style charity if many of them agreed that it created dependency. In response, one audience member blurted out: “Because it’s easier! It costs much less time and money to run a food pantry, and that’s what churches want! Churches want their members to feel good about serving the poor, but no one really wants to become involved in messy relationships” (Lupton 57). This person’s candor may be unique but their perspective is not. As previously mentioned, many people engage in charity to fulfill an emotional need but not to actually solicit change. As a result, when their methods are challenged, they become defensive and resistant. They have become accustomed to the emotional price tag that their giving solicites—expecting something in return for their altruistic efforts while still maintaining their distance. In his book Money and Power, French philosopher, Jacques Ellul argues

   It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Alms-giving is Mammon’s perversion of giving. It affirms the superiority of the giver, who thus gains a point on the recipient, binds him, demands gratitude, humiliates him and reduces him to a lower state than he had before. (112)

Ellul is illuminating that under the facade of humility, toxic dynamics between “giver” and “receiver” roles, deform relationships and thus undermine benevolent efforts. Unfortunately, as the audience member attested, forming “messy relationships” can be taxing and much more complicated than simply handing out food or clothes. The same goes for foreign aid as well. Sending a one-time donation to Haiti after the earthquake for instance, feels good and seems to satisfy our sense of duty. However, confronting our country’s (and correspondingly, our own) culpability in the economic instability of the region is a much greater request. In the end, it is high time that we stop disassociating ourselves from the misfortunes of others, and begin to recognize our own involvement in the mass subjugation of our fellow man. We must endure the growing pains of transform and begin recognizing that our own complacency may be impeding the process of development. Rooted change often requires us to alter our personal lives and perspectives--asking us to look inward and confront our position of domination over those we are trying to help, as well as our own form of emotional poverty.

   We must ask ourselves: ‘what outcomes would we actually like to see from our charity?’

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and then began to restructure our giving to produce those very results. If we cared about, for instance, seeing human dignity enhanced, or trusting relationships being formed, or self-sufficiency increasing, then we could employ proven methods known to accomplish these goals. (Lupton 63)

4. An Alternative Model

4.1. Participation Increases Efficiency

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 people. (Lupton 36)

Participatory development is built on the idea that without ownership and active participation on the part of community members, no development endeavor will ever create meaningful change. Research has proven time and time again, that the intentional and active inclusion of poor people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of an intervention, greatly increases the likelihood of its success (Corbett, Fikkert 134). For as Corbett wisely attests: “Like all humans, poor people are likely to have a sense of enthusiasm and ownership of a project if they have been full participants in it from the very beginning” (136). Calling for a “learning process” versus a “blueprint approach”, Corbett goes on to suggest that although it may expedite the process for the economically non-poor to make all of the decisions, but in the end, imposing solutions that are not embraced by community members, will always be in vain. On the other hand, if we were to adopt the “learning process” approach, which seeks to facilitate an action-reflection cycle in allyship with the people being served, we would see a great increase in the longevity and overall success of solutions.

One of the main reasons for this is that poor individuals and communities are incredibly complex and not easily understood by the non-poor. Many times, volunteers enter a culture with a standardized solution model and fully expect it to easily apply, when the fact of the matter is, problem-solving cannot be a one-size-fits-all endeavor. What works in one culture or region may fail miserably in another. Take for instance a housing charity serving in Latin America. Volunteers spend weeks traveling around different regions and building homes for the poor and homeless. However, upon revisiting villages years later, one finds their projects in crumbling disarray. When asked as to why, a village leader reveals that the houses were built in direct contradiction to local custom and wisdom: bathrooms were meant to be situated in the back of the house, as it was more sanitary, and wash rooms were meant to be outside the home so as to be closer to the clothes-line. These houses had been built with bathrooms in the middle of the house and with washrooms attached to the kitchen--an incredibly impractical model. Moreover, as no locals participated in the building process, when structural or electrical issues surfaced, local craftsmen were unable to address them. By using foreign supplies and expensive designs, the charity organization had rendered the community impotent in the face of inevitable problems (Corbett, Fikkert 135). In this way, we tend to under appreciate cultural differences when
attempting to help poor communities abroad—expecting there to be universal solutions extrapolated from our own experiences. However, our perspective is subjective and limiting. Therefore, it is imperative that we include many points of view in the planning process.

Many organizations have fully adopted this concept and work to inspire and empower their intended beneficiaries by making community involvement their top priority. Opportunity International for example, is a Chicago-based microlending organization that aims to assist low income people with small loans to grow their grassroots businesses. Forming “trust-groups”, small clusters of neighbors can apply for a loan and collectively ensure its repayment. The group then democratically decides who should receive the first loan—agreeing to provide accountability and support for one another (Lupton 19). Though not a perfect system, this organization and those like it are making encouraging steps away from paternalism and towards equity and opportunity for all. Other lenders have gone even farther to support self-sufficiency and agency by removing strict loan stipulations and instead matching what community members can contribute with a no-interest investment. This way, participation is elevated to a maximum level—for all parties are able to enter the situation with equal contribution and partnership. As evidence of their success, these microfinance programs also have incredibly high repayment rates, indicating that trust members feel a greater sense of responsibility and stewardship towards their mutual investment.

Conversely, when people are gifted money, there is often strings attached, forming power structures that undermine the development of independence. Think for instance about a parent-child relationship: the goal of any child-rearing effort is to raise an individual that will eventually be self-sufficient. However, many parents impede this process by continuing to financially support their child through adulthood—often creating a resentful dynamic, as the two parties attempt to manipulate and control one another. On the other hand, if the parent learns to recognize the child’s growing autonomy and agency, and in turn, expects the child to participate in the investment and direction of their own life, then their relationship can flourish on the grounds of mutual respect.

Encouragingly, charities all over the country have recognized this fact and begun to allow for more genuine interactions. Nestled in a small burrow in the heart of Denver, Colorado, a quaint cafe aims to change the way food is provided to the economically disadvantaged. By offering nutritious, quality fare on a pay-what-you-can bases, SAME Cafe grants its customers dignity and respect while still providing for those in need. Organic, artisan pizzas and fresh salads are just some of the items on SAME’s menu, all of which are hand crafted by volunteers and customers alike—allowing community members of various backgrounds to intermingle in an equal setting. This kind of interaction is incredibly powerful as it dismantles the savior-complex in the wealthy and empowers the poor simultaneously.

Some may argue that such a model is not applicable on a large scale and thus cannot make the necessary difference needed to combat food insecurity. However, such critiques are ill founded. Perhaps a small-scale-only approach would be incapable of accommodating a great many people at one time; nevertheless, if we were to invest in growing the frequency of smaller operations, the amount of people being served overall would not change, only the type of service they were receiving. This kind of approach focuses on the development of intimate communities instead of enlargement of “efficient” operations that often foster disempowering dynamics.
4.2. Participation as an End in Itself

While participation does arguably increase long-term efficiency, it is not the only reason to utilize participatory models for development. According to Corbett, “Participation is not just a means to an end but rather a legitimate end in its own right” (136)--for participation acts to honor what it means to be human. Aristotle was a champion of this argument, declaring that happiness (human’s highest pursuit) is not a state of being but rather an activity that consists of exercising the rational and emotional parts of our soul. As such, human flourishing as Aristotle suggests, cannot exist unless you are an active participator in your life. Consequently, living well consists in doing something, not just being in a certain state or condition:

…the function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (Book I 1096.a16)

Therefore, holistic reconciliation between people and between people and themselves should be of the utmost importance in charity work. Restoring individuals the power to exercise dominion over their own lives is thus not simply instrumentally good, but intrinsically as well. Participation is an ongoing process that requires the continual and conscious utilization of reflective processes. So instead of entering a community and explicitly insinuating that “I the giver, am superior, and you the receiver are inferior; I am here to fix you”, you enter with open hands, asking for the opinions and insights of the community, declaring “I believe you have knowledge and value. You know things about your situation that I do not know. Please share some of your insights with me. Let us learn and grow together” (Corbett, Fikkert 137). Subsequently, you engage in feedback exercises and brainstorming meetings that include the recipients themselves. You foster relationships and encourage community ownership by functioning as support structures, not as leaders. You recognize that there are no quick fixes to poverty, domination, and oppression. You leave room for mistakes but call for the regular evolution of ideas and projects. You have the goal be about process not products.

One extremely useful depiction of this is the Participatory Learning and Action model or PLA. PLA is a community development theory and corresponding toolkit developed in the 1990s that uses a variety of tactics to engage and energize community members. The PLA process includes several group-based exercises that prompt people to think about their history, assets, survival strategies, and goals as a community. Some of these activities include mapping, timelines, and problem trees--all of which help clarify priorities and draw out trends for the outsiders and locals alike. See for example the PLA’s description of some of its activities below:
Transect Walks: Transect Walks are a type of mapping activity, but they involve actually walking across an area with a community member/group of community members, observing, asking questions and listening as you go. This information is then represented visually in a transect sketch/diagram.

Time Lines: Time lines are a type of diagram that help to record changes in a community/household/life of a community member over time. They are a way of noting the important historical markers and milestones of a community or individual, giving a wider historical context to issues being discussed. They can also enable participants to draw out trends.
**Problem Trees:** A ‘Problem Tree’ or ‘issue tree’ is a type of diagram which enables community members to analyse the causes and effects of a particular problem, and how they relate to one another. Constructed around a focal problem/issue, the causes of that problem are traced down below, and the effects above. (Thomas)

PLA tactics and those like it, allow for an entire community to have their voices heard. They provide an engaging and illuminating way for insiders and outsiders to gain understanding and communicate more accurately. And although, PLA-trained volunteers often function as facilitators, the activities are presented and participated in in a round-table manner: leveling the playing field and giving worth to everyone’s testimony. This preliminary step is crucial before
attempting to engage in any changemaking efforts. It is a part of a larger necessary requirement that encompasses doing your homework. According to Ram Dass, author of *Compassion in Action*, taking the time to thoroughly get to know a community and uncover the underlying issues and complexity that influence their poverty, is imperative in activist work. We have to ask the hard questions both of ourselves and others, but more importantly we must commit ourselves to listening, truly listening.

When we begin to act by listening, the rest follows naturally. It is not so easy, of course—it requires us to give preconceived ideas, judgments, and desires in order to allow space to hear what is being said. True listening requires deep respect and genuine curiosity about situations as well as a willingness just to be there...Listening opens the space, allows us to hear what needs to be done in that moment. It also allows us to hear when it is better not to act, which is sometimes a hard message to receive. (167)

Often times the act of personal and societal connection takes a considerable amount of time. Time that most would rather spend acting. However, in anxious pursuit of our goals, we can fail to sit in the stillness that true understanding is birthed from. We trust our preexisting notions and our initial opinions as truth, leading us to formulate “solutions” that speak to surface issues and not underlying causes. In the end, hurry is the enemy of effectiveness. Therefore, if we instead choose to slow down and seek mental spaciousness, we will open the door to new possibilities, we will make new connections, and we will have a much greater chance to relieve suffering.

When Robert Lupton took the time to truly connect with the community he was attempting to serve, he learned that personal empowerment was far more important than efficiency. With this in mind, Lupton completely changed his charity’s methodology. Instead of maintaining a food pantry that was owned and operated by church members and managed under strict rules regarding participation (One visit per month. Must have legitimate ID. One bag per household...etc), Lupton helped convert his church’s food pantry into a food co-op. Inspired by the work done by Food Security for America, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, Lupon recognized that participation and co-ownership were imperative elements in developing a charity that addressed more than just the food insecurity of its members. In food co-ops like Lupton’s, the beneficiaries buy into the program and participate in every process regarding food attainment, distribution, and facility maintenance. Members setup and breakdown, sort and build grocery boxes, run to the food bank, and decide what fare they desire. Therefore, for a small bi-monthly fee of $3, members receive $60 worth of groceries and are given a voting voice in the program’s operation. Decisions are made democratically so each person’s opinion is heard and respected. In this way, relationships are forged as people actively engage in their own recovery.

The apparent immediacy of certain problems undermine this approach, so it is important that we stay open and receptive to ideas on each side of the aisle. There may never be a perfect solution to relieve national and international hunger, but as we uncover the complexity surrounding the issue and begin to ask some of the central questions about dependency, self-sufficiency, and need, we will place ourselves in a much better position to discover models like Lupton’s that can both address urgent issues and create long-term development. Again, the most central point, however, is that no matter how desperate a situation may seem, never do something for someone else that they could do for themselves—for the act of participating in one’s own life is the bedrock of human experience. Therefore, if we learn to prioritize participation as an end in itself, then perhaps we can measure success by a different standard, one
that emphasises dignity and empowerment over “number served”. by utilizing assessment tools and forming relationships, we can be better equipped to decipher if a group or person is in a situation requiring relief versus rehabilitation or development. Remember: “Development is a lifelong process, not a two-week product” (Corbett, Fikkert 157).

5. Where Do We Go from Here?

5.1. Political Responsibility and Allyship

Before entering into the aid industry, it is crucial to recognize that it is not only our dollars and methodologies that should be scrutinized but our daily actions as well. Sometimes we are blissfully unaware of how our personal choices and or political affiliations affect poverty and oppression. In this way, we must realize that sometimes our giving a ten dollar donation to the earthquake victims in Haiti or to an organization fighting food insecurity in the U.S., does much less than working to change how our country’s policies have perpetually subjected the the poor, both here and abroad. As activist Teju Cole states: “Let us begin our activism right here: with the money-driven villainy at the heart of American foreign policy”.

Admittedly a convoluted topic, our nation’s relationship with the rest of the world is an important thing to note before entering into any form of aid work. Often times, we are unaware of how systems here at home greatly affect the welfare of people abroad. Take NAFTA/CAFTA for instance--originally believed to increase economic opportunities throughout North America, these trade agreements have proven to do just the opposite. By allowing large corporations to set up shop in developing nations, free from tariffs and homeland oversight, the U.S. has effectively destroyed local economies and bolstered environmental and human rights violations south of the border (“Top Ten”). Moreover, many economists attribute the loss of over one million American jobs to the ratification of these agreements--making them not only deleterious for people abroad but for us here at home as well (Wallach). Therefore, before we decide to create a nonprofit to help villagers in Nicaragua, perhaps we should ask ourselves if our time would be better spent pursuing policy change in our own backyard. This is not to say that everyone need abandon their international aid efforts, only that our endeavors will be much more successful if we can comprehend the whole picture.

In the same way that our foreign policy affects global poverty, our domestic policies also have great impact on the rate of economic insecurity here at home. The criminalization of drugs, the inaccessibility to affordable education and healthcare, low minimum wage, corporate corruption, and a venal campaign finance system, are just a handful of political issues that affect poverty and subjugation in this country. Now, it may be a bit too complicated and controversial to open up a conversation regarding these topics. However, regardless, my point remains the same: poverty is not separate from the ways we choose to engage politically. Therefore, until we recognize the interacting matrix of poverty, politics, and the economy, we can not hope to face the problem comprehensively.

Unfortunately, as the issues become more complex, so does the variety of conflicting opinions. Poverty alleviation is clearly a complicated undertaking, and not one person or organization can hope to perform perfectly or single-handedly. However, we tend to dehumanize people with clashing perspectives and isolate ourselves from opportunities for collaboration and evolution. As such, a lack of allyship and synergy yields a body divided. This obstacle is only
compounded by the fact that new strategies for development are derived from criticism of the current system and thus often lead to factionalization and rivalry. Therefore, I want to be perfectly clear: it is not my intention to demonize or divide with my analysis. We do not need an enemy to create change, only an increase in understanding. For this reason, it is imperative that change workers do not alienate one another with soapbox arguments that only work to draw lines in the sand. It is extremely difficult to receive criticism without getting defensive, therefore we must remain receptive in the same way we desire our opponents to. There is common ground to be had, so let us first recognize our mutual desire to see the world improve and poverty and oppression diminish. Then we can enter into a discussion about our different values and methodologies, always bearing in mind that we are on the same team. Too often, progressives and activists are seduced into thinking that truth is exclusive and only exists in small, anti-establishment movements. Again, this tendency is alienating and limiting. A fringe movement is not the goal. A mainstream change is what is necessary to enact wide-scale improvements to the aid industry. Therefore, we need a kind of cooperation that requires all hands on deck.

5.2. Don’t Be Discouraged

Some of you may be becoming increasingly dissatisfied with my somewhat ambiguous suggestions on how to solve the problems I have adamantly expounded. I understand that after a relentless critique of an industry we all hold so dear, you may be deeply desiring a step-by-step solutions model for its revival. However, this is precisely the approach that I am combating. There is no quick fix. There is no widely applicable, foolproof approach. Take weight loss for instance: we all desire a miracle pill, a berry discovered in the heart of the rainforest that will melt fat and tighten our asses as we sit on couches and eat pizza-rolls. Unfortunately, there exists no such solution. Only with diligent exercise and a healthy diet can a person sustainably lose weight. They may crash-fast and spend thousands of dollars on supplements, yielding rapid results, but this approach is almost never lasting--it is immediately gratifying but ultimately detrimental. True weight loss can only be achieved through lifestyle change and it is not a glamorous process. It is long and gruelling and requires constant amendment, exception, and critique. For instance, some people’s bodies and current circumstances are extremely well suited to a raw food diet and a cardio focused regimen. However, others who suffer from a natural anemia and heart problems may require a different strategy. Not everyone’s situation or health assets are the same, therefore, weight management calls for a more individualized approach. Thankfully there does still remain guiding principles that can help with where to start.

The same wisdom applies to the aid industry. There are certain tactics that we know to be harmful and should be avoided. There are also certain truths regarding human dignity and involvement that can help guide us in our pursuits. However, in the end we must recognize that poverty is complex and ever-changing--requiring our constant reappraisal and evolution. We need to avoid flashy salesmen that tote marvel proposals and top-down approaches, no matter how much we desire their stories to be true. The belief in these schemes only yields disillusionment and burnout--for our compassion becomes exhausted as our lofty goals fail to be realized. The key is not to abandon our dreams of a peaceful, equitable society, but to reframe our definition of success. Human relationships and active participation in one’s life are indispensable to true flourishing. So perhaps we cannot solve the world’s injustices tomorrow, or
next year, or in ten years, but we can begin to heal long-standing wounds. Mankind is not short on resources, good-will, or altruism, in fact there is love and abundance everywhere you look. So imagine what we could accomplish if we were to redirect and recombine these assets in a collective effort to break down barriers and fight injustices. There is so much hope to be had even in our current climate. The presence of deeply entrenched problems does not weaken our capabilities to address them, it only requires that we continue to have faith in the power of a love that transcends all understanding.

5.3. How Can I Help?

"Due diligence is the cornerstone of wise giving" (Lupton 106)

In the end, this is not a do-nothing proposal. In fact there is A LOT that we can do even immediately. At the most basic level, it begins with introspection: we must take a closer look at our own personal lives and start to witness how we participate in unjust systems all around us. With this awareness comes humility— a humility the requires us to enter lightly, to assume first the posture of receiver and listener before imposing our own beliefs and ideas onto a community and to prioritize the establishment of empowering relationships. Indeed for some this may feel discouraging, but I argue that such news should be inspiring. It is empowering to recognize that sometimes the best thing you can do to help your fellow man is to start with yourself. Mahatma Gandhi once famously said “Be the change you wish to see in the world”, and what powerful words of wisdom those are.

After a period of self-assessment, the next step is to research and invest in organizations whose top priority is encouraging development by means of participation and partnership. Look for those who have published feedback from their constituents and who actively engage in efforts to evolve their practices. Moreover, seek out institutions that are maintaining awareness around privilege and power dynamics and that emphasize service with dignity over efficiency. Finally, determine whether an organization participates in strategies that combat social injustices on a grander scale—utilizing allies in the field and not alienating themselves. I understand that this process sounds exhausting and that not everyone has the time to dedicate to such involved labours. This is why organizations such as Givewell, an independent charity evaluator, makes an extremely positive impact on mindful giving. Givewell focuses on effective altruism and rates different nonprofits based on their impact and transparency as an agency. This allows people the opportunity to make contributions to efforts that are making meaningful strides towards equality and inclusion, rather than dropping donations in the dark abyss of the humanitarian aid fund (fingers crossed that it will reach the intended recipients without harming them). In the end, no charity is perfect, but by doing our due diligence, we can avoid supporting organizations that are causing more harm than good. Correspondingly, when we choose to invest in foundations that are committed to empowering their constituents and finding new ways to involve them in the development process, we can transform the aid industry.

5.4. The Oath for Compassionate Service

Before medical students are sworn in as doctors, they must first take the Hippocratic Oath. This oath consists of a pledge to uphold the ethical values and standards of their
profession—acknowledging fully the power and corresponding responsibility that their position holds. Therefore, I would like to close with a similar request. I believe that all those engaging in compassionate service should make an agreement with themselves and their peers to acknowledge the privilege they have, as well as the duty they have towards creating a more just and equitable society. Adapted from Robert Lupton’s own list, The Oath for Compassionate service is as follows:

- Enter lightly and with an open mind
- Do your homework
- Build relationships
- Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves
- Limit one-way giving to emergency situations
- Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to fuller achievements
- Subordinate self-interest to the needs of those being served
- Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said—unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service
- Refrain from judgement by maintaining a posture of humility
- Above all, do no harm

(128)

Though some of these points may seem obvious or trivial, I believe this oath is a crucial starting point for further inquiry and contemplation. The problems surrounding aid are infinitely complex and ever changing, therefore, it is important to have patience and realize that addressing such issues will take time and dedication. I have only revealed the tip of the iceberg with this endeavor so it is crucial that we as a society continue to probe deeper. However, we must not become discouraged as wisdom tells us that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
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