

report PUBLIC JUSTICE

October-December, 2005

Vol. 28, No. 4

Attacking Poverty **A New Book**

Do you work for an organization that pursues relief and development efforts in poor countries? Are you a professor who teaches or does research about such efforts? Do you have a role in government or politics with responsibility to deal with poverty-related development efforts? Do you give volunteer or financial support to organizations that are fighting poverty in less developed countries?

If you answer Yes to any of these questions, then here is a book you'll want to read: *Attacking Poverty in the Developing World: Christian Practitioners and Academics in Collaboration*, edited by Judith M. Dean, Julie Schaffner, and Stephen L.S. Smith (Authentic Media [authenticusa@stl.org] in partnership with WorldVision [www.worldvision.org], 2005; ISBN 1-932805-43-5).

Attacking Poverty is quite a package. It is the fruit of a 2003 conference sponsored by the Association of Christian Economists and features the work of more than 20 economists and development professionals from ten universities and colleges, four government and political agencies, and four international relief and development agencies. The book begins with several chapters on how researchers and practitioners can cooperate and why the cooperation is so important. A number of essays then follow on microfinance, savings and credit associations, agricultural development, education, and health practices. There are two chapters on how to evaluate Christian development efforts. And the book concludes with three chapters on Christian engagement in policy making where the aim is to reduce poverty at local, national, and international levels.

"At times," the editors write in their Introduction, "God moves individuals to take specific actions on sudden inspiration. More often He moves them to address problems after careful thought and planning. Rather than providing specific blueprints, He allows his people to exercise their God-given powers of reasoning. In the case of poverty reduction, sound reasoning would lead believers to search out the root causes of poverty in order to attack the problem at its source. This would mean eliminating the root causes, where possible, and providing for the on-going needs of the poor where the cause is irreversible (as in the case of severe disability, for example). Special expertise is called for, both to discern the root causes of poverty and to design responses that will succeed in improving people's well-being."

It is the concern with careful, thoughtful research and planning that brings the writers of this book together. They realize that understanding root causes and designing approaches to deal with those causes takes team work on many fronts. And that is what they want to encourage among themselves and others.

Many of the authors and/or their institutions will be familiar to readers. Editor Judith Dean conducts research for the U.S. International Trade Commission. Co-editor Julie Schaffner teaches at the Fletcher School of Tufts University, and co-editor Stephen Smith teaches at Gordon College. Among the other authors is David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World; Kenneth Graber and Robert Gailey of World Relief; Brian Fikkert, director of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development at Covenant College; Douglas Brown and Christopher Barrett at Cornell University, Ndunge Kiiti and James Oehrig of MAP International; Jaisankar Sarma and Bernard Vicary of World Vision; Katherine Marshall at the World Bank; and Andrew Levin at the Federal Reserve Bank.

Economic researchers and relief and development practitioners like these “have spent many years attempting to find the causes of poverty and address them,” write the editors. “A few fundamental factors have been isolated, which are at the root of the problem. The poor lack income and assets. They own few physical assets, such as land, and few human assets, such as skills, education, or good health. The return on what they do have is low and often volatile. Access to financial assets, such as savings and credit are often non-existent. The poor also lack protection from corruption. The consequences of the absence of rule of law, or corruption in law enforcement fall most heavily on the poor. They are often victims of usury, bribery, and indentured servitude despite laws which prohibit these practices. Finally, the poor are vulnerable to shocks. Having few assets and low returns, they have little to sustain them through adversity. Floods, crop failures, job loss, and sickness can easily push them into dire poverty.”

There is the immense challenge. Many Christians are working both in this country and around the world to alleviate and overcome poverty. Teamwork is essential. This book will both help and encourage those who want to be part of a larger team of public servants responding to God’s call to serve their neighbors.

—The Editor[©]