



## The art of Giving

*Organisational psychologist Stuart Carr talks to Malcolm Wood*

**T**he only way to truly appreciate the everyday reality of the poverty in which a large part of the world's population lives is to witness it directly.

For Stuart Carr, his experience – a life-changing one – came on the continent of Africa, in Malawi, one of the world's poorest nations, average GDP US\$600. Fresh out of Scotland's Stirling University with a PhD in Social Psychology<sup>1</sup>, Carr had accepted a contract position with the University of Malawi, arriving with his partner Françoise and their two children in 1989. They stayed for four years.

While there, he witnessed the ousting of President for Life, Hastings Banda. He saw the first depredations of AIDS, the loss of students and colleagues. He came to appreciate a little more the tragedy and scandal of children dying unnecessarily because of preventable diseases like malaria and dehydration, and lack of access to basic health services and health service organisations.

He also came to know the apparatus of the aid organisations on which the Malawian economy has come to depend. Here, he thought, was an interesting – and a socially

useful – line of work for a psychologist: to disentangle the human-scale mechanisms that make aid more or less effective.

The people of Malawi are not alone in facing the demon of poverty. In 2004, 980 million people worldwide lived on less than US\$1 a day, their plight a stain on the global conscience.

In September 2000, at its New York Assembly, the United Nations issued eight Millennium Development Goals, the first being to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Between 1990 and 2015, the UN

declared, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day would halve.

Of course, this was not the first high-sounding aspirational goal to be set by an international agency. Yet, powered by the economic miracles taking place in India and China, this one might just be met.

But exclude China and India and the problem looks more intractable. Take Sub-Saharan Africa, of which Malawi is a part. Between 1990 and 2004, the same period during which Eastern Asia managed the trick of having the percentage of its population living on less than \$1 a day fall from 8.9 to 2.1 percent, Sub-Saharan Africa's percentage fell two percentage points from 19.5 to 17.5 percent.

How do you best address systemic poverty? Might more aid do the trick? Surely some. But at least as important is making sure that aid is done right, that it works.

There so are many things that can conspire against effective aid. Aid can create dependency. It can distort or destroy local economies. It can create bureaucracy. It may be tied to the sale of services by the donor nation. It may be spent on building roads or infrastructure when the simple maintenance of the roads and infrastructure already in place would present much better value. It may be delivered according to models that fail to suit local conditions.

And then there is the 'elephant in the room', says Carr, the not-to-be-mentioned-in-polite-conversation matter of the vast pay disparities between expatriate and host-nation aid workers and the damage this does both to them and to the processes of aid and development.

After Malawi, Carr chose to take himself and his family to Australia, which, he says, was always the long term emigration goal. For five years he worked in the University of Newcastle's industrial psychology programme, "but the stuff from Africa just wouldn't leave me alone; it was just too important."

He continued a number of research collaborations with his former colleagues in Malawi, but his interests were regarded as a little left field, so when the opportunity to work for the Northern Territory University in Darwin arose, he seized it, thinking it would put him closer to the issues that interested him. Darwin was, after all, closer to places where development issues were to the fore: to Indonesia, East Timor and southern Asia, and, for that matter, to the indigenous communities of northern and central Australia. (He deplores the Howard government's heavy-handed interventions into aboriginal affairs.) He stayed for three years.

Massey's Auckland campus, his next port of call, was not necessarily meant to be a long term sojourn (though his father had always told him he had to visit New Zealand). But this time the stars seemed to be in alignment. Of all the universities he had worked for, this was the one that best understood what he wanted to do. As he puts it, the anchor went down. He took out his first-ever mortgage, and he and Françoise and their five children – the oldest is now 20 – took up occupation of a house on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula.

It has been a productive period. In 2003 he published the highly readable text *Social Psychology: Context, Community and Culture* and, in 2004, the Harvard-recommended *Globalisation and Culture at Work: Exploring their Combined Glocality*. (Glocality, says Carr, is the intersection we all occupy between the local and the global: "There is all the a-contextual global stuff coming out of America and the local stuff saying we are not having a bar of that. In reality, neither holds.")

And now? Now to deal with that elephant.

In July 2006 2007, Carr sat down with Wendy James from the university's research services and worked at a computer for a solid day to write an online application for the funding of multidisciplinary, international team





project to pursue his interest in exploring the implications of pay disparities within the aid world. The application was addressed to two United Kingdom bodies, the Department of International Development and the Economic and Social Research Council. In October 2006 he discovered he had been successful – a considerable and unusual coup for a Southern Hemisphere-based initiative.

‘Project ADDUP: Adding Value to Poverty Reduction Initiatives’ is to examine the vast disparities in pay in the sphere of poverty reduction work. It will examine how people perceive the disparities, how they affect, development work, and whether they can be better managed.

And to be sure that the project cannot itself be accused of perpetrating pay inequities, the team – whose current membership includes academics based in Ireland, Uganda, Britain, the Solomon Islands, India and Australia as well as New Zealand – have agreed to a common pay scale.

How significant are the differences in pay rates? When Carr was working in Malawi he and his fellow lecturers, whether local or expatriate, were being paid at local rates. But even on the same University campus a different reality held as well. Here the expatriate ‘expert’ would often be paid ten to 20-or-more times the rate paid to the local. The result? Guilt and compensatory emotions on one side; resentment on the other.

It’s a scenario that leads to what he calls double de-motivation. The expatriate feels guilty, develops an inflated sense of self worth, and becomes de-motivated; the host-nation worker feels devalued becomes indignant and inclined to lower his or her output in response to the lower compensation.

Another related scenario Carr terms ‘Pay Mel’. He gives as a vignette illustrative of aid folklore, the case of a group of villagers asked by aid workers to help unload some

drilling equipment to drill a deeper well. With a deeper well, the villagers will no longer need to walk many miles for water during times of drought, yet they refuse to help without payment – after all, the aid workers are being paid, so why should they work for nothing?

Surveys done by Carr since then of aid-experienced respondents have shown that in particular circumstances – say, among communities with a long term experience of aid agencies – this is exactly the response anticipated. Every gift, he says, also takes something away.

(Carr also writes of a third scenario, this one unrelated to pay disparities, in which the value of aid is compromised by imbalances between the expectation of achievement as an individual, and achievement through the group. Too much collectivism may partly stifle the individual; too much individualism is likely to lead to a backlash from the group.)

Can the matter of pay disparities be addressed? Aren’t overseas AID workers entitled to be paid at rates similar to those of their peers who emerged from university and chose to work in their own countries?

Carr says tackling the problem will require some ingenuity, although there not-profit organisations, such as *Médecins Sans Frontières*, that make a particular point of living like the locals.

Is Carr still in touch with people from his days in Malawi? He is, but only occasionally and tentatively. “It’s partly fear, fear of finding out who has gone.” ‘Gone’ meaning lost to AIDS, which infects around 14 percent of the adult population and has largely been the reason that life expectancy has fallen to 37 years.

It’s a chapter of his life now closed, he says. Nowadays his territory is Oceania.

But Malawi will always be with him. “People live in different worlds,” he says. “The one you see on the goggle box, it isn’t real.”

## Courting the donor dollar



Professor Carr and ADDUP project coordinator Ishbel McWha.

The images used to present the plight of the poor when organisations are competing for the aid dollar may be counterproductive, says Professor Carr.

He means those stock images with which we are all familiar: the close up of the wide-eyed and pitiable waif – or waifs – in impoverished surroundings.

These images, he says, despite their undeniable emotional pull, have a number of associated problems. One is that many people will naturally recoil from them, averting their gaze or switching the channel; a phenomenon that has also been observed with graphic road safety campaigns.

“Although they may be effective for a particular religious segment of the population, a lot more people get disaffected by those images, they find them distressing.

A second problem is that the photos show their subjects as passive. “The risk at an implicit level is that we begin to think ‘These people are hopeless cases, we keep throwing money at them and it isn’t working. Maybe it’s something wrong with the culture or the people...’ That’s the risk. Most of us don’t want to think like that but a lot of psychology points to the fact that we can end up with these stereotypes whether we like it not.”

One of Carr’s honours students, Ishbel McWha, devoted her research thesis to just this topic, gauging reactions to photographs cropped to show victimhood (the wide-eyed child) or wide-framed to show context (that child at work in a classroom).

(McWha, who recently returned from aid work in India and Cambodia, is now Project ADDUP’s co-ordinator.)

Caritas and Oxfam are two organisations that win praise from Carr for adhering to codes of practice specifying that any image used in advertising or publicity must respect the dignity of the people portrayed.