COMMUNITY RATHER THAN CLICHÃ©S

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Category: Short-Term Mission

One of the best blogs on the block at the moment is Djibouti Jones: life at the crossroads of faith and culture by Rachel Pieh Jones. Don't take my word for it; head over there and sign up the her updates.

In her latest post, Rachel talks about how she has helped Amina; a young woman living in extreme poverty in Djibouti. This could easily be a stereotypical 'benevolent expat helps poor African' story: but it isn't.

> *This was a relationshipÂ that has been built over trial and time and investment. There was language comprehension, we were communicating. There was history. I was able to enter into the situation and respond to it and interact. I was not overwhelmed or surprised by the poverty, which was extreme, or the circumstances. I was pleased to see where Amina keeps her running shoes.*
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> *I didnâ€™t think the kids were cute, with big eyes, orange hair from malnourishment, and flies on their faces. I thought they were Aminaâ€™s brothers and it was nice to meet them. I didnâ€™t think her father was a poor suffering old man, I wondered when he would be able to get medicine for his aching hip.*

Rachel's point is that she was able to help this family in an appropriate (and surprising) way because she had entered into their lives; learned their language and started to see the world from their perspective.

... And that got me thinking about short-term mission trips. The aim of short-term mission is to help people; but by their very nature they don't make space for serious language and culture learning. This means that the sort of culturally appropriate and sustainable approach to helping people that Djibouti Jones talks about is more or less impossible with short term mission. It is possible to mitigate against some of the worst effects of the 'white-saviour' complex, but they can't be prevented altogether.

I wouldn't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater; there is a place for short-term mission. However, I would like to suggest that as an absolute minimum, everyone engaging in a short term trip should learn something about the place they are going. It should be compulsory to:

- Read a book on the history of the country or region you are visiting.
- Read at least one book by an author from the country - this could be history, fiction, politics or anything else. But an attempt must be made to see the world through someone else's eyes.

After all:

> *â€œIf we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.â€ Teju Cole,Â The White Savior Industrial Complex*