

## Perspectives on Poverty

- You have seen so much on your travels...and certainly many people living under extremely difficult conditions/circumstances, trying to survive. Having seen what you have, has it changed your view on poverty? On its solutions? Are there any? What is our role as a developed nation in lending a hand? Do we have one? (Angela)
  - This one needs to be broken down a little, so that's done below. Please, as you read this, keep in mind that these are only our thoughts and are very much open to dialogue, development, criticism, and evolution.
    1. **Having seen what you have, has it changed your view on poverty?** No, our view of poverty hasn't been changed, but our desire to alleviate it has been transformed from a feeling of yearning to one of duty. The fact that there is poverty, *and so much of it*, is bollocks, totally unacceptable. The fact that there is so much of it is staggering, and we were hit time and again with how needless this reality was/is.
    2. **Having seen what you have, has it changed your view on poverty's solutions? Are there any solutions to poverty?** There are solutions to poverty, but they'll probably make people uncomfortable (us included). While we were in developing countries, not a *single* day went by when we weren't asked for money, a handout. We, as the white people, were often singled out as those who *have*: the person asking would often see us coming, and fight through crowds of their own countrymen (who were going about their daily business) to get to us and ask for money. The more this happened, the more we inquired about what that country's upper class(es) was/were doing to help those in need. Again and again, we'd hear that those who *have* did **nothing** to help those who *have not*. The rich in most of the world do nothing for their own poor neighbours. There is more than enough to go around, we just need to share with and help those less fortunate than ourselves. But – and here's what really hit home for us on this trip – this whole process *must* start and be spear-headed by the citizens of the country in question. It cannot be imposed from outside countries, no matter how well-intentioned they (we) may be. To reiterate, the biggest, most profound, and most important thing we learned on this trip regarding poverty and its possible solutions is that each country's citizens must help their own. This doesn't mean no one else (ie. outside countries) can or should help, but it does mean that the rich of a country *must* help their poor neighbours. The rich in Africa do not help the poor in Africa. The rich in India do nothing to help the poor in India. *This is what must change before outside aid will even make a difference to poverty levels.* Exactly how this attitude will change is a much more complicated question.
    3. **What is our role as a developed nation in lending a hand? Do we have one (not a *hand*, presumably, but a *role* ☺)?** Our role is complicated, but one thing is certain: we are *obligated* to help those less fortunate than ourselves. If this statement is accepted, we can move on. If not, we're going to be stuck in a neighbourhood full of unhappy and struggling neighbours, and it doesn't have to be this way. If we are to avoid being hypocrites of the worst kind (read our response to the above question (b) before this one), we need to help our own neighbours. Vancouver has more than its fair share of the least, the lost, and the forgotten, and we are obligated to help them. This is perhaps not as popular or fashionable as helping those overseas, but in our opinion it's just as important. In helping our immediate neighbours, we also, of course, need to consider our global neighbours, and help them. How this complex and delicate balance plays out will likely differ from one person to the next. For every \$100 donated to aid, person *a* might split it 50/50, domestic/international; person *b* might prefer something more like 80/20; and person *c* might choose 30/70. To be honest, we're not even sure how we will handle this relationship, but we do know that people need to follow their own hearts. If helping people in Africa, India, Burma, or Haiti is calling your name, then help them. We would just urge you to remember the ample need surrounding you *here*. So, while we're still very much developing our own approach, we do know this: (1) it is our duty to help those with less than ourselves; (2) in order to avoid contradicting our most profound poverty-related epiphany (spelled out above... the idea that the rich of country *a* must help the poor of country *a* before any aid from country *m* will be meaningful in permanently alleviating poverty and need), we must help those in our own country / province / city / district; and (3) we need to convince the rest of the world that their own rich need to help their own poor, a notion that is, to many of the cultures in developing countries, totally outlandish. Following the above examples, we need to convince the rich of Africa that it's *right* and *good* to help the poor of Africa; we need to convince the rich of India that it's *right* and *good* to help the poor of India... we just don't know *how* to convince them of this.

- **You have lived amongst multiple cultures this year and have no doubt encountered great poverty and need. Any practical advice you'd pass along to others (who might not have the first hand travel experience) about how to care for their fellow humans? Donations to NGO's, traveling, volunteering, backing off, friendship...? Have there been changes in you about how you see this stuff?** (Catherine)
  - We have indeed lived amongst multiple cultures and have encountered great poverty over the last year... and *still* providing practical advice is difficult! This question shares some common characteristics with the previous one, so make sure you read our response to that one before moving on to this question. Like the previous question, this one is quite personal, so as you read this remember that these are our thoughts and opinions, and will likely change and develop over months and years. Travelling the world is certainly one way of coming face-to-face with the need in the world, and appreciating how dire the need can be. As we've stated before, helping and caring for others less fortunate than ourselves should be seen as a duty, not an option. Once you accept this duty, there are a number of approaches available to you, and in the end the one you must choose one that jives, that fits, that "calls your name":
    1. Helping the needy here, at home, provides a wealth of opportunity to develop and foster a face-to-face relationship with someone that, more often than not, isn't possible in overseas aid. Every struggling person has a story, and if you want to help these people effectively you need to learn their story. Talk to people, work on that rapport, and foster that relationship. Understanding that it's probably not their *fault* that they are where they are is crucial in providing any meaningful, longer-term help... people need a hand *up*, not a hand *out*. If this type of face-to-face contact isn't a practical reality for you, there are a number of organizations that do great things for the needy here in Vancouver. We are still looking into these organizations and aren't in a position to recommend one over the other to you, but in general they are a good way to help people, provided you do your research when selecting which one to support.
    2. In the previous question we hinted at the debate between helping at home or abroad (and this debate's inherent lack-of-an-obvious-solution). This question mentions Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGOs): when we were in Africa, we came face to face with poverty incarnate, and at the same time we noticed that the nicest and fanciest vehicles by far in any town or city were *always* the vehicles of NGOs. For some reason, in a place where infrastructure is crumbling at best, many NGOs felt the need to bring in a fleet of \$55,000 SUVs to transport their workers from *a* to *b*. Donating to an NGO can be a phenomenally effective way of helping people far away from home, some NGOs are much better than others. They're not all as effective as they could be, as the above-mentioned SUV question illustrates. Do your homework when it comes to donating to NGOs. We have had the chance to work closely with [Food for the Hungry International](#), both the Canadian and Ugandan branches, and have seen first-hand how amazing this organization is. Granted, it's rarely possible to fly out somewhere and see for yourselves how effective an organization is, so you'll just have to do what you can. We can only speak to the wonders performed by FHI.
    3. Volunteering for an NGO and serving overseas is a noble endeavour, provided you choose your NGO wisely. We need to avoid the "send-in-the-white-people-to-show-them-how-it's-done syndrome. While we, as westerners, might think we know what's best for a group of people, we rarely – if ever – know the best way to make this happen. Choose to work with an NGO that uses locals for all its crucial roles. We've discovered that the most important role that most volunteers will ever play is to embody, for those overseas, the reality that people in a far away place actually care about them. You're there to say, "there are people in my country who are on your side, who want to see you succeed, and who believe in you." You, as a volunteer, add fuel to the fire of hope that the NGOs presence has (hopefully) created and/or fostered, and this is much more powerful than you might imagine. Yes, it is true that some of us have specialized training that those in developing nations may not have, and you will be useful in your overseas service, but it's important to recognize that your job should simply be to "teach them to fish, not give them a fish." Make sure the NGO you work for recognizes this: it's all about fishing.

- **This morning I read a very interesting piece in The Vancouver Sun.** [NOTE: we found the article online, so [here's a PDF version of it](#)... a good read!] **Here's an excerpt of what the guy (Calvin White, a BC educator/psychologist) had to say after taking a group of teens from rural BC to India over Christmas:**

*We shortchange our young here in Canada. We protect them from danger. We create "good memories" for them, safe environments, orderly, predictable existences. But in our understandable and caring intentions, we prevent them from wrestling consciously with the deep issues of self. **We don't give them enough experience with pain, with suffering, with raw visceral unfairness. They do not experience enough situations where they are tested about who they are, about what life, is, about what is meaningful.** In our part of the world, we have allowed our children to live in triviality. We have allowed them to be sold to the marketers of gadgets and style. This is a life of emptiness. This rare school trip to India is to introduce them to the world of brokenness. To the world of no answers, but one of personal responsibility.*

(He then gives 2 examples: a small street boy being caned for begging opposite a street vendor; an 8 year-old with a new-born baby begging outside a temple).

*What to do with all this. With all the thousands of other contradictions and dilemmas in a place like India? None of us on the trip has control. We do not know what we will encounter at any moment. **This is a far more accurate representation of life than what we attempt here in Canada, far more representative of the personal trials each of us will encounter at any moment in our own lives.** We strive for and pretend to have control. We put on a good front.*

**I have in mind that you may agree with his statement? If so, how has it changed you?** (Wilna)

- That article contains lots of "food for thought," but if the question surrounds the concept that we (in the West) "coddle" our kids too much, that protect them from "real life," there's a couple of different angles we could take on this. On the one hand, one could argue that the children are simply being raised in British Columbia by parents in British Columbia for a life *in* British Columbia. In BC, it is unlikely that anyone will encounter the sorts of situations that confronted these kids in India; in this way, therefore, what those kids saw and experienced in India is *not* "far more representative of the personal trials each of us will encounter at any moment in our own lives" *in British Columbia*. So the logical question is then, "why go to India and 'suffer' through the sorts of experiences that brought the children in question to tears?" Our response to this surrounds the notion that we are – or should be – raising our children to be *global* citizens... members of a global community who will – or should – take on a global perspective rather than a more inward-looking position. The rest of the world *matters* in this day in age, so it makes sense that kids today should grow, learn, and understand as much about the world as is helpful to their maturation and development, and that includes "unsanitized" encounters such as this trip to India that the article discusses. So, your question asks, "how has [this understanding] changed you?" Before our trip, we were both on board with this approach to global education, this idea that the more genuine and hands-on the experiences, the more powerful the education. Now, after travelling the world for a year, our belief in this approach is stronger than ever. The only caution we have is that there needs to be a *process*, a step-by-step methodology through which children can grow in their worldly experiences. It does no one any good to drop the most innocent and fragile child into the heart of Slumland India; this will do more damage than good, and so caution – and patience – is advisable in the hope of avoiding developmental damage in our young people.