

## Some thoughts on ‘material poverty’ and how outsiders can help well

*The following is written based on my Christian faith, some reading, and my experiences of having a materially prosperous upbringing and being in a high socio-economic echelon of being a doctor, and also living and working with the materially poor in Central Australia (10 years) and Timor-Leste (5 years) and other places in Asia. I am not writing this as an academic exercise, hence there are no references to sources. Please note that many of the ideas are not my own, but those of people who are wiser than me.*

**Please do not share publicly without asking me first.**

### Material poverty in Timor-Leste

The GDP per capita in Timor is about US\$1300,<sup>1</sup> which means an average person earns approximately US\$1300 per year. A newly graduated teacher teaching at a Catholic primary school (run by one of my friends) earns less than US\$150 per month. An office worker with a university degree (such as the ones I used to work with) earn around US\$200-300 a month. A nurse manager or a very experienced teacher in one of the best private Catholic schools in Timor earns around US\$500 month. A specialist hospital doctor earns about US\$1000 per month. A Timorese with a foreign university degree who works in an office position in a foreign embassy, or a United Nations agency, or a foreign-funded organisation may earn US\$1000-3000 a month, depending on the organisation and position.

Furthermore, families are big (often with 4 to 6 children, plus perhaps a grandparent, a cousin or two, an uncle or aunt who might be living together) and unemployment is high, which means that a middle-class family, with both parents working and earning perhaps US\$600-800 a month together, may be supporting up to 10 people. Rent of a small family house may be US\$100-200 a month (which does not include cooking gas, running water, or electricity). Most people drink water out of 22 litre bottles, which is US\$1 a bottle, and a family may well go through a bottle in a day or two, so they may well be spending US\$20-30 a month for drinking water alone. Enough fresh vegetables and tofu for a simple meal for 5 people might cost around US\$2 (before the cost of rice), and many people dream of being able to eat meat every day. Mobile phone credit could be as little as US\$1-2 per week, but that makes downloading videos frustratingly slow; US\$30 a month gives reasonable download speeds, but spending 10% of your total monthly salary on mobile phone credit is not viable. Therefore, a middle-class income doesn't go a long way, and eating at a restaurant for just US\$5 per person becomes an extremely special treat. A US\$3 taxi ride is only for dire emergencies. Having a motorbike in the family is the middle-class aspiration.

The financial situation of families in rural areas is likely to be much more difficult, where there is subsistence farming.

However, having a family member who has gone overseas for a year or two to work in a minimum-wage unskilled labouring job in a country such as Australia or South Korea will be considered rich to be able to send back a few thousand dollars a year. That may well manifest itself in the nicest house in the village.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=TL>.

## **What does material poverty do to you?**

For those of us who have never experienced real material poverty, it is hard to truly imagine because we have always had choices. I think part of being materially poor is having few real choices.

From my observations, being materially poor puts people in a survival mode – how do you survive today, or until the next pay day? Planning and budgeting for the future becomes difficult, if not impossible, when financial savings are almost non-existent. Leisure activities are minimised, if not eliminated. Owning something such as a smart phone or a computer becomes a dream. New clothes and shoes are only bought when necessary, and almost always from a second-hand shop. Investing in something that doesn't have immediate benefit, such as a fire extinguisher or a helmet, becomes low priority. Any promise of extra money, whether it is a legitimate scholarship, or a scam, is very attractive.

If you're fortunate enough to land a good job with a foreign organisation that provides higher pay, all your family is proud of you and will naturally ask, and expect you, to buy all sorts of things for them. That may get annoying after a while. Therefore, sometimes it's better not to be well off.

If you happen to have a higher income, you may not necessarily know how to budget and save because no one around you has ever modelled that behaviour to you.

## **Systems**

When we live in a country such as Australia, we take for granted the many functional systems that don't exist in a country like Timor, for example:

- **Medical care.** When you are sick in Australia, you can go to see a doctor who is highly likely to provide you with good quality medical care, and when given a prescription, you will likely be able to obtain the medications. In Timor, doctors may not necessarily give you good quality medical care, and medications may not be in stock.
- **Waste management.** In Australia, everyone knows to put rubbish in bags which are put in wheelie bins, which are collected in trucks, and somehow disposed of, such that rubbish is not blown onto streets and into waterways. In Timor, everyone puts their unbagged rubbish into the designated local heap, where the rubbish truck comes and the men literally scoop up the pieces of rubbish by hand into the truck. In the meantime, many people toss rubbish onto the streets, or burn rubbish (including plastic) in their yards, and much plastic ends up in drains, on beaches, and in the seas.
- **Financial systems.** In Australia, almost all adults have a bank account and most people will do internet banking and use debit or credit cards. In Timor, many people don't have bank accounts (salaries are often paid in cash), saving money in the bank is a novelty for many, only the biggest institutions (such as hotels and supermarkets) that cater to foreigners may accept credit cards (and Visa only, no Mastercard or American Express).
- **Food service.** In Australia, the chances are that if you go to a restaurant, you will likely get the same standard of service every time you go. In Timor, in one restaurant I went to regularly, sometimes I would be given a paper napkin but not always, occasionally I would be offered a drink of water but not always. In another restaurant in Timor where I ate exactly the same meal every day, and occasionally I am charged more – it seemed to be according to the memory or whim of the person collecting money!
- **Electricity, water, and gas.** In Australia, almost all houses will have electricity, water, and cooking gas, and their supply will hardly ever be disrupted. In Timor, while most houses have electricity, even in villages, the electricity may suddenly be cut once every few weeks, especially

in a storm. Most houses and even clinics don't have running water, so water needs to be collected and carried. The majority of the population cook on firewood.

- Government systems. In Australia, the government generally tends to run well, in collecting taxes, having laws and policies that are generally reasonable, the streets are cleaned, potholes in roads are soon fixed, traffic lights work, police generally do their work, and so on. Not so in many impoverished countries, where tax is easily evaded, laws and policies seem a bit haphazard and rarely enforced, street cleaning doesn't happen regularly, potholes in main city streets are there for months and months, traffic lights may not work, police usually can't be trusted, and so on.

All these poor systems in Timor, I believe, are because of material poverty: setting up systems takes money, and the government is too poor to invest in those systems, and individuals who are always in survival mode are not accustomed to thinking about developing and maintaining systems.

Perhaps more importantly, the majority of people in Timor have not lived within functional systems. The norm for them is electricity that suddenly cuts off, not having running water but instead carrying water home, they don't expect to consistently receive good medical care, they've never seen people saving and budgeting money. So I think many people simply cannot imagine a different life in a financially prosperous society with functional and complex systems. Also, even amongst people who have seen highly functional systems overseas and want to emulate them in Timor, they often don't realise that behind the scenes of the functional system there are years of study, policies, guidelines, regulations, competition, on-the-job training, interaction with other functional systems, and learning from mistakes, such that having one or two well-educated people in will not miraculously turn a dysfunctional system into a functional one.

### **Root causes of material poverty**

There are countless socio-economic reasons why material poverty occurs. But as a doctor, I can identify one health-related reason for the perpetuation of material poverty that is not often discussed, and that is regarding brain development.

Scientific studies have shown that unborn babies carried by mothers who are anaemic and malnourished have poor brain development in utero. Brain development continues after birth, and it continues in the first 3 years of life; there is minimal brain development after that. Developing brains are very vulnerable to malnutrition, including anaemia. Malnutrition has been shown by scientific studies to cause children to have lower intelligence, and the later adults to have lower economic productivity. Therefore, to put it bluntly: poor nutrition of mothers and young children increases the risk of material poverty later in life.

[In addition, malnutrition in-utero and in early childhood causes genes to be turned on and off, which increases the risk of chronic disease (such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity). Low-income countries are often poorly equipped to deal with growing epidemics of chronic diseases.]

Other than nutrition, there are other factors that affect a child's development before a child reaches school-age.

- In materially poor settings, mothers are more likely to die in childbirth, and the death of a mother puts the rest of the family at higher risk of poverty.
- Adverse experiences during early childhood, which include trauma or abuse, uncontrolled stress or lack of stimulation, affect a child's brain development.
- A family in a chronic survival mode may not always be able to provide basic security for a child (as simple as a baby is always picked up and cuddled when upset), and basic intellectual

stimulation (as simple as playing peek-a-boo with a toddler), all of which is essential for brain development.

- Early childhood education, where pre-school children are taught basic classroom skills (such as how to sit quietly and pay attention to the teacher) and learn problem-solving through games, also promote brain development, and affect academic success in subsequent formal education. Therefore, the basic elements of early childhood development, which may be assumed normal non-negotiable elements of child rearing in high-income families in high-income countries, may be difficult to acquire in materially poor settings, and that puts the child at risk of more material poverty in the future. The main message is: the majority of brain development, which affects a child's future academic and socio-economic abilities, occurs before a child enters primary school. Therefore, investing in the pre-natal and pre-school periods is arguably as important as investing in primary, secondary, or tertiary education, in order to help families and communities out of material poverty.

The situation in Timor demonstrates the depth of all these problems. Firstly, in recent years, even in times of peace and relative prosperity, there is endemic malnutrition, where over half of all children are chronically malnourished; therefore, 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, when the current generation of adults were in utero or infants, malnutrition was likely even more widespread, causing delayed brain development in the most crucial early years of life. Secondly, from birth onwards, in environments where families were literally struggling to survive and trying to avoid death by violence or starvation, babies' and children's development was undoubtedly negatively affected. Thirdly, even now, after many years of peace and relative prosperity, only 20% of children under the age of 6 years attend any pre-school education; therefore, when current adults were children, the vast majority must have missed out on crucial early childhood education. Fourthly, even now, most children and adolescents don't attend school for the whole day (due to schools having to run in shifts due to lack of space), some teachers don't turn up except on pay day, many schools don't have books, much of the educational method is by rote learning, and so on; therefore, in recent decades, in times of socio-political instability and greater material poverty, primary and secondary school education was even less effective than it is now. Therefore, by the time Timorese youth leave school and enter the workplace or university, they are greatly disadvantaged compared to youth who have grown up in materially wealthy societies. This means having good job opportunities and good university education may have limited utility if the youth do not have the ability to fully embrace them.

### **So how do we help people out of material poverty?**

If I had a simple answer to the question, then I would have done it by now! The answer is not easy!

I think the leaders of the country need to make careful and bold decisions to allow more money into the country so that there is more money to go around. Bhutan is an example of a country that has relatively recently opened up to the rest of the world very wisely, bringing in foreign money carefully, and managing that money carefully so everyone benefits; I think Timor would be very wise to learn from Bhutan. Other countries in Asia have brought in money through tourism and foreign investment, some very successfully, but often with unintended consequences such as destruction of the environment and culture, or great divides in wealth where the rich get richer and the poor don't benefit much. (Timor has invested in oil and gas, which has reportedly brought in some good money to the country, but my understanding it is not as lucrative as it was purported to be, for various reasons, including the fact that huge amounts of investment in the infrastructure are required.)

Foreign development aid is helpful, but donors must be careful not to create dependency, which is very hard not to do. There are many low-income countries around the world that are very aid-

dependent. Governments and organisations end up relying on foreign donations to fund core services, and as soon as donations stop (whether it is from foreign governments, organisations, or individuals), then operations also stop. Therefore it is important to get reliable sources of real income, such as through tourism.

Educating young people is a good thing, but I think there are caveats. Firstly, as I have mentioned above, young people are often not adequately prepared for university, due to deprivation starting before they were born. Secondly, the education must be of truly good quality, and that requires a lot of money which Timor simply doesn't have. It is no secret that universities in Timor generally produce graduates who have been poorly educated (such as nurses who don't know how to take a blood pressure, or engineers who don't understand percentages, or accountants who don't understand decimal places). Thirdly, there should be jobs at the end of a good education, and very sadly, some bright young people who have studied overseas on scholarships have returned to jobs where their skills are not used well (I once employed two young people who had studied overseas to simply do data entry, because they were the best applicants), or with a foreign organisation where they get a good pay but they may not directly improve the governance of the country or improve essential service delivery. So I believe education alone is not the answer.

### **How can a small organisation help alleviate poverty?**

A relatively small organisation such as a church can help, but they must help wisely, without creating dependency. If donors provide food handouts, then, over time, the recipients will learn how to wait for handouts; if donors provide a means of helping people grow more food, or generating more income to purchase more food, then that is likely to be more helpful to promote sustainability. If donors provide monetary donations, with a survival mentality and no experience or role-models in budgeting, the recipients may use up the money and just hope for more to come. If donors fund educational institutions, they must also give thought to what happens to the young graduates – will they have meaningful jobs, or will they just end up educated but unemployed like everyone else?

Also, role models and mentors are needed, ideally people who look like them – it is easy to have idols of people who have done great things, but they may remain an idol rather than a role-model if their circumstances are too far removed from the local reality. Therefore I think there is great value in the incarnational approach, of an outsider living as a equal, in solidarity with the people in sharing the ups and downs of life together, mentoring and role-modelling, but also as an equal, and as a learner. The outsider who knows it all, or who just comes with lots of money once in a while, is likely to have limited impact.

From my own experience in working at the post-graduate level in Timor, it is clear to me and my colleagues that short courses of a few days don't really help improve professional skills. The participants love having a few days off work and getting a certificate (and maybe even a t-shirt) at the end, but applying the newly-learnt skills in the workplace often doesn't happen, or only lasts for a short time, due to weak underlying knowledge and weak systems. A longer-term mentoring approach is more likely to help in improving professional skills.

### **Drawing on appropriate expertise**

Decades ago, just jumping in to help an impoverished community was acceptable, because there may not have been other options. Nowadays, there are people with bachelor's degrees or doctorate degrees in international development, books have been written, there are many websites that

discuss the issues. Therefore just to jump into help without consulting the experts is risky, if not embarrassing when seen by the experts. In my own field of health, having an oncologist or interventional radiologist who normally only work in hospitals in high-income countries who have good intentions to set up a church's village health outreach programme in a low-income country is laughable – there are plenty of professionals who have higher degrees in community health who would easily poke holes in programmes that are set up by well-meaning but inexperienced people (I have been one such hole-poker).

### **Trust, accountability, learning**

(Note: when I say 'donor' it may not necessarily be one person, but perhaps an organisation, and obviously an individual donor of \$20 will have different influence than a donor who gives \$2 million; likewise, when I say 'recipient' it may not necessarily be one person, but perhaps an organisation.)

Obviously, if money is donated to run illegal or immoral activities, a donor should be horrified and stop donating. Conversely, if the money is donated to a scheme where the locals are truly empowered to bring their families out of poverty in a sustainable and measurable way, then that is ideal. However, the reality is that the issue is not black and white, and sometimes it's not easy to assess the usefulness of a donation.

On one end of the spectrum is donor-driven aid, where the donor, often in another country, will demand that the money is spent in a very particular way, regardless of whether it is actually appropriate for the recipients; for example, if the donor insists that the recipient must procure Hyundai cars, that may be inappropriate because in the recipient country there are only mechanics for Toyota cars (this has happened before). On the other end of the spectrum is recipient-driven aid, and the recipient uses the money without any conditions whatsoever; in a fictitious example, a recipient is convinced that the money should be used to buy used computers running on Windows 3.1 and with floppy disk drives, even if the donor may object to the money being used for buying outdated computers.

Somewhere in between there should be trust and accountability. A donor can legitimately ask for her monetary donation to be used in a particular project (for agriculture rather than education, for example), but the recipient should also manage the money well (diverting it from the over-funded agriculture program to the under-funded education program, for example) – there needs to be both trust and accountability, while micromanagement is seldom appropriate. The donor requesting reports to ensure his donation is well spent is also legitimate, while also avoiding micromanagement. Throughout, both sides should learn about each other's needs, aspirations, capabilities, limitations, and so on.

The recipient organisation has a responsibility to manage the donated money well, which may mean investing time and effort to gain the skills for proper governance, leadership, financial management, program planning and evaluation etc. A donor may well request that her money is used to increase the leadership and management skills of the recipient organisation, such that future donations are better managed. Likewise, a donor may need to learn about such skills and systems about how her donated money may be managed by the recipient.

While the donor may come from a materially prosperous and highly educated background, that is not to say she knows everything; while the recipient may come from a materially poor and poorly educated background, that is not to say he knows nothing; most likely they will meet somewhere in

the middle, where the donor has much to learn about the recipient and his community, and vice versa.

While I can't list every possible permutation of how a donor and recipient relationship might work or break down, my point is that it's a relationship that needs trust and accountability, as well as learning, on both sides.

### **Some questions to ask ourselves**

An important question to ask ourselves truthfully is: who are we really helping? How much of this is to help our own egos, to make us look good and feel good in the short term, and how much is really to empower people to rise out of poverty in the long term?

The imperfect adage of "if we give a man a fish, he will eat for a day, but if we teach a man to fish, then he will eat for a lifetime" has much wisdom. We need to ask: are we actually empowering people to help themselves?

I have seen huge piles of clothes donated to people after a natural disaster, including fancy dress costumes and ball gowns – is that just making the donor feel better by decluttering her wardrobe, or is she really helping people who have lost their homes? I have heard of people who have no teaching experience teaching English in impoverished villages for a week – what use is one week of English teaching, and also, if you would never send your own child to an unqualified teacher, what makes you think that children in an impoverished village deserves an unqualified teacher? I have heard of stories of expensive medical equipment being donated to hospitals in impoverished countries, but they break down after a year and are never used again, because no one invested in technicians to learn how to fix them, or any budget for maintenance costs for expensive spare parts that must come from overseas. Overseas volunteers who go to an impoverished country to do what the locals could do (whether it is manual labour or professional work such as nursing) is likely to be denying a local person gainful employment; the resources expended on hosting the overseas volunteers may also be better used to fund local projects. "Voluntourism," where materially poor people are viewed in the same category as zoo animals by volunteers who are claiming to help, must also be discouraged.

Conversely, being a bona-fide tourist and spending money on tourist activities, may actually help an impoverished more than being a volunteer. Tourists who keep their eyes and minds open to things other than tourist thrills may learn much about the material poverty in the country that they visit.

We really need to be honest with ourselves (and be humble enough to let other tell us) about whether we are helping just to make ourselves feel better, or if we are really benefitting the recipient in the long term.

And asking right person this question is important. If I give you a present, with much fanfare, I say "I chose it just for you," and then I ask you "did you like the present?", then the only correct answer is "yes, of course, I love it." You would never say "it's ugly and useless!" Likewise, recipients of whatever donations in an impoverished setting will always be grateful and say nice things about the donor, especially if on camera! Therefore it is important to get external advice, often from an evaluation specialist (of which there are many in the field of international development) to give an objective view of whether the help is truly helpful, and whether it is following best practice. Part of an evaluation specialist's skills may be to facilitate ways of eliciting honest opinions from the beneficiaries.

Perhaps the most important question to ask is: what will happen when we stop helping? Will everything come to a grinding halt when we stop donating money? Will things go back to the way they were? The question is relevant whether we are donating a food package to a family, or we are donating a school building, or donating some medical equipment, or donating the time of an agricultural expert. We need to be honest about answering that question. If the answer seems to be yes, things will stop happening when we stop, then we need to rethink our strategy now, or even before we start.

### **Final thoughts**

Poverty is not just about the lack of money, and the solution is not just about providing money. If it were just about providing money, then the problem of poverty would have been solved a long time ago. I would argue (as I am sure many others would also argue) that material poverty means lack of real choice, which can bring poor decision-making, an inability to realistically imagine a more prosperous future, and many other psycho-social effects.

As people who have been endowed with many resources, financial and otherwise, we have a clear biblical mandate to help those who do not have access to as many resources as we do. The bible doesn't actually tell us how exactly to help, but we can thank God that many people can help us discern some practical ways to implement the biblical mandates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Helping well is not easy! Just donating money with no strings attached is clearly not enough, and there are no quick solutions. It takes much wisdom and humility, and often much heartache and disappointment, and certainly a lot of time, to take the longer and harder road that are likely to produce longer-term benefits.

It may include consulting experts and practitioners in the field of international development, which is a field that has emerged in the past few decades, and continues to evolve. One of many books on this topic is 'When Helping Hurts' by Steve Corbett, which is written for an American Christian audience, but is relevant for any Christians (or indeed non-Christians) who want to help the less fortunate.

I hope some of my thoughts of are of some help and can provoke discussion amongst people who truly want to help.

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