

Fostering Dependency

"But we have so much and they have nothing; shouldn't we help them? "I'm being selfish if I keep it for myself." "We just need to get them started." These and other similar cries need to be seriously reconsidered. As Christians, we should have this God given desire to help those who are in need. However, at the inner core of mankind there is also this built-in desire for what others have. Even more than this seems to be the desire to get these things as easily as possible. Another truism is that we expect something to continue once it is started (the inertia factor). Next, we quickly grow to depend on it. And what's more; if something is withdrawn, then it is felt that 'something that was rightfully mine' was taken away.

I have just summarized the very heart of what we in the USA call the "welfare mentality" - aka the "dependency syndrome". Some refer to this condition as the 'debility of dependency.' Many well meaning missionaries and humanitarian organizations have surreptitiously succumbed to the siren song of dependency.

This dependency for 'things' coming from outside sources is inexorably more difficult to stop or reverse than it is to prevent in the first place (like an avalanche). Once begun; it develops a 'life of its own'. You can become the 'bad guy' if you try and change the process. Many very sincere and dedicated individuals and agencies have tried and failed to reverse the "dependency syndrome". The answer is prevention – prevention – prevention.

"Ownership fosters stewardship". This is another truism of mankind. People simply must have a stake in something themselves (ownership). It must cost them something (time, work, money, goods, management). Then they can take pride (this is 'good pride') and responsibility in whatever project or activity.

CAUTIONS REGARDING DEPENDENCY

1. Don't give by "knee jerk" response. Give liberally but also cautiously, responsibly, and prayerfully. Ask the local missionaries or others who know about the matter. This is most important!
2. You will be simply amazed at the infinite variety of requests for support. The key here again is to check out the requests as completely as possible.
3. You should remember that if you say, "I'll think about it" or "Maybe I'll do that" – the national hears a "YES". I know these terms are a "polite No" in our culture, but they are "Yes" in their culture.
4. It is harder for you to say, "No", than it is for them to accept "No".
5. Resist - resist ongoing support. To give a one time gift or support is one thing but to

agree to any long-term commitment is quite another. You must make it quite clear from the beginning that you are giving a one-time gift. When we lived in Africa, my wife and I would put these matters in writing. We would sign, and they would sign. This is especially important if you agree to some long-term support. By all means stick to the agreement!

6. Once you give, either a one-time gift or for ongoing support, you must get ready for the onslaught. What am I talking about? I'm talking about the onslaught of very plausible reasons you'll be given as to why you should either give more or give again – and again – and again.

7. A caution as to follow-up: No matter how seemingly well intentioned the recipient is about your following your support, you will find that it becomes quite laborious if not down right impossible.

8. Receiving external support over a long period 'weakens' the national. First of all it takes away their allegiance to their own people. Their allegiance is to YOU. You would be amazed at how much energy and time they spend on this. It also decreases their initiative.

9. Locally it becomes a 'status thing' to receive support from the United States. Then you have the predictable result - jealousy. [You have two camps - the ones who get support from outside and the ones who don't].

10. Another strange quirk of human nature is that it can grow to "bite the hand that feeds it." I am saying that you will be made to feel like the "bad guy" if you don't give more or if you decrease or stop your support. People can even grow to despise the very ones that support them.

11. You can never be sure how much support someone gets from other sources. [this is another reason you should check with some local missionaries who know the person and the situation]

12. It is another general human truism that something free is not appreciated. "If it doesn't cost anything; it must not be worth anything." This is why I am opposed to "free clinics". Oftentimes people come to "free clinics" in order to get medicine for later use or to sell. They should pay something – no matter how small.

There is much written about the vicious cycle of dependency in missiological articles. I implore you to be a part of the solution – not a part of the problem. There are other alternatives – other ways to help. Be an enabler, a teacher. There are many ministries that emphasize "Tent making" for the national. This has to do with teaching various trades.

Please consider the things that I have said. I hope that I didn't sound too negative or cynical. What I said comes from the experience of living in Africa for six years. Of course you will make mistakes and get "stung". It has happened to me many times. Just

learn from the mistakes and prayerfully keep trying. I think it can be said, "If you are never 'stung', then you aren't giving enough."