

The poor—who are they, what should we call them, how should we treat them... and why should we care?

Rachel Ulrich is a Middle School student from Richmond, Indiana. When doing a school project on poverty and development, she posed the following questions to NCP director David Radcliff.

Rachel: Currently, I am doing a project on developing countries. My main focuses relates to the reasons why some countries are less economically developed than others; the relation between developed and developing countries; the culture and lifestyle in a few specific developing countries; issues in developing countries; and how to improve situations with these issues (both on a large scale and with our personal lives). I was wondering if you would be willing to be interviewed by me on this topic.

1. In my research, I have noticed that the terms "developing" and "third world" are often loosely used and sometimes bring different connotations. Also, terms such as underdeveloped country and less economically developed countries are less commonly used. Which terms do you prefer to use and why? Do particular terms seem to hold more misconceptions than others?

David: I generally use "poor world" when talking about the half of humanity that struggles to have their necessities met. "Third World" is a bit of a misnomer, since more than a third live in some degree of poverty—in fact, half of humanity lives on less than \$3 a day. I stay away from "developing" because it suggests that economic "development" is the only kind of development—whereas I find people very developed (often more than us) in terms of community spirit, culture and knowledge of their environment.

2. How do you, personally, qualify a country as "developing," or which ever term you prefer to use?

***I would probably say that if the majority of their people don't have basic needs for food, water, shelter and education met, then they are part of the "poor world." And of course not everyone in a country is poor—all countries have a strata of very rich people thanks to globalization and the chance they have had to be connected to the global system. So more and more the "poor world" includes many people in countries where there is lots of wealth (such as India or China—and increasingly the US), but where the majority of the wealth is held by the few.

3. What are misconceptions that those of developed countries and developing countries often have about each other? When interacting with different people from these countries, how do you respond to these misconceptions?

***I mentioned some of them above--that these people are often quite "developed" when we might not be thinking of that. Also, richer people tend to think poorer ones are responsible for being poor, when it's really usually a matter of luck--where you were born. People are smart, hard-working and want to succeed, they just don't have the chance. And a big overall problem is that we think money is everything—which is handy for us, as since we have more of it we think that makes us superior—when there's much more to life than that.

4. In an encyclopedia I looked at, developing countries were described as "have not nations." In your visits to developing countries, what special, positive qualities did you notice that developing countries may have but that our culture, or cultures in other developed nations, seem to lack?

***As I mentioned, strong communities, strong faith, hospitality—often people will open their doors to strangers to help them or to offer food—things we wouldn't be likely to do.

5. What do you believe are the main reasons why some countries do not "develop" or achieve economic growth?

***A combination of things—their own government may not be a good one or care for its own people very well because of corruption (Russia, Nigeria) or being un-democratic (North Korea, Burma). Or their government may be too poor to really insist that their workers be paid well by multi-national corporations (Central America, Africa, Asia). Another reason: Our government and other rich ones set the rules for world trade, and the rules always favor us. And we are selfish—the US is last among rich nations in the percentage of our wealth we share with poor countries. Then there are factors like geography (not having a seaport--Nepal, some African countries), environmental problems (deforestation in places like Central America), history of war (Liberia, Sudan, the Balkans), sickness (like malaria and AIDS in Africa and Asia). And global warming is already impacting the poor world, and it will get much worse in the future as more people are without access to water and as crops fail (Africa could see its grain harvest reduced by over 200 million tons a year).

6. From your personal experiences, what are some of major issues that can be found in either the developing countries you have visited or developing countries in general?

***Important problems are lack of education, esp. for girls; rules set by international agencies that don't let countries take care of their own people (like saying they have to cut funds for education to repay international debts); diseases that kill or incapacitate millions of people; unreliable climate, especially due to global warming; lack of roads and health care and communication; lack of interest in working with people to solve their problems (thinking "we" know best); lack of clean water.

7. How have you seen the issues in these countries contribute to other problems (or even themselves)? Examples are welcome.

***Lack of education, for instance, pushes people to take jobs in sweatshops, where they have very little chance of getting ahead in life; lack of education increases the chance of a young woman getting AIDS and also reduces the chance of her children surviving. (I'll paste in a story below)

8. Because we are all in this world together, I tend to think that many of the issues in developing countries such as poor health care and disease, malnutrition, unclean or polluted water, or poverty (which contributes to it all) are not limited to developing nations. Even if a developed country has very few of these issues, how might a developing country (that has the issues in mind) negatively affect the developed nation?

***One way might be immigration flows—when the poor people in one nation need work to survive and can't find it locally, they will go to another country, often illegally. For instance, El Salvador's number one export is people—men and women coming to the US to earn money to send home--and they send over \$3 billion a year. Of course this disrupts their families and puts them at risk (getting caught or dying), but they are desperate. Another way poverty in poor nations affects rich nations is that corporations move their jobs to the poor nation to get cheaper labor, costing jobs in the rich nation—and putting the profits in the hands of the executives and stockholders.

9. What are the issues that New Community Project tries to combat and how is this done?

***Ignorance is a big one—we try to just help people where we live understand the world better and then take action—and not just "charity" (giving what we can spare or have left over) but justice (seeking equality and fairness for everyone); we also work to connect Christian faith to these issues, as sometimes church people don't think their faith has anything to say about these things; we take Learning Tours to visit these people, learning to know them and their struggles, then looking for ways to walk with them toward a better world; we have special projects for girls' education, malaria prevention, and reforestation to help improve our neighbors' lives.

10. How do you compare these ways of dealing with situations to methods used by larger organizations or governments?

***The main differences: we are very committed to working with the local people to make decisions about what is needed, rather than to think because we have the money, we know best;

we work hard to see the good things and abilities of the people we work with—and what they have to teach us—rather than think we're the ones with all the good ideas or good qualities; we go to visit them, so that there's a relationship and not just "money" involved; we don't keep any of the money we raise for special projects for ourselves, sending it all to the people who need it; we're committed to challenging and changing "us" and not just "them"—making us more conscious of how our lifestyles affect others and how it is our responsibility to share this earth with our neighbors.

11. What are ways that we, as individuals, can contribute to helping those in developing countries who suffer from the issues you have previously mentioned?

***Learn about them, visit them, let them know they are not forgotten, give money and ideas to help meet their needs, treat them with respect—maybe that would be our biggest gift

12. When giving presentations or speeches about poorer nations, how do you try to personalize or reveal people's situations to those you are talking to?

***Yes, I think this is critical, as it helps people better understand and empathize. I am careful not to portray these people as only poor or whatever, but also as full of life and strength and faith, but facing many challenges. I use photos and stories, and this is a very important part of our efforts.

Here's a story of a girl working in a factory in China making toys for children in the United States: *Li Mei had been taken out of school after the third grade, because her father needed her to work on the family's farm taking care of the animals. When she was 18, after years of living and working in her small village—and never going back to school—she went off to work in a large Chinese city where some of her cousins had gone to work. She had heard of other girls who had gone to work there, and some of them had gotten sick—one even died—but she was strong, and she was desperate to do something besides work on the farm.*

When she arrived, the person who hired her handed her a long paper telling about her job—but since she couldn't read, it didn't mean anything to her. She was then taken to the place where she would be staying while working there—a room about 12 feet by 23 feet, which she shared with 20 other girls, all sleeping on bunk beds with a thin mattress—sometimes two of them in a bed. There was one bathroom down the hall, where in the mornings you had to wait for an hour or more to get in to bathe.

In the factory, her job is to use four different brushes to paint the eyes on dolls for a company far away called "Mattel"—and she has to paint one doll every 7.2 seconds—or 4000 a day. If she can't go that fast, they take money from her pay. The fumes from the paint she uses make her eyes burn. There are labels on it maybe warning about it, but she can't read, so it doesn't mean anything to her.

How much is she paid? For a day's work, she receives about \$1.25—for 13 hours of work. That's about 9 cents an hour.

(From The Real Toy Story by Eric Clark)