

Donating to African Churches, Organisations & Individuals.

From the perspective of both a local church pastor and director of a Christian NGO, I have experienced both sides of the external supporter/local beneficiary relationship. Most people are well meaning and have good intentions, but with so many strong emotions involved there is great potential for pain, regret, disappointment, embarrassment and shame – on both sides. I have seen this first hand when things go wrong.

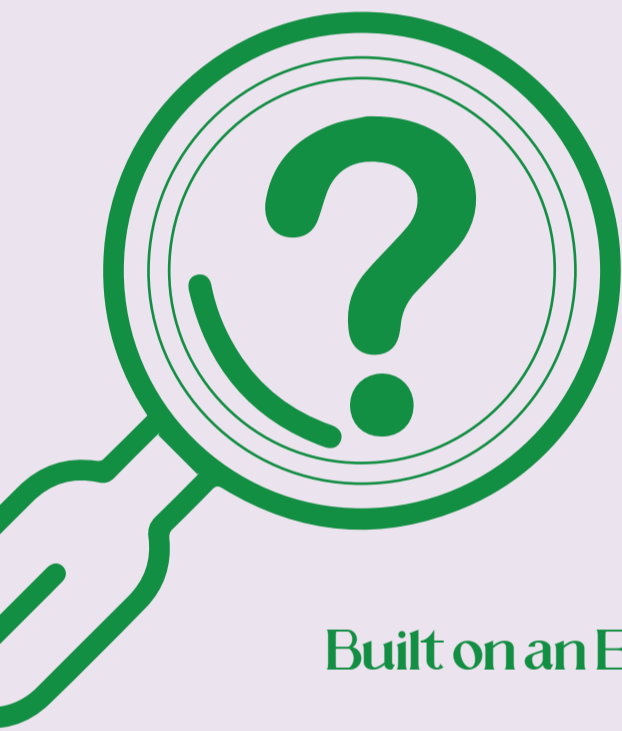
I have seen some “success stories” dressed up for the West, to impress donors and encourage more contributions. I have seen people being

presented with photos of what their donations have apparently achieved, but the photos may have been fabricated. When I have raised concerns or asked questions, I have often been sidelined as an obstacle to doing good, because people want to give and help and be generous. But I believe that this compassion and generosity should go hand in hand with discernment and due diligence. It is in everyone’s best interests to put certain guidelines in place in order for financial and other support to be most effective, and to be stewarded well.



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Common Problems



Financial support is given on Trust.

Often, Western congregations, donors or supporters are inclined to trust – especially if they are giving via a personal contact, such as a member of their congregation. The problem is that they do not actually verify for themselves by visiting the communities or organisations they are supporting, meeting people, asking questions and seeking advice.

1

Built on an Emotional Connection With One Person.



A visitor might come for a short time and form a connection with one particular person – such as a driver, interpreter or host – and this person becomes the default point of contact for future support, information and donations, whether or not they are the right person for the job. That person may not really be connected into the community or involved in any of the active initiatives that are already happening. They are just one voice and not necessarily the best person to be the point of contact. Certain people may also see a way to benefit for themselves and therefore reinforce this one-to-one relationship rather than connecting potential supporters with other pastors or organisations.

2

Danger Of Killing The Initiatives That Are Already Happening.

With genuine heart and great enthusiasm, individuals or groups can sometimes show up too soon and kill the momentum of the initiatives that were already happening, driven by local people and organisations. It is important to consider how and when to come and support in a way that doesn’t interfere with a promising initiative or raise another set of problems.



3

Potential Conflict Between Christian Ngos and Local Churches.



It is helpful to be aware that there are sometimes tensions between Christian NGOs, that tend to have more resources and more of a platform, and local churches that are often the active implementers on the ground. Some NGOs perpetuate the narrative that the churches are chaotic and unskilled and that donors shouldn’t send money directly to them as it won’t be stewarded as effectively. There can therefore be a certain competition for resources. It is true that NGOs often have better structures and accountability in place, so it’s less risky to give via these organisations, but they also have more (and sometimes excessive) overheads. Giving to a local church might be higher risk, but the same financial donation could have much bigger impact at this direct level. It is therefore vital that we also help the churches to improve their structures and increase their capacity, empowering them to rise up and do more, with less risk of things going wrong.

4

Red Flags



- When you are kept in a “closed circle” and not introduced/given access to other pastors, churches, local government officials, etc. These people are usually very accessible and welcoming, and it is concerning if you are prevented or discouraged from connecting with them.
- When asked to send money to an individual's account rather than a local church's account. Every pastor is part of a parish or fellowship of pastors. Even though you may have one primary contact and they may be someone you trust, it is unwise to send money to an individual's account.
- When requests for assistance come too quickly. Beware of a lot of visionary talk, and a lot of proposals, but nothing that has actually started.
- Excessive flattery. If people are genuinely doing something that they are passionate about, they will be more concerned with that and less concerned with flattering and impressing potential donors.

Helping Wisely

- LOOK at what is already happening.**
Those who are passionate about making something happen in their community will already have started doing something, however small the initiative. Look for what is already happening and consider how you can support that initiative and those people (without just showing up immediately and potentially killing a good thing).
- VERIFY the needs.**
Are there people within your community who are originally from that area? Ask them to help you verify, or help you contact someone on the ground. These people can be a good point of entry, but they should be able to point you to others, not just themselves.
- ASK questions about the organisation.**
Look online for a website. Are they connected to a network, eg. Evangelical Alliance? Is the organisation already working on the ground, with connections and accountability structures? What is their verification mechanism – how they assess and evaluate what is good, genuine and effective?
- CONNECT with other local contacts.**
It is not wise or healthy to communicate and verify through just one person. Initiatives should be connected in with local government and churches, with a group mechanism for evaluating and verifying. It's a good general rule to ask for three other local contacts, eg. in local government, including someone from a different church.
- SEND someone to visit for the short-medium term.**
Send a representative to visit and stay with a local initiative for 3-9 months, not promising anything but just being a part of it. Listen, build relationships, connect with what's going on and pay attention to who's doing what.
- If sending money, send to a LOCAL CHURCH ACCOUNT.**
When you have a relationship in place, you understand the needs and plans, and you have verified these for yourself, it's better to send money directly to the account of a local church (not via a denomination and not to an individual). This is best way to have confidence that the money is going where it's most needed, and being stewarded well.

Identifying the Needs

Westerners may have a different perspective on what the needs actually are, and what is worth spending money on, so it's important to understand the culture and context.

These are some of the most vital areas of need:

- Buildings and physical facilities – not necessarily fancy or flashy, just appropriate for their purpose.
- Training in leadership and finances.
- Sending elders to Bible school.
- Sponsorship for children and young people to complete academic and vocational studies.
- Vocational training for women and youth as part of a process of coming out of poverty.
- People to write the stories, and share the narratives of what's going on, in a way that is compelling and engaging for Western audiences.

It Takes Time...

With the best of intentions, it can be tempting to look for the quickest and easiest way to help, but this is when things have a high risk of going badly wrong. Genuine, lasting help and support takes time. It needs to be a process that is carefully thought through, with the appropriate mechanisms in place. This kind of support starts with building relationships – with churches, organisations and communities. It starts with listening, understanding and verifying, so that you know what the needs actually are and how you can help and support in the most effective and lasting way.