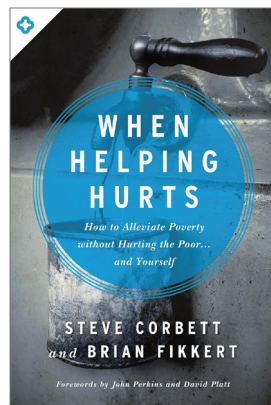


When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself

By Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. Moody Publishers, 2012. 251 pages.

Reviewed by William "Bill" in the Arabian Gulf



Bill is serving in the Middle East (now for over 40

years), mostly as a tentmaker in the Arabian Gulf. His family shares Christ with Gulf locals, builds up local believers, and encourages expatriate churches to reach out to locals. His university studies included a BA in Economics and an MS in Industrial Engineering: Economic Systems Planning--Economic Development.

Have you ever thought that helping the poor, in the West and overseas, is not working? Have you felt that Christians should do something, but often help does not bring long-term improvement? In the US, decades of the "war on poverty" (a huge departure from the way poverty was biblically addressed from colonial times until the mid-to-late 1800s) has only made things worse, destroying initiative and work ethic, breaking up families, and keeping people dependent and disempowered. Overseas, in places like Africa, decades of Western aid have not always served to improve lives but empowered the rich and powerful. In our personal lives overseas, especially as Westerners often viewed as "the rich," we often question whether to give money when asked, with all the problems it brings, such as the risk of destroying a local believer's

witness if their community thinks that person is not suffering for Christ but being paid by foreigners to witness.

When Helping Hurts is written by evangelicals to evangelicals, especially for those seeking to truly help a community in Christ's name, whether at home or abroad. It is based on Christian principles of treating people with respect, listening before speaking, and adapting locally. It recognizes that much aid is not helping, but merely perpetuating dependence on one side and feelings of superiority on the other. It puts Christ and Christians at the center of the reconciliation and transformation that both the poor and we ourselves need, giving respect to and listening to poor communities and their felt needs.

Author Steve Corbett is the community development specialist for the Chalmers Center for Economic Development at Covenant College and an assistant professor of economics and community development. Author Brian Fikkert is a professor of economics at Covenant College and the founder and president of the college's Chalmers Center. They have lots of experience putting these principles into practice and helping others do likewise.

Part 1 lays the foundation, discussing the fundamental nature of poverty. Part 2 discusses three key issues for the design and implementation of any poverty-alleviation strategy. Part 3 applies all of this to "economic development," which seeks to increase the income and wealth of the poor. Part 4 describes steps to take toward implementing this in various contexts, a new section added for the second edition, since some readers of the first edition felt paralyzed by fear of causing harm and so did nothing (15-16).

The authors emphasize biblically that the church is responsible for helping the poor, both spiritually and materially (31-46).¹ They told of

1 See for example Isa. 1:10-17, 58:1-10; Matt. 25:31-46; Acts 6:1-7; Gal. 2:1-10; James 1:27; 1 John 3:16-18.

the “Great Reversal” in 1900–1930 in North America when the evangelical church reacted against the theological deficiencies of the social gospel movement. This lack of theological balance continues to affect the evangelical church today. Missionaries to the developing world teach salvation, as they should; do they also teach about God’s concern for the poor? Do they encourage churches to model a Christian worldview, a kingdom perspective, in their interactions with their community, in word and in deed? The early church spread its faith as it cared for the downtrodden and grew explosively as a result.

What is the root problem in poverty? Most middle-class Americans think it is lack of material goods. But the poor in low-income countries describe it differently. “Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness” (51). How we view the problem affects our “solution.” The book draws on Bryant Myers’s (1999) *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. God designed humans to be in relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation, and the fall (Genesis 3) impacts each of these relationships. Fallen people have a poverty of spiritual intimacy, of being (an improper view of themselves), of community, and of stewardship. “One of the major premises of this book is that *until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good*” (61, emphasis original).

And now we have come to a very central point: *one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.* (62, emphasis original)

Some feel trapped in poverty, but we are ambassadors of Christ the reconciler (71–73). The author’s helpful definition of poverty alleviation:

Poverty alleviation is the ministry of reconciliation: moving people closer to glorifying God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. (74)

One type of poverty alleviation is material poverty alleviation, which they define as “working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work” (74). It is about “People and Processes, Not Projects and Products” (77).

Knowing what poverty is, the book addresses three distinct kinds of assistance. After a crisis, first relief may be needed, then rehabilitation, then development. “One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make—by far—is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention” (101).

We should avoid trying to fix them, reinforcing unbiblical superiority-inferiority feelings. “For these reasons, many Christian community-development experts have discovered the benefits of using ‘asset-based community development’ (ABCD) as they seek to foster reconciliation of people’s relationships with God, self, others and creation” (119–120). God has given the poor talents and assets that might be used; start there.² This reminded me of some biblical passages, such as God’s question, “what is that in your hand?” (Exod. 4:2), or the prophet’s question, “what do you have in your house?” (2 Kings 4:2).

One common problem in well-meaning aid efforts is equipment being given to help a community, but a few years later it has rusted, and some of them never used. A frequent problem is “*inadequate participation of poor people in the process.*” (134, emphasis original). Whatever the kind of assistance given, we must be “working *with*, not *for* people” (105).

2 The authors offer a helpful four step plan (119–120).

Part 3 goes on to practical strategies, addressing short-term missions, domestic poverty alleviation, overseas applications (such as micro-finance programs, partnership, training programs, and very briefly Business as Mission) and briefly the role of the North American church (185–200).

In the new chapters of the 2012 edition, the authors give principles and ideas on how to get started in a North American church context, using approaches discussed earlier. The new appendix gives a bit more on the Community Organizing Process in North America.

Evaluation and Practitioner's Angle

Ted Esler (2021), in *Innovation Crisis* (reviewed in *Seedbed*), used *When Helping Hurts* as an example of innovation through design thinking (empathize, then strategize). Esler personally asked Fikkert how he developed his ideas, and Fikkert explained that economists focus on the material side of poverty, and church leaders on the spiritual side; he sought a more comprehensive model. At Covenant College “he joined a community that emphasized the kingdom of God” (Esler 2021, 149). In an African village, he used simplified design thinking (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test), teaching the local church to listen to the poor before they imagined and planned change—after seeing the results, the witch doctor from a nearby village gave the church land to build a church in their village too! Esler mentions the role of systematic thinking, which can be helpful as far as it goes (Esler 2021, 148–149). This is an exceptional story of how good can come from thoroughly biblical work, even clearly recognizable by those who do not share our faith. Our good fruit speaks well of our faith and our understanding of God and mankind.

How can we apply this to our part of the world? In the Middle East, there is lots of refugee work – ought we to incorporate the ideas in this book, seeking long-term benefit for refugees, empowering them?

Who are the poor? My experience is primarily in the Arabian Gulf, where most cross-cultural workers have full-time jobs in their host country. In the Gulf, people are paid according to their passports. We

may feel embarrassed by how little we pay a housemaid. However, they send most of the money back home, where it is enough to put their children in private schools and build houses for their extended families—things which some of us expat workers would have a hard time affording for ourselves!

How can our churches best help? Before helping those we consider needy, we might ask: do they consider themselves needy? Do they feel empowered and uplifted when they receive our material gifts? I once asked an Indian pastor in the Gulf if his church had a ministry to (mostly South Asian) laborers. He answered, yes, all of their churches do! It may be a stretch for Westerners, at the top of the social scale, to minister to laborers at the bottom. In one Gulf country, many Americans were expelled for doing so, probably as the government feared Western publicity that would embarrass them. Perhaps it makes more sense for Indian churches to minister to these South Asian laborers.

How does sharing with locals connect to helping the poor? One British man in the Gulf brought food to locals he thought were poor – they were living in free, temporary, air-conditioned shacks – while making clear his love of Christ. Afterwards, a couple of churches took up a similar ministry to a particular village. They later stopped, however, as they thought giving food without much witness was not worthwhile—and was there real need there? Some of us have attempted teaching ESL to public school village children, which gave some opportunities to share our faith. Churches join in a joint relief committee which investigates individual needs, helping people of all nationalities and religions in special need—are these also opportunities to sow seeds of grace and truth?

One family in the Gulf started a ministry to locals with disabilities, which I have been involved in. Locals with disabilities are traditionally hidden, as they are shameful to society and families do not know how to help them. The local people greatly appreciate the social interaction provided by this ministry, as well as the home therapy provided by some with expertise. We are known as Christians from the church, and we can

share more on home visits or special occasions. They appreciate our love; we treat them with dignity and give them a glimpse of Christian community. Starting such a ministry may take someone special. Others can then come alongside and our local churches might even join in.

Recommendation

I highly recommend this book, not only for NGOs helping the poor, but for all engaged in church planting. The authors evidence a lot of experience and deep thought, not only regarding the economic perspective, but significantly also from the Christian faith perspective, of what it means to really help the poor.

Chapters begin with an exercise to do individually or in a church or ministry group and ends with reflection questions and exercises. I did not spend much time on the practical exercises, but they would be especially helpful in clarifying what readers do not know (we all need humility and an encouragement to listen and learn). These can also help a group, such as a church-planting team in a poor area, especially if doing NGO-type work, to consider together how to apply the many principles in particular situations, helping the team to learn, to be on the same page, and to talk through important issues biblically as well as practically. A number of the principles—such as empowering others and not feeding our Western pride—are helpful in most of our contexts, whether we are helping the poor or not.

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