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Patronage Today

Helen Hekel

Introduction

How does patronage, as seen in the Roman world and described by the apostle Paul in Philippians, challenge us to reflect on today's model of responding to poverty? As Steve Walton has shown, patronage in the Roman world was pervasive, embedded in the culture, creating a system of social interactions, ruled by the interdependency between clients and patrons.¹ Thousands of years later, we too have a model of patronage which exists in an organized system between global actors. Our world today is different to what Paul and New Testament (NT) Christians faced in their time. Yet, the characteristics of interdependency and power dynamics are similar. In this essay, I will reflect on some of my experiences working in the field of development and humanitarian aid, and the ways in which I have encountered dependency and power imbalances in our modern-day model of patronage. I will also outline some emerging models moving towards the idea of partnership and how Christians have a key role to play in changing the discourse and mindset of how we can approach a global response to poverty.

Our world today

Each day, as we turn on our TV, listen to the radio or open up the newspaper, we read of more tragedies unfolding around the world: poverty, hunger, war, violence, outbreak of diseases and environmental disasters. We see the effects of these events on communities and individuals, in a variety of countries: Ethiopia, Syria, Nepal, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Colombia and more – while closer to home we see a rise in terrorist attacks in France, Germany, Belgium, Turkey and Tunisia.² We live in a time where news travels across the globe in the space of minutes, where we can see live images of the faces of men, women and children who are thousands of kilometres from where we are.

¹ See Steve Walton, 'Patronage and People: Paul's Perspective in Philippians', in this book.

² This section reflects the news at the time of writing (July 2016).

Most of us are shaken by these events and want to find a way to respond to the needs we see. Those in leadership positions in governments engage in such responses: they sign treaties, pledge resources to other countries, raise money on appeals, look for partners and implementing agencies to do the work on the ground. The United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also provide support to these communities. It is this web of relationships that I look to in this reflection on patronage as we can relate these institutions as patrons to the local communities who are, for the purpose of this essay, the clients.

The complex nature of modern-day aid

I have worked in countries overseas with various NGOs, both on emergency-aid projects and on development issues, funded by government foreign aid departments and the UN. I have worked in projects working with displaced communities, supporting families and individuals who have fled their homes and villages because of conflict or natural disasters and are now living in 'borrowed homes', with little stability and sense of ownership, as they have lost their land and belongings as well as their livelihoods. For many such families, they fall into the category of 'recipient of aid', from their own or a foreign government, or from local or international NGOs. Like many before me, I have worked in these situations and been confronted with the many challenges of these contexts – discussions and decisions over lack of continued funding for projects; concerning projects' efficiency and effectiveness; regarding the challenges of delivering quality to the standards set internationally; engaging with the issue of security and access to areas; concerning corruption and fraud; about adhering to local and international governments' agendas; regarding concepts of impartiality and beneficiary accountability; and much more. In all of this, I have been torn between responding to the needs of the people I was there to serve and following the guidelines of the system in place, the requirements of the governments and of the donors funding our projects.

The issue of patronage today is complex. The relationship between client and patron is a lot less personal than in the NT: given today's global scale, the rising needs across the globe, the international dimension and the multitude of actors engaged in aid and development, it is hard to keep a face and a name to each individual. In NT days, patronage would have enabled the receiver (client) to fulfil a career or a trade: in theory, it could have balanced out some inequalities of those who had much and those who had less. The reality in today's context of development and aid – like the ancient context – is that the relationship between those giving aid and those receiving it is unequal: one side holds the financial means and resources; the other competes for them in a demanding context. In many cases, recipients of aid rarely have the luxury of choosing who they will receive aid from, so when the donor attaches conditions to the funding, the receiver or client will comply.

The process of receiving aid from 'patrons' is extremely competitive. Charities and NGOs compete to secure funding from governments to implement projects in other countries. National organizations and civil society organizations also compete

for funding from UN agencies or embassy offices in their countries. Governments are competing with each other to secure the best projects and results. Churches and grass-roots organizations compete for the attention of benefactors to fund their community projects. In such a competitive environment, patrons lay out conditions for clients: the receiver or client needs to deliver identified outcomes, use a chosen approach, in specified geographical areas, for a particular target group, and all with some financial restrictions. With such conditions, it is difficult for local NGOs to receive funding from international donors: a recent report from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies estimated that of the total humanitarian assistance funding given directly to NGOs (international, regional, national and local), only 1.6 per cent went directly to local and national NGOs,³ despite these actors being ideally positioned to respond to disasters in local communities, well before international agencies will reach these.

So, how does this context of accessing funding affect the targeted communities? Despite the competition, are the communities receiving the ways and means to 'come out of poverty'? What strings come attached to the patron/client relationship in modern-day aid?

This imbalance of power and reliance on aid presents a real challenge in the relationship. In an attempt to secure funding, this reliance on donors can lead to *designing projects which do not necessarily meet the expressed needs of the communities*. To give an example, in one particular project on which I was working in the Horn of Africa, we were looking to secure funding for activities in the communities for the year to come, as our current cycle of funding was coming to an end. Up to that point, our projects had been fully funded by an international donor, providing safe and clean water to displaced communities, improving food security in the community and providing health centres where infants were screened for malnutrition and treated, among other activities. We were also seeking to meet some of the psychosocial needs of the community, particularly for children: this was done by setting up safe play areas for children, called Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS). As we looked to approach our then-current donor, we were informed that due to the decrease of available funds, they would only be funding emergency and life-saving activities, which did not include psychosocial activities. Of course, I understand the complexity of responding to rising and multiple needs in the world and that a greater focus on life-saving activities should be prioritized. Nevertheless, I also felt the need for these families and their children to have a sense of stability, safety and 'normalcy'. So despite the demand from parents and children for these safe spaces, we had to stop these activities temporarily while we looked for another donor willing to fund the safe spaces. Thankfully, volunteers in the community continued to run the CFS until we were able to find another source of

³ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 'World Disasters Report 2015', 105 (https://ifrc-media.org/interactive/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1293600-World-Disasters-Report-2015_en.pdf, accessed May 2017); Bibi van der Zee, 'Less than 2% of Humanitarian Funds "Go Directly to Local NGOs"', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/oct/16/less-than-2-of-humanitarian-funds-go-directly-to-local-ngos>, accessed May 2017).

funding. This example illustrates the complexities of this environment, when there is a finite amount of funding available and a multitude of rising needs.

Part of the problem we encounter in our modern times is the drive for *immediate or short-term results*. Whereas in the past, a patron would have supported a client for many years, or until the training for a trade was completed, modern-day institutions are more likely to fund projects which will provide quick gains or results and look to achieve this at minimal cost.⁴ We can all understand the need to show value for money and evidence for the impact of projects on local communities. The trouble is that this trend creates an environment which prioritizes 'quick fixes' and short-term solutions over long-term investments in projects which seek to tackle deep-rooted and complex issues, and where results may only appear over generations, but could have a lasting, sustainable impact.

I paint this picture to demonstrate the complex and global environment which these relationships bring into play. However, there is a fundamental question: Does this model help to save lives? It seems like the obvious question, but I have wondered time and time again about how flawed our model is, especially when I continue to see the symptoms of poverty and injustice on the news each day. Like many others, I have had my share of doubt. In one of my most difficult moments, I asked myself, 'What difference is this making? Regardless of what we do, villages and civilians are still attacked, the country is still at war – this is useless! We are never going to make a real difference, things are not going to get any better!' Sharing these thoughts with a colleague, he told me something I will always remember. He said, 'If we were not here, if we were not screening these children for malnutrition and supplying these families with extra food, if we were not installing clean water sources and distributing seeds to farmers, do you not see that more people and children would have died? Perhaps we are not seeing an improved situation as you would like to see it, but by the work we are doing through the local communities, we are stopping the number of deaths from increasing.'

Yes, that is at the heart of the issue: there are flaws in the current system in place, but lives are restored and deaths are minimized. However, we can look to a new model and, particularly, a new discourse, which could have greater impact and lasting change.

Looking to a new discourse

It is interesting to look at the origin of the word *patronage*, from the Latin *patronus*, which means 'protector of clients' or 'defender', and from *pater* meaning 'father'. The concept of 'patron' as a protector or defender brings a lot to think about in the light of modern-day practice. Can we see examples of this attitude in the donors of today

⁴ On the complexities of and imbalances of power in our current humanitarian system and the trends in project funding, see Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, 'Five Reasons Donors Give for not Funding Local NGOs directly', *The Guardian* 9 November 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/09/five-reasons-donors-give-for-not-funding-local-ngos-directly>, accessed May 2017).

such as governments and development organizations, seeing themselves as defenders or protectors?

What implications does this discourse hold for Christians, following the reflections of Steve Walton on the Apostle Paul's *thankless letter*?⁵ Looking at our own attitude, do we not see the same impact of this discourse of the 'helper': when I choose to give money to charity or to sponsor a child, am I not making some conditions in my mind about how this money should be used? What expectations do I have of the charity, of the child or student I am sponsoring? Am I willing to allow that child to make their own decisions, even when these go in a different way to what I had hoped for?

What about the impact on local communities targeted? How much input do they have in the decisions made for them by external agents? Is our current system not a *patronizing* system disguised under contractual agreements and the label of 'partnership'?

How can we begin to speak of true and equal partnerships? Models of participatory development have gradually taken importance in developmental discourse and practice over the past decade, in the hope, perhaps, of turning the tables from a top-down approach to a bottom-up approach to development.⁶ Examples of this type of approach to development can be found in village-saving groups, farmer field schools and community-led total sanitation initiatives, among others.⁷ Church and community transformation approaches, such as those supported by Tearfund and other international NGOs, seek to envision and empower local churches and communities to identify their own needs and the resources they have at hand to help meet them. These approaches provide reflective tools, including Bible studies to encourage churches to reflect on their role in their communities, and practical approaches and techniques including 'community description', information gathering, analysis and assessment and local decision-making.⁸ One common local response to poverty is the establishment of small savings or 'self-help' groups, in which small community groups (often female-led)

⁵ See Walton, 'Patronage', in this book.

⁶ Grassroots, bottom-up, and localization are key terms and approaches in contemporary aid and development. Localization means taking local, subnational contexts into account in the setting of goals and targets as well as in the development of programmes and projects that seek to achieve those goals. Sustainable development. The UN regards members of groups in these contexts such as women, children, indigenous people, farmers and local authorities as major stakeholders in the SDGs (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/mgos>, accessed January 2018), while 'Adapting to new challenges through local, inclusive, and context specific responses' was a key issue discussed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (<https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/summit>, accessed January 2018).

⁷ To read more about the approaches given, see 'Integrated Production and Pest Management Programme in Africa' (<http://www.fao.org/agriculture/ippm/programme/ffs-approach/en/>, accessed May 2017); and 'Overcoming Challenges in Community-led Total Sanitation' (https://learn.tearfund.org/resources/publications/footsteps/footsteps_91-100/footsteps_97/overcoming_challenges_in_community_led_total_sanitation/, accessed January 2018).

⁸ Tearfund, 'Church and Community Mobilisation in Africa' (Teddington: Tearfund, 2017) describes the history and process of church and community mobilization (CCM), a church and community transformation approach; pp. 15–16 focus on the steps of the approach (<https://learn.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/ccm/2017-tearfund-ccm-in-africa-en.pdf?la=en>, accessed January 2018). This 2014 report provides an evidence-based study of the impact of CCM in Tanzania: https://learn.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/church_and_community_mobilisation_tanzania_research_summarymay2014.pdf?la=en (accessed January 2018).

save together, each member putting a very small amount each week into a shared fund. As the fund grows, the members are able to take out first small, and then, later (as the fund grows further), larger loans that are repaid with interest over an agreed time period.⁹ Loans are made to cover education, healthcare costs and income-generation projects. Each group is self-governing and self-sustaining, but facilitation-intensive, as they require support to learn more about financial and business management and skills in order to flourish.¹⁰

These approaches are seen as an alternative to top-down approaches and seek to bring local communities and individuals to the decision-making process, driving the process of change and development in their communities themselves, analysing their own problems, deciding on priority actions and designing the activities they want to carry out. These movements seek to counteract the dependence on external entities and give back ownership of projects to local communities. Greater change in communities can also be found in supporting and developing civil society organizations (local and national NGOs), who have a drive to see transformation and change in their communities and are part of these.

During my years of work at Tearfund, I have seen a model of development which builds on this participatory, community-led development but goes further: Tearfund's model, essentially, is a model centred on relationships. This is a model centred on the gospel – where love and compassion is at the centre of what we do,¹¹ where second chances are possible and where local action with the right level of support and input can spark up change in communities.¹² Tearfund's 'Bridging the Gap' report describes the way in which the combination of a church and community mobilization (CCM) approach and advocacy training has begun to equip three churches and communities to solve their own problems and advocate for themselves.¹³ One community member described her own transformation in the following terms:

Before CCM, I was a 'nobody'. Today, I am a councillor representing my parish at the sub-county. After the CCM training, I felt empowered to approach people and discuss issues that affected us in our villages, and people asked me to represent them at the sub-county. now everybody in the parish knows me, and it's because of CCM. CCM has transformed our lives as women in these communities in

⁹ Tearfund, 'Partnerships for Change: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Self-help Groups in Ethiopia' (Teddington: Tearfund, 2013), 3 (https://learn.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/research/tfund_ethiopia_self_help_executive_sum_web.pdf, accessed January 2018).

¹⁰ Tearfund, 'Saving for a Very Dry Day' (Teddington: Tearfund, 2017), 7, evaluates the contribution of self-help groups to resilience in East Africa and looks at those supported by Tearfund and other NGOs (https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/self_help_groups/2017-tearfund-tearnetherland-saving-for-a-very-dry-day-en.pdf?la=en, accessed January 2018).

¹¹ On Tearfund's faith-based response, see https://learn.tearfund.org/themes/church/tearfund_faith-based_approach/ (accessed December 2017).

¹² See, e.g., the story from Recife cited by Katie Harrison earlier in this book, reported in Tearfund, 'Why Advocate on Waste and a Circular Economy' (Teddington: Tearfund, 2017), 8 (https://learn.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/circular_economy/2017-tearfund-why-advocate-on-waste-and-a-circular-economy-en.pdf?la=en, accessed January 2018).

¹³ Tearfund, 'Bridging the Gap' (2016) (<https://learn.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/topics/advocacy/2016-tearfund-bridging-the-gap-en.pdf>, accessed January 2018).

many ways. CCM has improved gender balance, hygiene, support of widows, and education. Through CCM advocacy, we have been able to get services in our community: for example, we now have four boreholes in our parish, a functional health centre, and we facilitate community monitors for pregnant women.¹⁴

Churches and communities overseas are being empowered to find their own solutions to their local problems: they are equipped with resources, advice, training, learning from other projects and financial backing to see their communities flourish.

There are still conditions to be met, such as certain financial parameters and organizational structure to be in place. At the centre of this model is the willingness to build a genuine partnership and see local churches and communities flourish. This word *partnership*, today, as it was during NT times, refers to sharing in a common feature. In Tearfund's work, the common features are our faith, as Tearfund works with local churches and Christian NGOs, and a shared passion for eradicating poverty by bringing whole-life transformation to individuals in the world. This is built on trust and underlying values of human flourishing and the desire to support and empower local churches and communities to shape and drive their own transformation.

We all look to see good things come from the people, projects and charities we invest in. We give to families or projects overseas or charities because we believe in what they are trying to achieve and we want to be a part of the solution. Aid is not only about finances; it can also be about taking part in the journey with an individual or a community and be a part of their lives. Supporting a project financially enables people to create connections in this global world. It helps each person to be part of a global community and journey with others. I am excited when I read about the impact of projects I support. I feel privileged to have played a small part.

Let us then consider entering the relationship of patron-client, of giver-receiver, as one of mutual learning, despite the obvious inequalities and imbalances of power. Let us consider how each one can approach giving with humility. Even in the overwhelming contexts, when you might meet countless number of individuals in need every day, where you cannot put a name to a face – even then, there are precious moments, when you connect with that one individual who will remind you that all these nameless faces and hands are unique and all have something to teach you.

It is so easy in the field I have been working in to develop a 'saviour' mentality about oneself, in which I consider myself 'selfless' and 'good' for putting my safety in peril, setting aside the comforts of my home country, putting up with the heat, the mosquitos, the bitter cold, the repetitive food, the lack of a warm shower and so forth. You can also start to think you have all the answers and stop listening to local knowledge. I have been surprised time and time again by the courage and generosity of the people I have served. In fact, I have probably learned more because of them and remember them more than they will remember me – just one foreigner among many who come to their country and leave, never staying long enough to learn the names of their children or learn the local language.

¹⁴ Tearfund, 'Bridging the Gap', 15.

Despite our differences across the globe and the inequalities that we see, there is a great element that we share as humans, and that is that we work as communities, not as islands. We might think of the response from the world to the attacks in Paris in 2016, the generosity of the public towards the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, the response of the world in light of the shootings and hostage situation in a shopping mall in Nairobi in 2013. We are moved, inspired, outraged and, ultimately, connected in seeking justice for all – and this brings us back full circle to the start of this essay: ultimately, as a society we are moved by the plight of others and we seek ways to help. We just need to consider which model to follow and be aware of our intentions and aware of our own prejudices.

Conclusion

In this short study, we have reflected on the dynamics of power and dependence that exist in our model of development and international aid today. We have also looked at a different discourse which compels us to respond to the needs of others in a different way, in an equal partnership, where each party can give and receive in turn. As the church of today, we can do so, acknowledging that all that we have has been given to us by God.

In preparing this essay, I have been challenged to think about my own attitude towards the 'other' and also on my own attitude to giving and receiving. I was challenged by my own selfishness when I worked in the humanitarian field: like many others, I was stunned by the generosity and hospitality of the people I encountered as they would lavish their best food and bring out their best tea set for me. It put me to shame as I protected my things and only gave away gifts on my terms. I have been challenged by the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth:

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Cor. 9.11-15, NIV 2011)

Let us consider what the world might be like if we all gave freely, with no expectations in return, no conditions attached, no restraint and no complaint, but instead, gave freely in recognition that God has given to us first, as a symbol and outpouring of his love for us. Just as the Christians in those early days, and as Paul instructed in his letter to the Philippians, we can all thank God for the gifts we give to and receive from each other. Perhaps in this spirit of thankfulness and generosity we will begin a journey of whole-life transformation and restored relationships across this world.