

How to Fight Poverty Without Hurting

Fighting poverty is increasingly becoming a priority for many people. The staggering number of individuals living below the poverty line continues to increase thereby creating a moral imperative to help the poor. When I look at the issue of poverty alleviation for those living in poor countries, most of the scholarly work on poor nations is written by rich nations. I am not by any means discrediting the valuable work of wealthy nations; however, I strongly believe that effective solutions to poverty reduction will ultimately come from people who live in poor countries. Many poor countries are getting poorer in spite of getting help from the rich nations. As a matter of fact, it seems that most of time, those who have come to help the poor countries have instead ended up hurting the people they intended to help. The question is how to fight with poverty without hurting the poor and yourself.

There are lots of well-written books on the issue of ending poverty and many challenging us to do more to help those less fortunate than we are. Recently I read a book *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. The authors lay out the very clear problems as well as issues and interesting solutions for reducing poverty. One of their main concerns is how good-hearted people out of their good intentions try to help but instead hurt the poor. The authors explain that just by giving handouts, many are encouraging the poor to stay in their poverty. The other point that makes the book very interesting compared to other books written about poverty is that the authors walk their readers through the Bible and redemptive history to show why we have poverty and why many of our attempts have failed to reduce poverty. The authors go deeper by touching on different mindsets, models, and methods. Sometimes people tend to measure poverty by a lack of material goods. But in reality, we all face and live in poverty, even some of those who have been materially blessed.

The book spends some time explaining how poverty reduction hurts the giver and the recipient more than it helps. I suggest those who are willing to help the poor should read this book because some rich people have a savior complex where they feel like powerful ones who dispense undeserved gifts on the helpless poor. According to the authors, material poverty reduction involves more than ensuring that people have sufficient material things: rather, it involves helping people to earn sufficient material things by using God-given gifts and by doing this, moving people much closer to being what God created them to be. Actually, the other very interesting argument the authors are trying to make is that work is an act of worship. For the authors when people search to fulfill their callings by glorifying God in their work, praising Him for giving them such gifts or abilities and thanking Him for giving them that kind of gift and those abilities, then work is an act of worship to God. But most of the time it happens the other way around, so that when the work is done, we must often glorify ourselves, make more money, and begin to worship false gods.

However, I do believe the role of family is very important in reducing poverty. Studies shows that poverty prevention is significantly more successful for those who finish high school, get a job, and wait until marriage before having

children with only a small percentage ending up poor whereas those who do not meet those three criteria have a very high chance of living under the poverty line. As William J. Bennett often says, family is “the most effective anti poverty program ever invented,” as can be readily seen given the significant changes to family structure that has occurred in the Philippines over a couple of decades and the concomitant increase in poverty. Today a majority of new mothers at the age of seventeen give birth out of wedlock, mothers who work overseas are separated from their children, and many boys and girls grow up without a mother or father. Mothers who go overseas sometimes become involved in another relationship or the father who stays home is involved in other relations. We simply cannot discuss poverty without addressing the role of family. A strong, healthy family is one of the most important measures to fight against poverty.

Corbett and Fikkert talk about how the wrong approach to fighting against poverty can hurt not just the poor but also those doing the helping as well. Sometimes we do not think a great deal about how our help could hurt the poor and ourselves. According to the authors, poverty is not just a lack of material goods but has social and spiritual dimensions as well. Most of the time charity considers the poor as victims in need of handouts, which forces them to be dependent. However, the business world could treat poor as workers and customers helping them to stand on their feet and be independent.

The book *When Helping Hurts* provides a foundational concept and explains general principles and applications. The result is an effective and holistic approach to fighting poverty. A healthy family structure offers a seminal solution. The mistake between our perceptions and the authors’ can have bad results in terms of our help. If we think that the cause is a lack of knowledge, we will educate them; if we think it is oppression, then we will work for social justice. If we think it is their sins, we will help them to reconcile with God. One key phrase in the book is “Never do for the poor what they can do for themselves.” It is hard to apply. My simple solution to eradicate poverty is if every rich person gave 10% of his or her income, we would not have a poverty problem. Also, the main cause of the poverty is a lack of knowledge on the part of both the generous and the needy, and the solution is to educate those who give, so that they help the poor become independent and whole by teaching them to work and to educate the poor by empowering them to make life changes for themselves that will endure.