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Living in the mountains of the southern Philippines, I was mystified. My neighbour's son was critically ill, suffering from malaria and urgently required medication to treat his high temperature and the impact of the infection on his frail, undernourished body. And yet her priority with her limited cash was to ensure that there were new batteries for her small radio in order to listen to the nightly "soap opera". I believed she loved her son with all her heart. Why had she made this choice? What is the impact of poverty on decision making, particularly in marginalised communities?

When you think of "development", what picture comes to mind? Is it a positive image? Is it restricted to material development? Or is it social change in a material world? Bryant Myers' book Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development, first published in 1999, focuses on concern for the whole of human life – materially, socially, psychologically and spiritually, and has been a formational text for me in my journey with minority ethnolinguistic communities in education and development. I've just been reading the revised second edition, and it's instructive to see the ways in which the author has expanded his work to include theoretical models from multiple perspectives from Europe, Asia and North America.

Billions of pounds are spent annually [1] on international development by the British government alone and the 2002 International Development Act requires all UK aid to have a focus on poverty reduction. Add to this the investment from national governments and external organisations and consider the impact. Are we seeing significant alleviation of poverty? If not, why?

Myers' goal is to bring together the best of the principles and practices of international development organisations, the thinking and experience of Christian relief and development nongovernment organisations, informed and shaped by a theological framework and to help us toward a more nuanced understanding of poverty with the intent of influencing our actions and reactions. This make "Walking with the Poor" a core text for teaching and learning about issues surrounding education and development in minority ethnolinguistic contexts. This book leads us to rigorous reflection that should influence our interactions in community and plans for literacy and education programmes.

Banerjee & Duflo in Poor Economics [2] write of the need to resist the kind of lazy, formulaic thinking that reduces every problem to the same set of general principles; if we listen to poor people themselves and force ourselves to understand the logic of their choices; if we accept the possibility of error and subject every idea, including the most apparently commonsensical ones, to rigorous empirical testing, then we will be able not only to construct a toolbox of effective policies but also to better understand why the poor live the way they do.

Myers draws us away from the simplistic towards a synthesis of Biblical framework, a holistic understanding of poverty and (particularly in this expanded edition) a detailed survey of development thinking from practitioners from many different perspectives. It's clear that it is impossible to distil poverty to a simple model and there's no simple response. He centres around two significant approaches drawn from the fields of anthropology and development –
Paul Hiebert’s description of Western worldview and the excluded middle and Jayakumar Christian’s discourse on the nature of poverty. In the Foreword to *Walking with the Poor*, Hiebert notes,

we have relegated God’s transforming work to spiritual realities and assigned earthly matters to science and technology. The result is a schizophrenic Christianity that leaves the everyday problems of human life to secular specialists and limits God to matters of eternity. A truly holistic approach to mission rooted in biblical truth is essential in planting vital churches that remain Christ-centred over the generations as it is in Christian ministries of compassion.

Myers writes of the role of the outsider, playing god in the lives of the poor resulting in the marring of the identity of both the poor and the non-poor. We, as outsiders, cannot play god and be the image of God that he intends us to hold. In teaching about issues around education and development for minority ethnolinguistic communities, I believe that one core outcome is to develop reflective practitioners who are willing to critique both their own and others’ practice. So, who should read this book?

Have you ever suspected that there is a more integrated way in which to view the world than the prevalent spiritual/material dichotomy that the Western worldview presents? Have you ever wondered why we need to use the word “holistic”? What is broken that needs to be repaired? The goals of the journey of transformational development are to find and enjoy life as it should be – as it was intended to be – to recover our true identity as human beings created in the image of God. If these thoughts have crossed your mind as you personally prepare for mission involvement or consider the place of missions in a complex, socially and economically fractured world, then I urge you to turn to this book.

Other books tackling similar issues, from different perspectives that I’ve also found helpful, include:


