

A woman with a joyful expression is cooking in a traditional brick stove. She is wearing a pink sleeveless top and dark pants with a patterned hem. She is sitting on a red stool, and her right hand is raised in a fist. The stove is made of bricks and has a fire burning inside. A large pot is on the stove, and a smaller pot is on the floor. There are stacks of bricks and a bowl on the floor. The background is a dark, textured wall.

FOCUSING ^{ON} THE VULNERABLE



Reconciled
World

Framework for Transformation

Introduction: Seven Core Principles

This is just one of seven core principles in this Framework for Transformation. All seven work together and reinforce one another as we seek to see God bring transformation to the brokenness in our world. The principles are:

- **Depending on God** - It's God who transforms. We need to look to Him for wisdom, provision, and supernatural intervention.
- **Nurturing Truth and Confronting Lies** - To see transformation in physical poverty and injustice, we must confront the wrong beliefs that undergird them.
- **Integrating Physical and Spiritual** - The biblical teaching that all of life is meant to be lived for God's glory changes how we understand poverty and the way we seek to address it.
- **Partnering with the Church** - The local church, Christ's bride, is key to addressing brokenness.
- **Focusing on the Vulnerable** - To see lives transformed, we must help vulnerable people to reclaim their identity as image-bearers of their Creator and stewards of the earth.
- **Mobilizing Local Resources** - As people stuck in poverty discover and use their God-given resources for God's glory, their thinking is transformed.
- **Pursuing God's Ways** - We need to be intentional and faithful to choose God's ways, which are higher than our own.

You can download PDFs of the other booklets (or request hard copies) and access additional articles, stories, and blogs about these seven core principles at frameworkfortransformation.org

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FOCUSING ON THE VULNERABLE

I remember the email arriving in my inbox: *Are you okay?*

Yes, *why?* Was my equally short reply.

I had absolutely no idea what the writer, a coworker living in a different part of Asia, was talking about. I was happily sitting in my home working on curriculum. While it had been raining excessively and the internet was more patchy than usual, it wasn't really something I was paying attention to. In my mind, nothing noteworthy had happened in the past week.

I was oh-so wrong.

As it turned out, a massive storm had hit the country. News reports were already showing many had died. A few quick inquiries revealed that a number of the areas where we worked training churches had been hit by a hurricane. The

phone lines were all down and we had no way to find out how the churches we worked with were coping. There was little to do but wait.

My inbox quickly filled with emails from our relief department asking what we were doing. This was what we referred to as a "CNN-scale disaster." Anything that makes it to CNN brings with it funding and, with that, the need for plans to use the money wisely. Yet there wasn't much I *could* do. I couldn't contact anyone and couldn't travel. So I sat inside my waterproof home, peering at pictures on the news of landslides and buried houses. The reports got worse—all the bridges were washed away in the areas where we worked, so there was no way to access the villages with medical help or food. I prayed fervently and spent the rest of my time worrying. This storm had destroyed crops in areas where the people already struggled to have enough food for the year. They lived in shacks that were hardly able to withstand a small breeze, and certainly not a major storm.

Five rather long days later someone from one of the churches tied a rope to a tree branch and swung over the river. He found access to a phone somewhere and called to let us know that they were not only all alive but that the churches in that area were all working together. In the past week they had distributed food to everyone in need and dug more than 30 houses out of the mud. Now they were in the process of clearing roads so they could rebuild the bridge. Within a week or two more they had rebuilt the bridge (it was the first bridge to be restored, well before the government built any). They had also cleared most of the roads and built a number of new houses. This had all been done on their own initiative and with their own funds.

The people who were involved in this massive relief effort are all people that we would typically describe as “vulnerable.” They lived in one-room mud homes with 6–16 family members. Their worldly possessions totaled a few pots and maybe one extra set of clothes hanging from a nail poked into the wall. The kitchen was a smoky fire, often in the center of the house since it was also used to warm the family. Some (but not all) villages had a primary school, but few had gone to school past grade four. As Christians in an ethnic minority group in a gospel-hostile country, they weren’t even *allowed* to study past grade six. They were ineligible for the government help that others received because of their faith and were often persecuted. There was little medical help in their area and clinics that offered good medical care were hours away. A few people had motorbikes, but most just had a bicycle or walked everywhere. To collect water they walked from one to five kilometers. Life was hard.

I remember the day the pastor in charge of that area came to the first training. He brought his friend because he was too scared to go to the city by himself—he had never left his district before. His borrowed clothes were acceptable, but none too flash and, well, borrowed. He sat in the back of the room, barely understood a word, and looked petrified the whole time. While usually as a teacher I try to get the whole group to participate, there was something about his wide-eyed fear that made me just let him be. I wasn’t even sure that he should come back. But since I was even worse back then at difficult conversations than I am now, I never scrapped together the courage to tell him he wasn’t quite what we were looking for.

Thank goodness I didn't, because the churches in his area were the ones who, when the storm hit their village, made plans, worked together, distributed food and made sure everyone had something to eat each day. They got the roads cleared and bridges rebuilt long before the government or NGOs had managed to work out how to reach them. It was all led by the churches in the communities. Before I had even managed to establish who was alive, they had served hundreds.

Only a couple of years later, this area announced that they had all been transformed and were no longer poor. Since we still hadn't done much beyond some trainings, it seemed like a wildly implausible statement. And yet an investigation proved that it was true—there were no more needs. Children were now in school, everyone had a stable house, the fields grew enough so that everyone had a sufficient income, most people attended church, the communities had wells, toilets, and rubbish pits. Illness had decreased, and their quality of life had significantly improved. Their relationship with the local government had even improved such that, instead of persecuting them, officials were commending their good works and often speaking favorably of the churches.

Another couple of years later they announced they had built a 70-kilometer road. Over 300 people had worked together for a month to make it possible. Why undertake such a massive project? Because, they explained, there was another area that had not heard the gospel that was incredibly hard to get to—without a road, it was many days' walk. They built a road so they would be able to share the gospel and disciple them.

Around the same time they told me they had bought an ultrasound machine and that someone in the community had bought a car that could be used as an ambulance.

No one had given any money to these areas. The incredible change had all come from their own work and ingenuity and God's blessing. It was all beyond what I could have imagined.

Who are the Vulnerable?

What images spring to mind as you think of the vulnerable?
What words would you use to describe them?

I think of the villagers that I often meet—the ones whose homes you have to bend down to pass into. Inside it's dark—there are no widows in their mud walls—the floors are dirt, and the possessions few. For the fortunate there may be a mattress or a bed frame. Their education levels are low, and they are often illiterate. The children dash around semi-dressed and caked in plenty of dirt. Health standards are terrifying.

I also think of the blind girl who sits begging on the side of the road. Her parents leave her there each day. Growing up blind in the Majority World rarely includes schooling. Begging is often the only occupation open to someone like her.

I think of an HIV-positive widow I met in a Delhi slum. Her husband has already died of AIDS, and she's worried that if anyone finds out, her children will be kicked out of school. Her small 40-square-foot house is HOT. And while tiny houses

might be trendy, this one definitely isn't—it's falling down and provides inadequate shelter. She used to clean houses for a living, but now struggles to find work. Because she's HIV-positive, she has to miss work for a few days each month to go to the doctor to get the antiviral medication that she needs. Or she can skip going to the doctor, not get her medication, and miss work when she gets sick. Either way, for a cleaning job like she can find, she's fired when she misses a few days. It's an endless struggle, barely getting by. Beyond that, she's ashamed of her disease and hopes no one finds out.

“ *Those we call
'the vulnerable'
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image. Each has
great potential.* ”

I am sure you have your own set of images that spring to mind when I say “the vulnerable.” Stories of need, lack, difficulty, and desperation. Sadly, too often our definitions only include what they don't have, their needs and the hardships they face. In fact, we often describe them in such

terms—the poor, the blind, the widows, the orphans, the needy. The word “people” vanishes. They, God's precious creation, are reduced to a category. A category defined by their need.

However in these descriptions we miss something essential. In reality all of these people are made by God, in His image, with great value. He knows the plans He has for each of them—plans for good and not for evil. Those facing material needs, those with disabilities—each has potential and each needs the opportunity to reach their potential. In that respect, they are no different than you and me.

The community described in the introduction is only one of thousands of similar communities that we have seen rise up and do the most remarkable things. Over 1000 communities have already moved out of poverty, without much in the way of outside involvement and no financial help.

“ Wrong beliefs create a web that stops vulnerable people from reaching their potential.”

The HIV-positive widow I described is also an amazing church planter. As soon as she accepted Christ, she began begging her pastor to come and teach at her house so that her Hindu neighbors could hear the good news of Christ. When he finally agreed, she went around her neighborhood sharing about her new faith and inviting people to the church service. Forty came to the first service and the church was birthed. Despite receiving threats from local Hindu leaders, she continues to host the church.

So why isn't this happening everywhere? Why are people still hungry? Why are children needlessly dying if those who are poor can change things? Why aren't widows everywhere becoming mighty women of God? As discussed in the booklet “Nurturing Truth and Confronting Lies”, it's often beliefs that hold people back—the beliefs of those who face lack, the beliefs of society around them, and the beliefs of those of us who want to help. Together those beliefs create a web that too often stops those experiencing vulnerability from reaching their potential.

Leadership books will assure you that people rarely exceed your expectations of them. If you expect your employees to fail, they probably will. However, if you raise the bar and expect more from them, then they will probably rise to that challenge. Vulnerable people are no different. If all of society believes they can't do anything, then they will also take on that belief and not try to do anything. If all of society says they have nothing, then they too will take on that belief and fail to see the many things that they do have. When called uneducated, they fail to see all the knowledge, talents, and skills that they do have. And thus, they meet our expectations and the expectations of those around them—they're desperately needy and barely surviving.

One of the trendy topics in the podcasts that I listen to these days is reframing. It's the idea of looking at something through a different lens (frame) to change your perspective on a topic or situation. For example, instead of calling that morning run "exercise," you could call it "me time"—a chance to think, listen to whatever you want, and enjoy the early morning without interruption. It's the same activity—going for a run—but viewed through two different lenses (one apparently more appealing than the other).

In many ways, the term "the vulnerable" needs reframing. That phrase stops us from seeing the potential of people because we only see their need. I'm going to propose that, instead of "the vulnerable," a better term

“ If we think of vulnerable people as 'stuck,' our focus is no longer on giving them stuff, but on getting them unstuck. ”

would be “the stuck,” or even better, “people who are stuck”—those who, for various reasons, have gotten stuck and not yet reached their God-given potential. If we think of these people as stuck then our focus is no longer on giving them stuff but on getting them unstuck. It’s also a reminder that they are not so different from us.

Expectations

This reframing is important because it changes our expectations—what we believe can happen as a result of our involvement. When we see people as a list of needs, then our hope is to address those needs and to bring an end to the suffering they are facing. When we think of people as stuck, we remember again that they are made with immense potential and they need the opportunity to reach that potential.

In the past few years, I have had a lot more to do with organizations that engage with people with disabilities. It’s been a learning curve because it’s one area where I still tend to fall into the trap of only seeing people by their need. My focus was initially on helping churches in their communities serve people with disabilities and their families. However, I was graciously (and frequently) reminded by the program’s director that people with disabilities need space to serve in the church, not only to be served by the church. My goal was shaped by how I saw them—as people who were needy. I needed to reframe things to see them as people who are made in the image of God to be contributing members of society, those who can and should serve others.

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A few years ago, I met a missionary in a guesthouse. He had grown up in the Democratic Republic of Congo and was still living there, having served the Congolese people for a number of decades. I explained the church discipleship we were doing in the DR Congo and told him that it was all being

funded by the churches themselves. He assured me that local funding wasn't possible. It was a strange conversation. I mean, I was telling him what was already happening—not a hope that I had, but something that had been happening for over two years. And yet, in his mind, the Congolese were not able to contribute, so, despite the fact that it was indeed happening in thousands of churches, he assured me it wasn't. He couldn't see past the fact that DR Congo is the poorest country in the world and that the church there is needy. With those beliefs, there is little hope that he will be able to challenge people to rise to their full potential.

Often the facts are a bit bleak: a country is among the poorest in the world, the church is broken, and the government is corrupt. But those facts can cause us to miss larger truths: God is active, and God is able. He made these people in His image, with creativity and problem-solving skills. God has given them many resources, and He expects them to use well what He has given them.

Helping people who are stuck reach their potential

So how do we help people get unstuck? What is our role as outsiders? There are a few things we can uniquely offer to help those who are stuck to start moving towards the potential that God has placed inside them.

Hope

The biggest barrier to education in the Majority World is not lack of facilities or school supplies. It's that parents simply don't see the point. "Why send my child to school beyond learning the basics of reading and writing?" They'll argue, "They are destined to be a farmer, and farmers don't need much education." If we want to see children studying beyond grade four, then we need to convince the parents that there is hope that their children can have a different future.

This is true for all of us—hope of a different future gives us the motivation to endure when things are difficult. Change is hard work, and we need to believe that what we're doing will pay off. If we want to lose weight, it's the hope of success that encourages us to keep avoiding our favorite foods and exercising (or having me time, if you're good at reframing). If after a few weeks of sacrifice, the scale says we're actually gaining weight, most of us quickly give up. We lose hope.

However, most families and communities who are stuck have little hope that their lives will change. For those who are Christians, the only hope they express is that things will be

better when they die and go to heaven. Typically, they haven't seen a great change in their community in the last 20 years and see no reason to expect that things will change in the next 20. They may have moments of hope that an outside organization or the government will step up and help, but years of disappointment—either from unfulfilled promises or help that didn't really make a difference—has left them resigned. This lack of hope defeats. Why fight for a better future? Why put forth the effort when nothing will change?

One of the great joys of teaching the orientation for the Truth Centered Transformation (TCT) program is that we see people gain hope. As we talk about what has happened in other countries, they start to wonder if it's possible in their own country. As we talk about what the communities did, they start to realize it's not outside of what their community could do. After we tell the story of what happened in the country where we first worked, we divide the students into groups to share what they are learning and to put together a list of questions. Almost every time, one of the questions is, "Do you think it could happen here?" And we always respond the same way: "It's the same God. Of course it could. These communities walked in obedience to God, and God turned up and lifted them out of poverty. It's happening all around the world, so why wouldn't it happen here?" And with that, hope is born—hope that will help motivate them, hope that is rooted in God. No longer are they left waiting for outsiders to arrive. No longer do they see themselves as hopeless victims, but rather they have hope that they too can be used by God to transform their community.

“We can help them gain hope that they can be used by God.”

The Bible has much to say about hope—in the NIV there are 180 verses to be exact. It's a good reminder just how important hope is. Most of the verses remind us that our hope is in God, not in our own limited efforts or abilities. It's hope that, as we do what we are able to do, God will multiply our efforts. Some of the many verses that spring to mind include:

Psalm 146:5-7: "Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—He remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry."

Psalm 33:18-19: "But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear Him, on those whose hope is in His unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine."

Isaiah 40:31: "but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

*Lamentations 3:25: "The Lord is good to those whose **hope** is in Him, to the one who seeks Him."*

These are promises for all of us, whether we are stuck or flourishing. We can hope in God, because God is more than

able to save. As outsiders working cross-culturally to address vulnerability, one of the big things we can seek to restore is hope—hope for a better future, hope that is rooted in God.

However, before we can offer hope to others, we ourselves need to believe there is hope that God can turn up and bring transformation to this situation. When we see the incredible needs around us, it's easy (at least for me) to lose hope for transformation.

“*As outsiders, we can seek to restore hope for the future, hope that is rooted in God.*”

I remember the first time I flew into Burkina Faso. Up until that time, we had worked in relatively fertile countries. The soil in nations like Uganda is

(or at least should be) the envy of farmers around the world. Countries like DR Congo and South Sudan are so fertile that they could feed the whole world. In nations where dropping a few seeds could result in a bumper crop, it didn't stretch my faith to hope for a new future. But looking out the window at Burkina Faso as we flew over, I found it easy to lose hope. There was nothing but desert wasteland as far as the eye could see. I remember thinking to myself, “Why am I here? I've taken on far too much. I'm not sure TCT can work here.” Just challenging people to “get on and do it yourself,” when they had nothing but a patch of dust, felt mean. It seemed like a miracle that they were keeping themselves alive at all. They certainly weren't going to be digging any wells or helping each other in the fields.

But as we flew, and as I prayed, God reminded me that He is more than able to put streams in deserts. These are minor things to the One who made the universe. I felt Him challenging me, “Is your hope in fertile land? Is your hope still limited to what you can imagine humanly happening? Or is your hope in Me?” (Side note: God has amazed us in Burkina Faso. The churches have created roads, built schools, and cleaned medical clinics. In one area they have had such an impact that their local Muslim leaders gave them land to build a church. The government, impressed by their efforts, gave one church \$50,000 to pave the dirt road that they had created—a true act of God, since this was a village that actively supported the opposition party, which makes them enemies in African culture.)

If we are going to bring hope, we need to have hope. We need to believe that God can bring transformation, that God has created every person in His image with all the talents and gifts and potential they need to build His Kingdom. If we don’t have that hope, we need to ask God for it. We need to reflect again on the goodness and the power of God.

We can bring hope in three ways.

- **Point people to God** – Psalm 33:17 reminds us that the things people trust aren’t where we should be finding our hope: “A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.” Instead, our hope—and the hope of those who are stuck—is in God. He is the One who is able to save. We need to point people to God, sharing the truth that, as they walk in obedience to Him, He is more than able to multiply their efforts. Because they’re aware of their weaknesses, people who have been

stuck are often a step ahead of the rest of us who largely forget to look to God. Their hope is not that they can do everything, but that God can. We need to teach key truths: that God has plans and a future for us, that He is on the side of the widows, that the ones God promises to use are the weak, not the wise. They need to know that, with God's help, things can change.

- **Share testimonies and stories** – I was recently in Thailand visiting a community that was participating in a project with another organization. We walked along a narrow path to get to the crop areas. I was familiar enough with paths like these that I knew the farmers must be carrying every crop on their backs to the nearby village. I commented almost in passing to the village head man that in the country where I lived some communities were widening the paths so that motorbikes and carts or even vehicles could pass them. "We can do that," was his quick response, "In fact we will do that tomorrow." (In countries where written plans are less of a value and people follow their leaders with few questions, things generally happen remarkably fast). It was just a story, shared in passing as we meandered along a pathway to visit their crops, and yet it gave them a new idea and served as an inspiration for change. They didn't need me to spell out how to do it, to organize it for them, or to provide the resources. They could do all of that. And the result of them acting on one powerful idea would be significant health and economic change to their community.

Many people living in poverty have seen little beyond their own community and don't know anyone whose life has transformed. Consequently, they have little hope that

transformation is actually possible. One of the things we can bring to those who are stuck are stories of transformation. Be a collector of such stories, from history and from today. Think about the sorts of change that would reflect God's intentions for this situation and share those stories. Help people to see beyond their own situations.

- **Manage our actions and words** – Sadly, some of the things we do to show God's love to people who are stuck end up affirming lies they believe about themselves—lies that keep them stuck and unable to experience all God has designed them for.

For example, when we give out nutritious food in a weekly feeding program in a community, we are meeting a need on one level, and the people are likely grateful (aren't we all when we get a free meal?). However, the very act of handing out food says, "You are a recipient and I am a giver. You are needy and must rely on others to provide for you."

Handouts don't help people to become unstuck, because they don't help people to see their role in the Kingdom of God. Receiving regular food handouts generally takes a tiny bit of burden off the family budget, freeing up some resources for something else. But the damage of reinforcing lies that keep them stuck far outweighs any good that extra food or money can do. Instead of helping them in the long term, our handouts hold them back.

We need to take an honest look at our actions and be willing to question our beliefs. Whenever we are presented with an apparent need or opportunity for ministry, we need to ask ourselves:

- Do I believe that these people can be used by God to bring change to their community?
- How do the things I am planning to do reflect that truth?
- Am I pointing to myself, to my program, or to God as the source of hope and transformation?
- Do my actions affirm the potential that God has put in people, or rob them of the opportunity to see and develop that potential?

The booklet “Mobilizing Local Resources” addresses this topic much more deeply, exploring why this is so important and how to give well.

Dignity

We have a video we often show at trainings, a testimony from a pastor who struggled to have enough to feed his family. He attended a training where he learned we need to steward well all that God has given us. He prayed about it and God reminded him that he had land that was unplanted. Seeking to be a good steward of his land, he bought two papayas and planted the seeds. Within one year he had three hundred papaya trees. Now, by selling the fruit from his trees, he is able to pay his children’s school fees, he has enough money for food, he has become a role model for the community (who also started to plant their own land with various vegetables), and he gives generously to others.¹ When I show the film, I ask the class

¹ You can view the video at reconciledworld.org/the-good-steward

how the man's life changed. At first, I was looking for answers like, "He has enough to eat" and "He can send his children to school." But those attending the training, who have often known poverty themselves, always comment, "He stands up straight. He has dignity. He's now a man." That's what they notice. Dignity has great value to them.

“It's not enough to bring food or clean water. To flourish, vulnerable people need to understand who God made them to be.”

One of the great pains of poverty is not so much the hunger or lack of material resources, but the feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and shame. Too often those who are stuck see themselves as inferior.

We are each made in the image of God. As image-bearers, we are designed to have dignity, to understand our value, and to play a role in building God's Kingdom. If we are truly to help the poorest people to flourish, then it's not enough just to bring food or clean water. To flourish, they need to fully understand who God made them to be—His son or daughter, His precious creation, someone who loves and serves others, who brings glory to Him, who has much to contribute.

How do we help people regain dignity?

Help people to understand what the Bible teaches about them as people – The Bible has a lot to say about who God has created us to be and how He sees us: we are made in God's image; we are children of God; we have a calling to be part

of His redemptive plan. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world, and indeed in the pew next to us, have yet to understand these truths. People who are stuck need to see the reality of who they are—that everyone, not just outsiders, is given a role. That we are called to rule and steward creation, not to be ruled by creation. When people come to understand their real identity, it changes their entire outlook and their expectations for the future. They become agents for transformation in their communities.

Challenge People – There is a reason that people sign up to run a marathon (beyond “insanity”). God has made us in such a way that we gain immense satisfaction from achieving something, especially something that we didn’t expect to be able to do. Achievement, making a difference, and serving are all part of who we are designed to be. I’m always amazed that the Bible doesn’t say, “Stop trying to be great and get focused on God.” Instead, Jesus tells us, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...” (Matthew 20:26, Mark 10:43). It appears God is not as worried about our desire to be great as He is about our methods.

Somehow when we look at vulnerable people, we forget that they are basically the same as ourselves. They too feel great satisfaction when they achieve something, when they make a difference, when they are involved in serving someone.

Many people who have been stuck a long time have no belief that they can make a difference, that they can serve, or that God can use them to change their community. Instead they have learned (often as a result of Westerners’ actions) that only outsiders can do those things. They see themselves

as others treat them—as the recipients of help. We need to challenge them to see that, as those made in God’s image, they not only can but must be involved in serving and loving their community, in seeking its transformation.

In order to do that, we need to change our approach. No longer can our question be, “What do you need?” That question only serves to reinforce the lie, “You don’t have, and you can’t do; I do have, and I can do.” It frames the whole conversation with us as the hero and those we are talking to as the victim. Instead we need to move to questions that challenge that lie:

What dreams has God given you for your community?

What gifts and talents has God given you and others in your church?

What do you think God is calling you to do to address the needs you see around you?

In reality, many of those we work with may not be able to answer those questions immediately. If they give you blank stares or say, “We can’t...! We need you to...”, it’s a good indicator that their greatest need is for training that helps them to see who God made them to be.

Help people see the gifts and talents that God has given them

– I’ll be honest (even though it’s humiliating to admit): one of the things that amazed me when I first started to work in Africa was that this continent has a disproportionate number of strategic leaders. If you had asked me before I visited what it was that Africans were amazing at, I would have said things like running, rhythm, and style. They indisputably rule the world in those three areas. I wouldn’t have said, “God has gifted them as incredible strategic leaders.” I had credited

Westerners with leadership skills and Africans with dance. In doing so, I unconsciously undermined the incredible potential of Africans.

Sadly, not only was I blind to their strategic strengths, but so are they. When I say to my African brothers and sisters, “God seems to have blessed you with incredible strategic leadership capacity,” they all look at me with disbelief.

When I was in Malawi I was stunned at how unbelievably innovative they are. As an international trainer and consultant, I’ve gotten to spend a lot of time with people from around 40 nations. Malawi quickly stood out as the most innovative place I have ever been. We heard stories of rural people who had read a book and began generating electricity from wind. When we began assessing the local program, we went from church to church and asked them what community assessment tools they were using. They pretty much all said, “Oh, we made up our own.” I commented to the Malawian evaluation team that these were, without fail, the most innovative people I had ever met. They quickly argued me down (though when I pointed out the many examples, they did become reflective).

Imagine what would happen in that nation if they came to believe that they are world leaders in innovation. How do you think that would change things? We have a unique opportunity to see the truth and to speak truth. As outsiders, we are often seen (sadly) as especially knowledgeable and wise.

“God made them,
like the rest of
us, to rule and
steward the earth.”

While we need to fight that lie, it does give us an opportunity to speak truth to people and to be heard.

I don't believe that God left any nation devoid of the gifts they need to build His Kingdom. I don't think Africans' great calling is only to be the rhythm section in heaven (although that sure is a great contribution). God made them, like the rest of us, to rule and steward the earth. He gave them all the gifts and talents they need to do that. Yet generations of seeing themselves as second class often causes them to miss what God has given them. We need to ask God to show us how He has gifted the people He has called us to work with. Then we need to make it our mission to help people see it.

Truth

If we want to see vulnerable people get unstuck, then one of the ways we can help them is to teach truth. We've looked at a few key truths already: there is hope in God, we are made in God's image with incredible value, and we have a role in building His kingdom and stewarding creation. There are many more that are needed depending on the issue that you are dealing with.

In our booklet "Nurturing Truth and Confronting Lies" we look at other truths that can be important, such as the idea that God cares about all areas of life or that He values women as highly as men. That booklet also helps to outline how to discern lies and bring truth.

Skill Development

Social scientists tell us that, in order to change, we must be both willing and able. For example, if I wanted to get more healthy, I need not only to be willing to make the sacrifices to exercise and eat right, but I also need to know what to do. What foods are healthy? What exercise is most beneficial and how do I do it? I need the knowledge, skills, and resources to make those changes.

Similarly, you might preach a compelling sermon on why I need to evangelize my neighbors. I might be willing to do so, but without skills I will probably stand around feeling somewhat paralyzed. Should I go hand out tracts on a street corner? Invite a friend to lunch and then...say what exactly? Announcing that someone needs to repent while asking them if they would like hummus on their cracker seems awkward. So I never actually implement—not because I don't want to, am a bad person, or am helpless or hopeless and need you to take over—but rather because I just wasn't sure how exactly to do it. And my failure to evangelize may well serve to affirm in my own mind that I can't do it, I am helpless, and I need someone else to do it for me.

“*While truth gives us a powerful motivation to change, we also need skills in order to get unstuck.***”**

Many of those who are stuck face a similar problem. While they do need to hear truth, that's not always enough. They also need the skills and knowledge to change. The TCT program very much grew one module at a time.

After the first three church discipleship modules, we noticed that, while churches were doing a great job of serving their communities, babies were still dying because parents would not give them any liquids when they had diarrhea. And so we taught practical lessons on health. We discovered women were doing all the work and marriages were basically only seen as a means of procreation, so we taught a Marriage and Family module. We realized that the rural poor were being horribly exploited by the wealthy who locked them into horrendous loans or manipulated them, so we taught Money Management. Each of these lessons starts with truth about God's intentions, but spends the majority of the time on practical skills. For instance, Money Management teaches how to make a budget, keep a budget, and calculate if you are making a profit.

While truth gives us a powerful motivation to change, we also need skills in order to get unstuck. Without the skills to implement what you are teaching, everyone is left paralyzed. And, in the worst cases, this ends up affirming their beliefs about their own incapacity.

There are endless skills-based materials available. Community Health Evangelism, for example, has a huge library.² If you want to do skills training, I would suggest you start with what is already available.

2 You can register on their website to access the CHE resource library: www.chenetwork.org/signup.php

Prayer

It's easy to dismiss prayer because we're "busy" doing something that feels more significant or important. But, really, prayer is the most important and significant thing we can do. It's God who transforms lives, not our human efforts (although He can and does work through us). Prayer is a powerful tool in doing that. We've also talked a lot of about the importance of changing beliefs. But that's not easy. Many of the beliefs that keep people stuck have been held for generations. It's rare to go into a community, announce women have value, and have everyone suddenly change their attitudes toward wives and daughters. Similarly, beliefs like we are inferior, we need help, and things are hopeless, are lies Satan has used to steal, kill, and destroy since the beginning of human history. He doesn't allow them to fall easily. Confronting these lies is the beginning of a battle—one that is, in part, fought on our knees.³

Recap

The vast majority of people who are stuck are not going to suddenly change without some kind of intervention or catalyst. They are indeed stuck, for the most part, due to beliefs. But we can play a role in helping them overcome the situations they are in by teaching the truths that there is hope in God, that they have dignity, and that they have a role to play in building God's Kingdom. We can challenge them to rise to the potential that God has placed in them. In addition to teaching truth, we need to teach practical skills when needed. And above all, we

³ The role of prayer in our work is looked at more closely in the booklet "Depending on God". You can find justice prayer resources at reconciledworld.org/pray

need to be people of prayer. It's going to take the right beliefs, skills, and God's intervention to see those who are stuck become all that God intended them to be. Yet we have seen, time and time again, that it's more than possible.

Those who aren't stuck

There are some people who need help, but who aren't stuck because of wrong beliefs and hopelessness. Two main groups spring to mind.

Those in a relief situation

These are people like we see in the story of the Good Samaritan—they have fallen on a sudden and unexpected disaster. It could be a personal catastrophe, such as a house burning down, a child hospitalized, or a severe car accident. It could be a natural disaster, like an earthquake, hurricane, or flood. Or it could be a man-made famine or war.

Similar to the story of the Good Samaritan, this person may have been doing just fine before some sudden crisis struck. Alternatively, it could be someone who was already struggling to have food on the table and to pay their children's school fees and who has no safety net when their house burns down or a flood washes away the crops.

The people in this category are facing a specific, unexpected event. It's not a bill for school fees that comes on a schedule and can be anticipated, but something completely abnormal.

How to help

This isn't a time for truth or skill building but to be the hands and feet of Christ and provide what is needed—food and shelter. The issues they are facing aren't because beliefs have trapped them in poverty. In relief situations, handouts aren't undermining their dignity or leaving them believing that they are hopeless and helpless.

We do need to be discerning about when the disaster has passed. If we stay in handout mode too long we are in danger of creating dependency. Handouts are only helpful until the immediate crisis has past. Some would define that as when they are no longer about to die. I might be a little more generous and say when the shock is starting to wear off and they can conceive of a future. If they can get through the day without weeping and you are still giving handouts you may have stayed in handout mode too long.

“When people have faced a catastrophe, we need to bring practical help fast. We also need to leave quickly.”

My husband's family was rich before he was born. However war and communism left both his family and the nation extremely poor. He grew up knowing what it was to go to bed hungry because there wasn't any food. Today, without any outside help, they are all relatively wealthy with good jobs. Why the dramatic change? Well his family

wasn't stuck—they still believed that they could change the future, that hard work would pay off, that education opened doors. They still had dignity and hope. And so they worked hard and managed to overcome their situation. While they endured difficult years, their poverty was not generational and not grounded in beliefs, but was brought on by external circumstances. However, in some countries where people's lives have been disrupted by war, many people remain stuck in poverty generations later. NGOs flooded in and stayed too long, and people became dependent on handouts. Instead of sacrificing and working hard for a new future, they learned to see themselves as victims, worthy of handouts. And today, years later, their nations remain packed with NGOs because the need has persisted.

There is a place to jump in and serve when people have just faced an immense catastrophe. But similar to my husband's family, the people we are helping aren't necessarily "the stuck". In fact, at some point you or I could easily need this kind of help. So, while we need to bring practical help fast we also need to leave quickly. If we do feel called to the community long-term then we need to first assess if people are actually stuck (and therefore what beliefs, skills, and prayer are needed as we phase out material handouts).

The Dependents

Another group who need special consideration are those I am calling "the dependents." They are dependent on another to provide for them. Typically they would be the very old, the severely disabled, or the very young who have no family. A six-

month-old orphan is completely and appropriately dependent, as is the 86-year-old who has been abandoned by her family.

How to help

This group does require long-term help. They are going to be dependent on others for a significant period of time.

The best people to help dependents are those in the same community. They understand the issues and are present long term. However, they do also often need training to equip and challenge them to be involved. Similar to much of the West, many Christians around the world seem to have forgotten that we are called to care for the widows and orphans. We've defaulted on our responsibility and look to the government instead. However, this command is for the poor rural community as well as the wealthy US church. I have seen that churches around the world are more than able, but sometimes they, like ourselves, do need to be challenged and given basic skills.

Orphan Care

The best people to care for an orphan are the extended family. This has long been the tradition in cultures around the world. If the family completely rejects the orphan, then someone else in the community will step in. If the orphan is older, they may continue as a child-headed household under the watchful eye of the community. Now, not every child flourishes under these conditions. In fact some do become the equivalent of slaves. Those who take them in do feed them, but they are expected to work for the family in return. It's not a great life, and they are unlikely to reach their potential.

One popular alternative has been orphanages. However, I would argue that it's not a good solution. There is a reason that the West no longer has orphanages—we've long understood that a child does best raised in a family setting.

Beyond that, foreign-funded orphanages are a messy affair. Many are started as fundraising ventures. I have met pastors who have candidly told me that they started an orphanage in order to fund their church off the surplus of foreign funds. As the pastors explain, foreigners don't want to fund a church, they want to fund orphanages. So as a result everyone starts an orphanage. The children aren't actually orphans; they have parents in the village whom the pastor convinced to send their children to the city for "better education opportunities."

“*When trained, churches do an amazing job of supporting the orphans in their community.*”

If we want to help orphans, there is a much better solution. Our experience has shown that, when trained, churches do an amazing job of supporting the orphans in their community. Young children are adopted by families and treated in the same way as their own children. Child-headed households are looked after

and provided for. The community puts aside crop land for them and works together to plant and harvest the land so the children have an income. They buy chickens or other small livestock and help the children plant a vegetable garden that they can care for. Teachers or other adults help provide support with school work. While we might be concerned to hear of nine- and ten-year-olds living without an adult in their house, the reality is that in highly collective communities they are

probably more integrated into others' lives than the average American child lost behind their iPhone.

So what is the role of foreign funding?

One key way foreign funding can help is by funding training for churches. As mentioned, the average church member may have never been taught that orphan care is their responsibility. Training is needed to help them understand what the Bible says on this issue and to help them think through how to care for orphans.

Another way that I have seen foreign funding have a positive impact is to provide something like a daycare or childcare for children who are not yet school-aged. While families may be willing to help, the reality of the time needed to look after a very young child can be overwhelming. Providing for half-day care relieves some of that burden. Alternatively, sponsoring school fees or health care can also help families who are willing to take in a young child (though a better alternative is to look at ways to help the family who is adopting increase their long-term income. A loan to buy a cow or sewing machine might actually be significantly more helpful).

The elderly

Another group that needs help are the abandoned elderly.

Now we do need to be a little careful that we don't too rapidly throw them in the basket of those who need outsiders to help. I remember visiting one program that provided handouts to the elderly. Three of the five that we visited lived with their families. Those families were, according to the Bible, required to care for their family members (1 Timothy 5:4-8). Two were

doing well, judging by the size of their home and land and number of livestock.

“Our priority needs to be restoring families,”

These people should not have been receiving handouts. One family was struggling—it was headed by a single mother with lots of children. But even for this family, skills training would have been more helpful than handouts. What this single mother really needed in the long term was sufficient income to care for her children and her elderly mother, not handouts.

Another person we visited was extremely old—he actually died a year later. However, he lived with many caring neighbors on a large piece of land. The houses were all small, single rooms attached in a row. He still had the capacity, with the right help, to be involved in his own care. He could have easily done something like raise a plant nursery—growing seedlings from seeds and sharing the profits with someone else who helped sell his seedlings.

The last person we visited we found wailing on the ground. We were very concerned. He did cheer up as he shared that the church had bought him a mattress (he had never had one before). After lots of discussion, it was found that he did have family in another area and his dream was to return and live with them. While this organization had been giving handouts for the last few years, really what was needed was to restore him to his family. Someone probably needed to take his photo and go to the village he came from, find the family and talk to them. It was a big job. However, it was more needed than a mattress. Like too many of our efforts, the mattress was a thoughtful gift but not really a solution to this man's problem.

Alternatively, I have seen in that same country some great church-based initiatives. Church members have come together to build and repair houses for the elderly. They have planted gardens and provided needed tools. And in cases where the elderly have become unable to provide for themselves, volunteers have maintained those gardens to provide food for those who have no family.

When seeking to serve elderly people, our priority needs to be restoring families (including extended families)—it's who God intended to have responsibility. We also need to be looking for ways the elderly can continue to contribute because, at every age, contributing brings dignity and restores our identity as stewards and image-bearers. For those few who are truly abandoned and dependent, our goal should be to strengthen churches and communities so they can creatively come up with ways to provide food and housing for the elderly.⁴

“We need to look for ways the elderly can contribute. At every age, contributing brings dignity.”

A long, slow approach

We've all seen the stats: 9 million will die of hunger this year, 1 child dies every 10 seconds, or 17,000 people will die of hunger

⁴ We take a deeper look at how to help churches and communities meet needs like this in the booklet “Mobilizing Local Resources”.

and hunger-related diseases today. For the past couple of decades, development organizations have worked incredibly hard to help bring some understanding and urgency to the problem of poverty. And since they are mostly asking us to give up our money to help someone we have never met and will never meet, it does require a little drama and simplification to get our attention. Poverty, often hidden in places we never visit, isn't really on our daily radar.

In this booklet I've advocated a slow response—helping people understand who God has created them to be, unlocking their potential, and building their skills. All this takes time. While the principles make sense, when we see the immediate need, it doesn't feel like enough of a solution. At a heart-level, we still may want to jump in and provide food, water, school lunches... Why wait until another child dies?

One thing to understand is that very few people actually starve to death in the world. Those who do are in war or famine zones that are extremely hard to reach. Where there are roads and transport, most everyone has escaped to refugee camps. Those who are truly starving exist in the most isolated and dangerous places in the world. And yes, I would definitely advocate handing food to them. This falls under the category of "relief situations." However, very few of our efforts actually reach these areas. Organizations like the UN and Samaritan's Purse are concentrated on reaching them—it's expensive, takes a massive amount of expertise, and requires food drops from airplanes.

The vast majority of those represented in the dying-of-hunger statistics are in complex situations created and maintained

by wrong beliefs. It's the woman who doesn't get adequate nutrition while pregnant because men eat first. It's the child born malnourished (because, again, the men eat first) who is unable to fight off disease. Is it most helpful to rush in and give pregnant women food (even though they have enough food in their home—the husband, father-in-law and sons just ate it all)? While our handouts may keep that woman and her child alive, we aren't changing the beliefs that keep them from ever reaching their potential. We're in danger of treating the rest of the world like our pets—we will feed them, care for them, and make all their decisions. We are failing to see that they are God's precious creation who should have the opportunity for hope and dignity as they contribute to building God's Kingdom.

One of the most common illustrations to explain the complexity of extreme poverty is "The Mountain Pass." The story basically goes that there is a mountain pass which is dangerous and slippery and people are constantly falling off the mountain. Since it takes so long to get people to medical help, many die. So an organization wanting to help sets up a bunch of ambulances at the bottom of the mountain and puts in a road so that people are now able to be rushed to the hospital quickly. While yes, it's reducing the number of people who die, it's clearly not the best solution. It would be much better to prevent people falling in the first place. Putting up a fence or making a new path would both be better. But even better again would be respecting the image of God in the people you work with and helping them think about the problem. What's happening? Why is it happening? What can be done differently? If we slap up the fence, then chances are that it will need repair and everyone will look to us. Or another mountain pass will

also need a fence and again they will look to us. Or a different problem will arise and, you guessed it, they will look to us. We've treated people like animals, unable to help themselves and needing us to build them fences for their safety. While infinitely better than the ambulance at the bottom of the hill, it still doesn't honor people or get to the heart of the problem.

Similarly if we start feeding pregnant women or young children born into homes where the men eat all the food (or spend the family income on alcohol or gambling), we haven't solved the problem. We have done the equivalent of providing an ambulance at the bottom of the mountain. The woman lives but is still mistreated. The child survives, but grows up in a home where women and children are both treated like a possession and where they will learn that women have no value and should be mistreated. We should aim so much higher—the restoration of families as God intended.

Conclusion

We have been given an incredible opportunity to help people who are stuck in poverty and vulnerability to get unstuck, to see them moving towards their potential. In part it starts with us understanding again just who vulnerable people are. Like ourselves, they are God's precious creation, designed to steward the earth and called to love and serve their neighbors.

Once we acknowledge the truth of who they are, then our challenge becomes helping them to move into the reality of who God created them to be. We do this not by giving them things

that meet their immediate needs, as useful as that might seem, but by bringing hope, dignity, truth, and skills to enable them to move towards their God-given potential.

REFLECT AND APPLY

Who comes to mind when you think of “the vulnerable”? Be specific; write their names if you know them.

In what ways do you see the image of God in this person (or people)? What would it look like if they were reaching their God-given potential? How would their circumstances change? (If you struggle to answer these questions, stop and ask God to help you see this person the way He does.)

Do you think this person sees this value and potential in themselves? Why or why not?

What beliefs (their own or society's) do you think may have caused them to get stuck? Why haven't they reached their potential?

On page 14, it says, "...before we can offer hope to others, we ourselves need to believe there is hope that God can turn up and bring transformation to this situation." For many of us, years of disappointment or frustration in lack of progress—or simply the desperate needs we see—can easily rob us of hope.

On a scale from 1 (hopeless) to 10 (great hope), where would you place yourself?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Lift it up to God.

Considering the enormous needs in our world, this booklet advocates a slow response—helping people understand who God has created them to be, unlocking their potential, and building their skills. Do these principles resonate with you? Does it feel like enough of a solution?

If not, list out the situation or people who come to mind who need a different kind of help.

Do they fit into the categories of “those who aren’t stuck” (from page 27)? Do they need relief because they have suffered an extraordinary crisis in the past month? Are they dependents who truly have no one else to care for them?

If not, what do you imagine would happen—both pros and cons—if you took a slower approach to helping?

Pray through the list and ask God how He would have you respond in each situation.

In the illustration of "The Mountain Pass," where would you place yourself (based on your involvement up until now) in the story?

- The organization building a road at the bottom of the mountain
- The ambulance driver, rushing the fallen to get help
- On the mountain pass, building a fence to keep people from falling
- The sherpa helping travelers see the problem and come up with their own solutions

Where would you like to be?

If you aren't where you want to be, what is the first, small step you could take toward getting there?

Pray: Thank God for the incredible potential He has placed in each person and ask Him to help those you work with to reach that potential. Pray that He would fill both you and them with hope—not in programs, but in God's power to transform.



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