

Legitimizing Local Leadership  
In Interfaith Relief and Development

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Traditional/20 <sup>th</sup> Century Methods.....	6
Western Responsibility.....	6
Short-Term vs. Long-Term Methods.....	7
No Strings Attached.....	9
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Issues.....	10
The Environment.....	10
Globalization.....	12
Non-Western Power.....	13
Legitimizing Local Leadership.....	14
Local Capacity.....	16
Local Knowledge.....	18
Local Initiative.....	21
Local Imperfection.....	22
Locals and Democracy.....	23
Interfaith Leadership.....	25
Principles for Discussing Religion.....	26
Religion in Development.....	27
FBO's and Religious Service.....	29
Religion as Identity.....	31
World Faiths and Global Justice.....	32

Table of Contents

Religion as Motivation.....	35
Limitations of Religious Leadership.....	36
Defining a Global Ethic.....	37
Practical Application.....	38
Scenario 1.....	38
Scenario 2.....	39
Conclusion.....	41
References.....	42

Abstract

The traditional methods of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western aid have proven ineffective. In addition to persistent poverty and disease, 21<sup>st</sup> century relief and development efforts face global environmental changes, the impact of globalization, and rapid growth in non-Western nations. Modern methods must respect indigenous culture and legitimize local leadership in order to be effective and sustainable. World religions in particular, and the variety of practices and interpretations within each of them, must be incorporated for needs and priorities to be accurately determined. Common ground in ethics, with each remaining true to the core values of his/her faith, must be found in order to live and problem-solve together.

## Introduction

During his inaugural address in 1949, Harry Truman announced the following:

We must embark on a bold new program for...the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery.... For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people. (Easterly, 2006, p. 24)

For decades the world has enthusiastically pursued the eradication of poverty, pandemics, and inequality. However, in September 2000, world leaders had to meet to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, making a commitment to meet eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Not only has Truman's vision not been fulfilled after 60 years of relief and development, but new obstacles, such as AIDS, have decimated attempts to help the poor.

The traditional methods of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western aid have proven ineffective. In addition to persistent poverty and disease, 21<sup>st</sup> century relief and development efforts face global environmental changes, the impact of globalization, and rapid growth in non-Western nations. Modern methods must respect indigenous culture and legitimize local leadership in order to be effective and sustainable. World religions in particular, and the variety of practices and interpretations within each of them, must be incorporated for needs and priorities to be accurately determined. Common ground in ethics, with each remaining true to the core values of his/her faith, must be found in order to live and problem-solve together.

### Traditional Method

The history of relief and development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been well documented and endlessly debated. It is sufficient to say any goals of eliminating global poverty and disease had not been successful leading up the creation of the Millennium Development Goals. The value in reconsidering some of the specific dynamics and intentions of these efforts is found in trying to develop a theory for why aid and development have largely failed in order to pursue a new set of priorities and methods.

### *Western Responsibility*

One of the most prominent critics of traditional relief and development, Zambia's Dambisa Moyo, summed up her perspective by asking the following:

Has more than US\$1 trillion in development assistance over the last several decades made African people better off? No. In fact, across the globe the recipients of this aid are worse off; much worse off. Aid has helped make the poor poorer, and growth slower. Yet aid remains a centerpiece of today's development policy and one of the biggest ideas of our time. (2009, p 7)

An important question asked about development is who is ultimately responsible for its success, the donor or the recipient of aid? Many in Western countries would say that since much aid has been given, the failure is with struggling countries to use it effectively. While there is certainly at least some legitimacy to that conclusion, Western countries must be willing to accept blame to whatever degree they are responsible for being active participants in effective relief efforts and aid disbursement. This is not just because of a responsibility to be neighborly to other countries, but also because Western

countries have contributed to the current state of global poverty. Jeffrey Sachs, author of *The End of Poverty* wrote:

Little surpasses the western world in the cruelty and depredations that it has long imposed on Africa. Three centuries of slave trade, from around 1500 to the early 1800s, were followed by a century of brutal colonial rule. Far from lifting African economically, the colonial era left Africa bereft of educated citizens and leaders, basic infrastructure, and public health facilities. The borders of the newly independent states followed the arbitrary lines of the former empires, dividing ethnic groups, ecosystems, watersheds, and resource deposits in arbitrary ways. (2005, p. 189)

#### *Short-Term vs. Long-Term Methods*

Moyo compares the methods of development in Africa to the rebuilding of Western Europe after World War II. The Marshall Plan, which facilitated the work in Europe, invested US\$13 billion (the equivalent of UD\$100 billion today) over five years and was incredibly successful. Perhaps the most critical and relevant difference between the Marshall Plan and development strategies in Africa is an upfront understanding of a limited timeline. The US agreed to fund the plan for five years, and at the end of that time they stopped sending money. This incentive forced recipient countries to plan for the long-term, while also providing enough time to invest the aid wisely (Moyo, 2009, p. 36).

Whether or not a short-term timeframe for developing countries would be effective, the fact that endless aid is ineffective is clear. Decades of relentless aid has caused some African countries to see it as income rather than a finite resource. Perhaps this is human nature and therefore inevitable, or it could also be that many donor

countries and agencies are simply attracted to the severe problems of poorly governed countries. As William Easterly, the author of *The White Man's Burden* put it, "Maybe bad government attracts donors who want to reform it just as sinners attract televangelists" (2006, p. 136).

Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede, in writing a chapter about short-term vs. long-term oriented countries, began one section by stating that "Africa, and particularly sub-Saharan Africa, is a development economist's headache" (1997, p. 228). They went on to describe a survey distributed in 14 countries intended to clarify value differences between African and non-African cultures in order to find out why Western development seems largely ineffective. One clear result was that short-term thinking is prevalent in African culture.

Certainly not all Africans are short-term thinkers, but the value is culturally prevalent. The results of the survey also lead to a revelation that the loans from the IMF to African nations, while intended to promote long-term development, were short-term-oriented themselves. Whatever the reasons, the history of and tendency for dependency and short-term thinking to develop must be taken into consideration (Hofstede, 2006).

Moyo provided a narrative describing the potential for harm in seeking to make substantial short-term impacts:

There's a mosquito net maker in Africa. He manufactures around 500 nets a week. He employs ten people, who (as with many African countries) each have to support upwards of fifteen relatives. However hard they work, they can't make enough nets to combat the malaria-carrying mosquito. Enter vociferous Hollywood movie star who rallies the masses, and goads Western governments to



collect and send 100,000 mosquito nets to the afflicted region, at a cost of a million dollar. The nets arrive, the nets are distributed, and a 'good' deed is done. With the market flooded with foreign nets, however, our mosquito net maker is promptly put out of business. His ten workers can no longer support their 150 dependents (who are now forced to depend on handouts), and one mustn't forget that in a maximum of five years the majority of the imported nets will be torn, damaged and of no further use. (2009, p. 44)

Surely the many well-intentioned relief and development organizations are not trying to sacrifice the long-term good for short-term successes. Moyo described how many charities have been criticized, among other reasons, for letting themselves be coerced by their own governments into activities that are not relevant to the local communities (2009, p. 7). However, the arguments behind the accusations that Western governments are only investing enough money to preserve their own security are best left for those who are close to the decision-makers in government.

### *No Strings Attached*

In terms of evaluating what elements from 20<sup>th</sup> century development should not be replicated, the idea of "strings" being attached to aid is certainly one of them. It would seem, if there were a consensus about not wanting to have strings attached to aid, that the solution would simply be to not accept money that has conditions associated with it. However, the work of grant writing and fundraising is extremely competitive, so the difficult argument for a no-strings-attached approach to funding relief and development will not be made here. Suffice it to say that obeying the demands of donors to the detriment of the communities in need is counter-productive.

Easterly's slightly pessimistic summation of the problem with aid is the following:

The tragedy of poverty is that the poorest people in the world have no money or political power to motivate "Searchers" to address their desperate needs, while the rich can use their money and power through well-developed markets and accountable bureaucracies to address theirs. The foreign aid bureaucracy has never quite gotten it-its central problem is that the poor are orphans: they have no money or political voice to communicate their needs or motivate others to meet those needs. (2006, p. 167)

### 21<sup>st</sup> Century Issues

Before discussing the alternative to a Western-dominate approach to development, there are a few global issues unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century that must be briefly overviewed. The issues to cover are the future of the environment and natural disasters, the impact of globalization, and the rise of non-Western nations, especially China.

#### *The Environment*

There are two reasons to mention global environmental changes in building an argument for local-oriented relief and development. The first reason is that the potential for global warming means a likely increase in natural disasters, especially in proximity to developing nations, which adds emphasis to the need to do relief work responsibly and effectively. Second, in addition to global environmental challenges there is much environmental destruction occurring on the local level, such as deforestation and excessive resource consumption.

In the state of California there is tension regarding the use of the San Luis reservoir in the Central Valley between farmers who are concerned about their well-being and the US Fish and Wildlife Service which wants to protect the marine life and prevent the total depletion of the reservoir. In Kenya deforestation has caused rivers that flow from the Mau forest to dry up, threatening the water supply of much of the country. These examples relate to appropriate relief and development in that it illustrates the impact local inhabitants have on a larger scale. This highlights the need for the knowledge and incentive for sustainability to be placed in the hands of locals.

The controversy surrounding the possibility of global warming is hotly debated and often politically charged. Therefore, it seems appropriate to doubt both the fearful and the skeptical. To whatever degree man-made global warming may or may not be occurring or might affect people's quality of life, it is being emphasized so strongly in governments' agendas that a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to effective relief and development must take it into consideration.

The most important implication of human-accelerated global warming is that a hotter planet would mean more dynamic weather. The frequency and severity of natural disasters would increase, and the greatest increase would primarily occur in developing countries (Coppola, 2007, p. 18; Friedman, 2008, p. 159). This, combined with the current forecast that the vast majority of global population growth over the next several decades will occur in these countries, means that large-scale methods of relief and development need to be effective in order to react quickly and prepare the governments of developing nations to deal with disasters as well as possible.

International disaster relief is particularly notorious for creating anticipation for aid rather than an incentive to mitigate risk in developing nations. Rather than reserving money for inevitable disasters and being prepared to minimize the need for support after they occur, many countries that have received aid in the past have concentrated on preparing to receive as much money as possible from donors should a disaster occur (Easterly, 2006, p. 368; Angeles, 2009, p. 2). While international aid is certainly a necessity in the relief and development process, it must be dispersed with prudence to encourage self-sufficiency rather than dependence.

### *Globalization*

Thomas Friedman, one of the leading authorities on the divisive and sometimes vaguely defined topic of globalization, discussed the tension between traditional culture and democratic, capitalist materialism in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. He defined globalization as the following:

The inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, cheaper than ever before. This process of globalization is also producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by this new system. (1999, p. 9)

The common perception in the West about what needs to happen in poor countries is that they need to be able to adapt and contribute to the global economy, especially through improved technology and the Internet. Friedman agreed this needs to happen, and to some degree inevitably will happen, but the effect of gaining access to the Internet is that Western culture is introduced and can clash with indigenous culture. Friedman described

this traditional culture, and the identity and sense of home and community that come with it, as “olive trees”, referring to the very old Mediterranean trees which have great value in many cultures (1999).

The need for 21<sup>st</sup> century relief and development to be rooted in local communities is reflected in the need for balance between a country’s ability to participate in the global economy and the preservation of its olive trees. As Friedman described the situation, “If that participation [in the global economy] comes at the price of a country’s identity, if individuals feel their olive tree roots crushed, or washed out, by this global system, those olive tree roots will rebel” (1999, p. 42). Therefore legitimizing local leadership not only promotes effective development, but also helps prepare communities to engage the global economy in a healthy way that preserves diversity.

#### *Non-Western Powers*

In *The Departed*, the movie that won Best Picture at the 2006 Academy Awards, Jack Nicolson’s mafia-like character was selling state-of-the-art microchips to Chinese gangsters. One of the detectives made a comment that seemed to sum up the present subtle fears of many Americans when he said, “We’ll probably be at war with the Chinese in 20-odd years, and Costello is selling them military technology.”

The future of China’s role in the world is just as unpredictable as the environment and the impact of globalization. There are, however, some trends that mean China could become the most prominent country in the world this century. Presently China has the highest number of people with access to the Internet, and almost as many people online as the total population of the United States (Friedman, 2008, p. 344). For the past three decades China’s GDP has grown at a rate of 10% every year. In the next 30-40 years the

demand for cars in China is supposed to surpass the United States'. Half of all the new buildings constructed between 2000 and 2030 are expected to be built in China (Friedman, 2008).

There will be many changes in many countries over the next few decades particularly. India is experiencing growth similar to China's and has a comparable population (Friedman, 2008). There will also probably be some developing countries whose governments are able to attain self-sufficiency and growth.

While China is likely to grow the most, it is also an example of the kind of changes that will likely lead to global change in the shift of power away from Western dominance. This means that Western approaches to development need to be sensitive to the differing cultures of non-Western local communities not only because it is more beneficial for those communities, but also for the West's own benefit.

#### Legitimizing Local Leadership

In the 1980's the Canadian International Development Agency, along with the Aga Khan Development Network, established an experiment in development efforts in some isolated regions of northern Pakistan. The experiment was built on the premise that, according to Khalil Shariff, "Beneficiaries, over time, must become the masters of the development process" (2008). The community was brought together in local villages where development priorities were determined as a group before any work began (Shariff, 2008; Enman, 2008):

Communities began to invest in small infrastructure to increase agricultural productivity and link their villages to markets. They started modest savings programs and lending activities to increase income for their families, made the

education of the next generation – especially girls – a priority, and focused on improving maternal and child health care, housing and living conditions. This development experiment revealed that community organizations and the vibrant civil society which they represented were key to lasting improvements in quality of life. (Shariff, 2008)

In time, and with patience, there were noticeable effects in the Pakistani villages. Incomes tripled, the infant mortality rate decreased by 25%, and literacy rates for both men and women dramatically increased, far outpacing development in other parts of the region. Over the next several years, other Canadians and Canadian institutions contributed to the area to help sustain the growth in capacity for self-development. Today Canadian relief agencies cite this success and want to have more of a leading role in the conversation about 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership (Shariff, 2008; Enman, 2008).

The relative success the Canadians had in northern Pakistan using a method that emphasized the role of local communities is an excellent example, but to be fair it is only one. There are many others examples, but proponents of the more traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century model of aid could come up with successful examples of development in pockets of the world throughout the last several decades as well. The goal of this argument is not to say that traditional relief efforts are sure to fail while depending on local leadership would be a perfect development strategy; far from it. Local inclusion and respect is a crucial element of overall effective 21<sup>st</sup> century relief and development.

It is important to demonstrate the ability and willingness of locals to contribute to development, as well as examine examples of effectiveness and successes. There is also a need for the vague idea of locals to be clearly defined. The most likely categories of

locals are governments, organizations, individuals or elites, businesses, community groups, specific demographics, and religiously defined groups. All but the religious groups, however, are relatively well understood.

### *Local Capacity*

In *Portfolios of the Poor* (Collins, 2009), four authors studied the year-long financial diaries of 250 families from Bangladesh, India, and South Africa that live on less than US \$2 a day. If one of the reasons international development tends to be overly controlling is the belief that the poor are unable to work out problems themselves given the right tools, these families provide a convincing alternative. With no traditional banking services and very limited, unpredictable incomes these families managed to survive day-to-day, year-to-year.

The authors found that every one of the 250 families had multiple financial resources and dealings going on at any given time throughout the year. There was lending in times of relative plenty, borrowing in times of need, investing in products or tools for work, saving when possible, and weathering one crisis after another. According to Collins, “Money management is, for the poor, a fundamental and well-understood part of everyday life” (2009, p. 4). It might be because of desperate circumstances, not just in spite of them, that they learn to manage finances so effectively. In addressing the assumptions that the poor are unsophisticated, or would plummet into debt if offered loans, Collins asserted, “All of those assumptions are right some of the time. But they are wrong much of the time” (2009, p. 12).

Money management is only one example of the poor’s capacity for problem solving and intelligence despite a frequent lack of formal education and resources. The



experienced rural developer Robert Chambers made the argument that people's knowledge and skills compliment their contexts (1984). Developers might approach a project with modern technological expertise, only to find that success in that particular environment requires certain knowledge the local people have learned from years of experience (Chambers, 1984).

Chambers acknowledged that rural knowledge is not always useful or valid, and he warned of the belief in the "Noble Savage" (1984, p. 85). While it cannot be assumed local people are always able to identify and meet their own needs given the proper tools, 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders cannot be tempted back into a system of colonization by the suspicion that the poor are unfit to be critical participants in relief and development efforts. The temptation was summed up well on the first page of *Portfolios of the Poor*:

We suppose...the poor can do little for themselves beyond hand-to-mouth survival. Their chances of moving out of poverty must depend, we assume, either on international charity or on their eventual incorporation into the globalized economy. The hottest public debates in world poverty, therefore, are those about aid flows and debt forgiveness, and about the virtues and vices of globalization.

Discussion of what the poor might do for themselves is less often heard. (Collins, 2009, p. 1)

The local poor not only frequently have the capacity to meet their own needs, but in many cases have actually done so. Historically it has been common for nations to require local governments to handle the mitigation and management of disasters. These communities rarely have enough resources to prepare for disasters, but floods and fires

strike annually, and to varying degrees of success these situations were dealt with (Coppola, 2007, p. 347).

Except in governments with heavily centralized authority that fear losing power, the UN is working to transfer the responsibility for emergency management to the local level because, according to Coppola:

The most successful emergency management systems are those in which local emergency management agencies maintain operational control of all phases of emergency management, with regional and national authorities only intervening in a supportive role and never assuming any leadership control. (Coppola, 2007, p. 350)

### *Local Knowledge*

In addition to underestimated knowledge and ability, the local people in vulnerable countries are also frequently those with the most accurate insights about communities' needs. As one author stated, "Nobody knows a community's needs, capacities, and risks as well as the community members themselves. When disasters do strike, the victims are friends, neighbors, employees, colleagues, and families" (Coppola, 2007, p. 350). Local community members not only better understand needs, they also understand the culture, which makes them more equipped to appropriately address those needs.

Bill McKibben, author of *Deep Economy*, asserted that development should be local rather than global because that preserves local culture. Global nations that contribute aid usually have values of strong economic and social independence, in contrast to many of the cultures that require assistance (2008, p. 197). As Friedman's

perspective earlier clarified, a community's "olive trees" must be preserved in order for progress and growth to be healthy and sustainable.

Seth Kaplan of the Harvard International Review wrote about the Western development community's tendency to address all problems with purely economic solutions and noted, "An organic, group-based process that must be rooted in the capacities and institutions of local communities, the international community has repeatedly sought to nation build from the top-down, using generic models that often preclude the use of local resources" (2009). This results in bloated or corrupt state structures that rarely make an impact at the local level. Having the humility and prudence to admit the limitations of development work based on these "olive trees" also reveals an important element to consider with trying to legitimize local leadership.

Western culture promotes a pragmatic approach to problem solving, while many cultures consider relationships to be more important than productivity (Hofstede, 1997). There is a fundamental conflict here that may be largely responsible for decades of aid being mostly ineffective and unsustainable. Nonprofit management guru Peter Drucker acknowledged that there can be conflict between an organization's responsibility to its donors and its desire to serve people well (2007, p. 139). A healthy approach to development that takes into account the potential cultural importance of relationships will probably lose some short-term productivity. Western donors, however, are known to be most enthusiastic about funding projects with immediate results. Two things must be consistently done to address this.

First, organizations that depend on donors must simply accept a potential downturn in funding from both short-term results-seekers and donations with strings

attached that contradict the mission or method of those organizations. These nonprofits are often operating with very tight budgets, but that is nevertheless what needs to happen. If the cost of keeping an organization functioning is its effectiveness then, ironically, it is probably only hurting its intended benefactors rather than helping them.

The second action that needs to be taken to address the conflict between Western expectations and what are likely the most appropriate methods of development is intentionality to publicly express the need for long-term investment. This idea is not beyond the comprehension of Westerners. Most Americans would, for instance, agree that in addressing domestic terrorism it is better to refuse to give in to demands in order to deter future terrorists. Despite initial resistance to a slump in accessibility to funds, both organizations and the work they do will benefit in the long-run.

Cultural understanding at the local level is also necessary to avoid obstacles that are purely cultural perspectives. A group of physicians working with Vietnamese and Ethiopian patients suffering from diabetes were struggling to achieve a significant percentage of compliance with the necessary treatment schedule. After researching the culture, they found there was a strong cultural stigma towards illnesses requiring consistent medication. The physicians learned to highlight that the stigma associated with amputation, a common effect of complications from diabetes, would be far greater. They also tailored the diets and cooking descriptions to culturally familiar foods and units of measurement. In time they increased their compliance rate to 87% (Coppola, 2007, p. 237).

People familiar with local cultures not only have the advantage of being able to better predict the effectiveness of a given method, they also have the benefit of knowing

the history of origins of important social practices and understanding. Coppola wrote that not only are outsiders unfamiliar with the culture frequently not taken seriously, they also do not know what the potential reactions to a social change would be. This can actually increase the vulnerability of a community (2007, p. 152).

### *Local Initiative*

In addition to an understanding that local people have the ability and cultural understanding to participate in meeting their own needs, it is important to know whether locals would rather take responsibility for their communities or leave the work in the hands of international governments and agencies. It is easy to visualize masses of inactive people with no jobs and seemingly little motivation in poorer countries with high unemployment and assume they are lazy. Perhaps the temptation is to blame local people for the lack of results in international aid all these years. However, that perspective seems to be largely inaccurate.

Jeffrey Sachs concluded a chapter about investment rather than welfare in poor communities as an effective on-the-ground solution to begin to prepare them to link in to local markets by adding:

The starting points... are the poor themselves. They are ready to act both individually and collectively. They are already hard working, prepared to struggle to stay afloat and to get ahead. They have a very realistic idea about their conditions and how to improve them, not a mystical acceptance of fate. They are also ready to govern themselves responsibly, ensuring that any help that they receive is used for the benefits of the group rather than pocketed by powerful individuals. (2005, p. 242)

Most nations are not defined by the unwilling or the unable, but instead have learned to function despite these groups. It would be a mistake to label people in developing nations and poor communities purely as obstacles to their own progress without taking a full understanding of their culture and context into account. This presents a crucial point regarding any efforts where people are involved.

### *Local Imperfection*

People in general have always caused things to be messy. Even if the perfect plan to address any given problem in the world were put forth here, there would be no way to implement it flawlessly. Selfishness, apathy, and a propensity for destruction are engrained elements of the human condition. The goal of successful relief and development cannot be to perfect culture or government, but to minimize pain, promote freedom and justice, and create opportunities for productive, happy, and healthy lives.

The need to consider intended outcomes in terms of what is possible given human nature leads to what Drucker referred to as the discipline of making a distinction between moral and economic causes (2007, p. 111). The eradication of child armies, for example, is a moral cause, and therefore poor results only mean efforts must be increased to solve the problem. A lack of progress in moral causes does not justify abandoning it. In contrast, economic causes are driven by the results of the investment. Though sustainable long-term impact is a higher priority than short-term, results are still the goal. The temptation for helpers, Drucker warned, is to believe all elements of a moral cause or moral themselves. It is important to remember that though the needs, and many of the methods, are moral issues, it is not just the thought that counts (2007, p. 111-112).

*Locals and Democracy*

As Winston Churchill stated in a speech to the House of Commons, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried” (McCoy, 1984). Students of development and culture can overcompensate for the perception that Westerners provide aid only to the degree that it promotes democratic capitalism by dismissing elements of democracy that benefit society. Easterly wrote, “Democracy works, but imposing democracy from the outside doesn’t” (2006, p. 116).

Kaplan agreed that states cannot be made to function from the outside even though a free nation creates the ideal environment for people to help themselves. He suggests that international assistance focus on helping communities identify and take advantage of their own resources and capacities in writing:

Poor people throughout the developing world have enormous resources-embedded in their religions, traditions, and social systems-built up over centuries that can serve as the foundation for political, economic, and social development. What these people and these countries need is help in using these resources to better their communities and governments. (2009)

To the degree local leaders begin to emerge, or a local community begins to become empowered, there is need for coordination. The enthusiasm for a successful project, suffering that is highlighted by the media, or a disastrous emergency can bring an overwhelming amount of government organizations and NGO’s. Many post-disaster problems and dependencies are a result of too much money or supplies being delivered in one aspect while leaving other needs unmet (Hoffman, 2002, p. 16).

If the local leaders have not had enough experience, it is ideal to have the national government of the affected country coordinate. In many cases this does happen, and the potentially hundreds of groups involved has been referred to as a “herd of cats” (Coppola, 2007, p. 279). This means an organization should not only initiate coordination and communication if necessary, but also be willing to find another leader under which to place themselves in order to minimize risk for the vulnerable (Coppola, 2007, p. 279-280).

An important method to increase the probability of successful involvement is to leave the workers who are on the ground in place and let them evaluate the local setting and investigate where leadership is or may be. Easterly argued, “We see aid bureaucracies shifting staff around before they can gain enough experience, with the result that those agencies are full of generalists without local or specialized knowledge” (2006, p.375). This also allows the opportunity for establishing networks between organizations and local people, which allows for other possibilities like letting a community of observers evaluate the development work in order to hold agencies responsible for outcomes. There is the potential for conflict here, such as differences in short-term vs. long-term thinking, but it is still a large step towards giving local people a voice.

Much of how organizations evaluate present approaches will depend on the specific organizations involved, the nature and immediacy of the needs presented, and the history and culture of the people to be helped. There are no guarantees, and no method will be simple. As Chambers advised, “Optimism generated by the achievements of the few must be tempered by the cold reality of the entrenched power of the many” (1984, p.



165). However, there is no way a culturally aware and respectful approach to development could be successful without incorporating the inescapable reality and presence of religion.

### Interfaith Leadership

Love it or hate it, religion is prevalent in the world and here to stay. One can choose to ignore that fact, but that would only mean living and laboring in a way that is limited in its effectiveness because it ignores a prominent element of culture and communities. Newsweek author Anna Kuchment illustrated the engrained nature of religion in development:

In South Africa, where President Thabo Mbeki has questioned whether HIV causes AIDS, religious leaders have campaigned for affordable AIDS drugs and challenged the Vatican's stance on condoms. In Namibia, Catholic leaders have endorsed the message 'ABCD': Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms, or face Death. And leaders of the African indigenous church talk to their followers about 'the beauty of wrapping gifts.' (2002)

In October 2008, over 75 religious leaders and representatives of Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith-based organizations came together in Istanbul after a two-day forum to form the Global Interfaith Network. The leaders pledged to "join forces to advance human conditions and realize the rights of individuals, with attention to women and young people...they also committed to share their experiences and affirmed the common aims of safeguarding the dignity and human rights of all peoples" (HIV/AIDS, 2008).

Leah Selinger, while writing about the relationship between religion and development, summed up the logical progression leading to the necessity for this study:

Economic development cannot take place in a vacuum, and must relate to the society in which it acts. In the majority of developing countries this is vital to the success of any development policy. Social capital, cultural relativism and social structures, which will govern the impact of economic policy... are intrinsically related to world views and thus religion is central to any progression in development theory. (2004, abstract)

One reason religion has been largely left out of the discussion of development work, in addition to what will be covered, is the complexity and frustration of the nature of religion and beliefs. Most people would go so far as to say the goal must be to respect the beliefs of others. However, this has as much potential for conflict as disrespecting others' faith because it requires an absolutely tolerant and relativist culture, which does not exist even in the most secular states. The goal, therefore, is to discern a model that incorporates different religion without compromising the core beliefs of the beneficiaries, the development workers, or any partners, despite the severe limitations.

### *Principles for Discussing Religion*

The temptation in discussing interfaith relationships will be to prefer one faith over another. Every person who engages this topic will either favor one faith as truth, or will profess to have no faith, which effectively becomes advocacy for secularization. Many from the West who consider themselves religious will profess to be Christian, therefore the tendency will be to allow subtle bias or even misbehavior on the part of

Christians while expressing outrage and demanding retribution for non-Christian proselytizing.

For the sake of effective interfaith relief and development the standard must be willingness to tolerate opposing faiths insofar as it does not compromise one's own core values. If one truly believes he/she must compromise to participate in this discussion at a fundamental level, then so be it. That is the first example of the limitations of this approach as well as the willingness required to let those offended go their own way.

The elements of this discussion are an understanding of the role of religion and secularization in Western development, the cultural roles of faith, recognizing commonalities and insurmountable differences between religions, faith as an opportunity or hindrance to development work, and some practical suggestions for applying this knowledge. As Kaplan wrote, "Religion is no panacea for the numerous and chronic maladies that plague existing state building initiatives" (2009) and cannot replace the tangible methods of relief and development, however it is a crucial topic that must be turned from an obstacle into an opportunity.

### *Religion in Development*

Despite its exclusion from topics of development in particular, religion is an incredibly popular subject. Social scientists discuss the shaping impact on domestic and international politics with fervor. Kaplan added, "This surge of interest has focused chiefly on religion's capacity to inspire intolerance, extremism, and political violence. However, religion's potential to spur development is enormous" (2009).

It is impossible to know what the world would be like politically and socially if religion were not a factor. It has certainly been used for great suffering and injustice as

well as inspired humbling sacrifice and proactive community, but the obstacles are, according to Kaplan, “overshadowed by religion’s potential to play an important role in promoting a gradual transformation of the political and economic landscape in the poorest parts of the world” (2009).

In sub-Saharan Africa one of the goals of development workers is to get the African Christian churches to start talking about AIDS, which is difficult because ministers oppose birth control and therefore avoid the topic. Where religious leaders have become involved, however, there have been reductions in the rate of HIV infections in the past two decades. Pernessa Seele, founder of the nonprofit Balm in Gilead, wrote, “The impact of AIDS is so great in these countries that if we get our religious communities to talk about getting tested, talk about the orphan problem, just talk about AIDS, period—dispelling the stigma—that is a great accomplishment” (Kuchment, 2002).

In many places around the world, including the Congo and Pakistan for instance, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have been filling in for government unable to provide services like basic schooling and healthcare. Often the FBO’s are the only organized groups working with the people abandoned by inept leadership. In recent years, however, international agencies have begun to recognize these organizations and enlist them to deliver services to more communities. However, the FBOs are typically required to adapt to a top-down, Western approach that disregards the benefits of the religious motivations of the organizations (Kaplan, 2009).

Western culture views religion as a purely spiritual experience, and is therefore practically separate from social action (Kutchment, 2002, p. 539). Many professors of the

predominant faith of the West have also, ironically, adopted a similar perception. Their faith is largely spiritual with varying degrees of relevance to daily life, community behavior, or social action. This causes religious activities, like prayer and evangelism, to be unrelated to community development. Describing the modern Christian's perspective, Myers wrote, "Loving God is spiritual work, and loving neighbors takes place in the material world" (1999, p. 6). Productive or destructive, there must be an attempt to grasp the complexity of religion as it has strengthened or, by exclusion or misuse, obstructed development in order to appropriately address potentially effective holistic methods.

#### *FBO's and Religious Service*

Strangely enough, while some believe religion has been ignored in social efforts, many argue that religion has played far too great a role in relief and development. To a degree this argument has to do with the belief that religion should be entirely removed from social action as well as society itself, however there is also a history of religion being inappropriately applied to development.

One of the major controversies in aid during the George W. Bush administration was the amount of money given to FBOs and whether or not that weakened the controversial concept of separation of church and state. By 2006, funding to religious organizations had doubled since 2000. In 2006 and 2007, USAID funded programs in Africa that used Bible verses and lessons to promote sexual abstinence. The agency's inspector general declared these programs "inherently religious activities" in contrast to the agency's claims that the goals were secular in nature (*Audit of USAID*, 2009).

In the same way that local leadership must be legitimized by accepting their core religious beliefs, FBOs have their identifies rooted in their faith which makes them

effective and motivated. It is not the money given to them that is of concern but they way these organizations incorporate religious intent. Some organizations have a reputation for its members openly preaching about Jesus while teaching about health. Part of this could be the mission of the organization or the zeal of its members, although in many places the indigenous cultures have trouble separating aid programs from the idea of religious activities (*Audit of USAID, 2009*).

In contrast to this reputation, World Vision strikes a balance between respecting its core Christian mission and an appropriate approach to global relief and development. Having received over \$280 million in federal grants in 2008 alone, World Vision is at the center of the controversy over the work of FBOs. They seek to involve churches and require that all domestic staff be Christian, but 17% of their international staff are non-Christian and they have a strict policy of neither proselytizing nor serving with any bias towards a person's beliefs (*Audit of USAID, 2009*).

While there is a tension in the West between a strong historic Christian presence and the secular state, the academic aspect of development has become almost entirely secular. Many relief organizations serve with religious intent or with blatantly religious activities, but the vague notion that development used to consist of missionaries forcing Western culture on indigenous cultures keeps those organizations on the brink of public disdain.

The largely American belief that religion is a personal opinion that practitioners try to force onto others creates a problem for effective development. The concern is the return of "rice Christians", referring to the act of offering someone food or aid only if that

person professes a certain faith. However in most of the world religion is not considered a list of beliefs separate from daily life.

### *Religion as Identity*

The process of globalization, which is drawing more and more nations into the global economy and cultures, is rooted in the democratic capitalism of the West. The West is experiencing growth in secularization and a decrease in religion as daily life, if not faith in general. Therefore it would make sense to assume that the world will experience massive secularization and a possible rise in atheism. There is certainly a degree of truth to this, however there is also a notable resurgence in religious interest. This makes sense in terms of Friedman's "olive trees".

People require a grounded sense of identity and community to be happy and healthy. Modern culture and technology isolates individuals and, for a time, can replace relationships with pleasures. Eventually, though, excessive pleasure leads to dissatisfaction, which can lead a person to an awareness of the need for identity. Religion is one of the fundamental sources of identity and community, and therefore a rise in interest in religion should be expected as globalization continues.

Western culture is highly individualistic, so trying to apply methods that make sense to Westerners is like trying to fit a square-shaped idea of development in the round hole of non-Western culture. Since religion is a primary source of identity, understanding the religious nature of a community is essential. Selinger described the issue:

Recognition of religion as a significant element in social identify construction is to be welcomed, but it remains rooted in the Western tradition which regards

religion as a personal force, inspiring individuals to make decisions based on historical faith, not on the role of religion in its social capacity. (2004)

If the most effective method of development is to productively involve local communities using local culture and priorities, then religion will inevitably be a deciding factor. There are two distinctions in religious application in general that must be identified. A community's religion tends to be either communal or individual, and either spiritual or a matter of social practice.

The distinction that many Westerners are probably less familiar with is spiritual in contrast to social religion. The perception in America in particular is that faith is purely spiritual and serves as a guarantee of eternal life after death rather than condemnation. This can be referred to as "fire insurance" faith. To the degree this faith leads to action it is blatantly showcased as an intentionally Christian act.

Christian mainstream culture is distinct in its quality and motivation from secular mainstream culture, which adds to the perception that anything religious is mutually exclusive from anything nonreligious. There are many exceptions and there is no universal standard to define who is or is not a part of the Christian church, but this is generally the perception that subtly affects the way many Americans react to religion.

#### *World Faiths and Global Justice*

One temptation is to make the discussion about religious leadership in development a comparative religions study. The study of just the Protestant Christian Church in American would reveal many denominations that have difficulty working together despite their fundamental commonalities. The goal is not simply to respect differing faiths, but to be knowledgeable in order to appropriately respect one's own faith



in a constructive way. This does require some information about the world's major faiths and their relationships to development.

Daniel Groody examined five of the world's major religions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha'I faith, and African indigenous religions—and their approaches to themes of social justice and human liberation. Only his evaluation of Islam will be considered here as an example. Considering the West's contention, and perception of contention, with Islamic sects it is also important to know what Muslim theology actually says about issues of globalization and global justice (2007).

The history and monotheistic structure of Islam are relatively simple concepts for Westerners because they share similar roots with Judaism as descendants of Abraham from the Bible. Groody stated, "Islam is a global religion with a global mission that promotes the globalization of ethical values" (2007, p. 125). He quoted Fauzi Najjar who described three "tiers" of division in Islamic thought concerning globalization ranging from "highest stage of imperialism and a cultural invasion" to "welcome globalization" and "finding an appropriate form of globalization compatible with the national and cultural interests of the people".

Groody stated that because of Islam's commitment to social justice it challenges some of the values of global capitalism. "Anti-Western Muslims are not against globalization per se, but against the Western secularization that propagates materialism, greed, and selfishness and undermines values that are important to Islam, such as benevolence, justice, moderation, humility, honesty, and forgiveness" (2007, p. 126).

A common misperception about Islam from Westerners is that it only has a very traditional set of fundamental values and lifestyles that it violently protects. As

Westernized religion has become increasingly relegated to the field of philosophy and ideas, it has become easy to assume that faith is a matter of conforming thoughts to a set of actions already in place. In contrast, Islam puts a very strong emphasis on action and deeds.

There is a concept called *zannah*, which has no commonly understood English equivalent, that refers to the futility of theological speculation, or as Groody defined it, “self-indulgent whimsy about ineffable matters that nobody can ascertain one way or another” (2007). It is more crucial to live the way that God wants than to try to reason with finite minds what God is about. While the zealous actions of fundamental extremist Muslims are a serious concern, this emphasis on global action for the majority of Muslims provides an opportunity for cooperation and mutual respect.

As with any faith there will be many variations among different communities and individuals in understanding and practice. However, a great many Muslims are passionate about pursuing lives of charity and justice that is compatible with what much of the rest of the world would define justice as. This is one example from the Qu’ran:

True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one’s goods, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveler, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms. (2:177)

One important idea that affects application is that many Muslims are not anti-Western because Westerners are different, but because the unbridled economic freedom propagated by the West threatens the Islamic focus on community and economic structure. There are societal restraints and counterbalances to keep individuals from

becoming excessively wealthy. Many Westerners can appreciate the fear of pure capitalist economics. This, combined with the Muslim ideal of global justice and charity, establishes the opportunity for effective collaboration and mutual respect without comprising anyone's core beliefs (Groody, 2007).

Agree or disagree, a local community must be allowed to choose its priorities of community over individuals, even to the detriment of Western societal structure. This is necessary if appropriate methods of relief and development are rooted in the commitment to legitimize local leadership and culture.

Obviously there are other major religions in the world such as Judaism and Mormonism in addition to the other four that Groody evaluates. However, this example presents a sample of a unique set of contrasts and similarities to the Western worldview and the West's prominent religion, Christianity. The goal of increasing one's understanding of other religions is to find common ground for worldwide ethics in order to prevent the conflict between cultures that will inevitably occur if globalization continues to dominate unfettered.

### *Religion as Motivation*

The religious element of a community is not only a source for discovering its needs and priorities. Religion can also reveal opportunities and committed servants, both within the communities and from organizations that seek to help. According to the PR Newswire (*USAID and DHS*, 2008), FBO's are frequently the first responders in a situation and the last to leave. This means that regardless of one's desire to empower FBO's, they are here to stay.

Having an understanding of a community's religious beliefs and history can also indicate how risk and the need for mitigation or development are perceived. The amount of risk present is dependent on how deities are perceived to operate (Coppola, 2007, p. 178). If disasters are a spiritual reaction, then the focus will be on changing lifestyles or making sacrifices. If disasters are considered to be inevitable, then there will tend to be more of a dependence on spirituality in hopes for divine intervention. Someone from a Western FBO with a monotheistic worldview will have to accept that a community might believe that poverty and sickness are connected to the disposition of spirits. The next step is to decide the appropriateness of respecting that belief in order to legitimize local leadership.

Religion not only classifies and reprioritizes risks, it provides a context in which to accept risk. Most obviously there is a social group to lean upon for help, but there is also a source of accountability. Seth Kaplan, quoting Adam Smith, noted, "Close-knit faith groups that had sophisticated social norms and actively penalized deviations from those norms encouraged cooperation and trust among their members, essential for expanding commerce and lending, especially where government institutions were too flimsy to guarantee contracts" (2009).

#### *Limitations of Religious Leadership*

The most obvious limitation of legitimizing local religious leadership is unfortunately a commonly held opinion about faith in general. Religious extremism breeds intolerance, which can lead to violence or oppression. Horrible atrocities have been carried out in the name of God, spirituality, and purity. From historical examples such as the Crusades and present-day violent Muslim extremism, to every-day criminal

activities that are either justified by religion or covered up by it, it is easy for many to justify suspicion toward religious leadership.

Presently in the West, the idea of religion reminds many of sexual accusations against priests, wealthy pastors, fear of homosexuality, right-wing politics, and the oppression of women's rights. As discussed previously regarding people's inherent messiness, a mature perspective requires the bad to be accepted along with the good. Nothing is free of humanity's complexity and propensity for selfishness as well as good. This fact must keep the development worker aware without becoming jaded.

As stated before, there is a degree to which religious intolerance must be allowed. Too many religions require conflicting worldviews and priorities of living. This will frequently be a severe limitation, which is why religion in the larger context of legitimizing local leadership is only one option. A line must be drawn between what is acceptable and what most people would agree is not.

### *Defining a Global Ethic*

A vital distinction is that the goal is to find a global ethic, not a global faith. The major religions are separate because they have incompatible core beliefs, and that could not change without disastrous repercussions. A few fundamental, incompatible beliefs are the number of deities, their imminence or transcendence in relation to people, and the fate and purpose of humans. However, each of the major religions share values of selflessness, charity, good deeds, healthy relationships, strong community, close families, and social justice.

Jason Abdullah Monaco from the Muslim Association of the Lehigh Valley wrote, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Every major religion in the

world has this concept among its teachings. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other faiths share this imperative” (2008).

The Parliament of the World’s Religions suggested four commitments for a global ethic:

(1) a commitment to a culture of nonviolence and respect for life, (2) a commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order, (3) a commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, and (4) a commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnerships between men and women. (Groody, 2007, p. 146-7)

These commitments do not have to be the gold standard for a common denominator in global ethics. However, this list is an excellent example of the kind of appropriate and informed compromises necessary for a world where so many people with conflicting faiths and worldviews are put in increasingly closer proximity to one another.

#### Practical Application

While any particular situation would yield many unpredictable factors that could cause one to consider altering a plan, these principles can be generally applied by making up case studies. Two broad scenarios will be presented. The first example is a Christian FBO responding to a disaster. The second is a secular organization planning a development project.

#### *Scenario 1*

In the scenario with a Christian FBO, a disaster has occurred in a Middle Eastern country that is almost entirely Muslim. The government is unable to meet the needs of those affected, and since this FBO has a reputation for not proselytizing during disaster

response, the government asks the FBO to respond. The organization, understandably favoring Christianity, looks for Christians to partner with but finds none in this area. It seems the largest mosque in the area is in tact, and many people are flocking there seeking direction.

This organization, with a thorough knowledge of its own abilities and resources, could have emergency resources ready to deploy immediately and a tentative long-term plan for rebuilding. Representatives from the FBO contact leaders at the mosque, work out where to set up an emergency shelter, and coordinate setting up and directing people to that location.

Once the immediate needs begin to be met, the FBO sits down with the leaders and discusses a plan for rebuilding. They present the leaders with an idea of the kinds of resources and projects that are possibilities, and then ask what the leaders think the plan should be. The FBO had planned on building shelters to replace destroyed homes. The leaders, however, believe placing the survivors in temporary housing will not be difficult. The community is very close, and there is also an emergency fund set up for this kind of situation.

The leaders' main concern is that the only road to the school has been blocked as a result of the disaster, and they do not believe there is anywhere else for the students to meet for classes. The FBO agrees to devote their resources to clearing the road while researching and planning a new long-term strategy with the leadership.

### *Scenario 2*

In the second scenario with a secular organization, the NGO is planning a development project in a rural African community. One year prior, the organization had

dug a well next to the community so that the women would no longer have to walk to the nearest river every day to collect water. The NGO has just learned that the wells are no longer being used because no one bothered to make the minor repairs occasionally necessary. The organization's initial interpretation is that since the NGO had come and installed the wells, the community probably expects they would come fix them when they broke down. Further research suggests that the community probably believes angered spirits were the cause of the wells breaking down in the first place.

Certainly the NGO's interpretation could be the most accurate. The community would have a difficult time "owning" the project if they were not involved in the planning and implementation. However, an obvious first step would be to send representatives and ask the community leaders why the wells are not being used.

Assuming the leaders confirm that spirits broke the wells and want the women to earn the water by walking to the river, there are two culturally sensitive options for the NGO to take. First, they could simply ask the community if they want the wells at all. If, from the perspective of the community, the spirits allow the wells to be used again, is it worth the risk of living in fear of angering the spirits again?

The second option for the NGO is to try to incorporate maintaining the wells into the community's worldview, but without patronizing their religion. This is a particularly necessary route if there is a health factor. Perhaps the river water is unsanitary and the cause of diseases. In that case, the NGO could look for other aspects of community life that require maintenance. Do the homes need upkeep? Does the farming require regular attention? If a shoe breaks or clothing tears, are they repaired? This has the potential to



help the community evaluate the possibility of taking on the responsibility for the wells using their own worldview and set of priorities.

These examples may be overly simplistic, or the solutions too optimistic. However reasonable, they illustrate a way of thinking that must be considered for modern methods of engaging foreign cultures to be effective and sustainable.

### Conclusion

The future of the world's systems, resources, and needs is unclear. What is certain, however, is that Western-dominated, aid-oriented methods of relief and development practices are not going to be well received as the world progresses farther into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Increasingly more countries will have the ability to push back should the West remain inflexible in its worldview. Secular NGO's, as well as faith-based organizations, must be increasingly accepting of indigenous culture, and religious leadership in particular. The world is getting smaller, and incompatible religions are coming closer together. Mutual respect and a global ethic, while preserving the different religions' core values, is necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be defined by social productivity rather than conflict.

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