Global Issues: Global Poverty

**Linking Extreme Poverty and Global Terrorism**

*By* [*JAKE HARRIMAN*](http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/author/jake-harriman/)

These days, I spend most of my time hiking the rolling hills and valleys of Kuria, a remote district in rural Kenya. I’m on a very different career path now than I was before, as a Marine patrolling streets and alleys in Iraq. In my new work, I travel from shamba to shamba (the Kiswahili word for farm) talking and working with farmers who live in extreme poverty. As we walk through their fields, I often see unwelcome flashes of my past. Peaceful Kurian villages transform into rows of Iraqi huts destroyed by rocket-propelled grenades. While gazing into the eyes of a Kurian farmer who is pleading with me to help her children who haven’t eaten in three days, my vision blurs and I’m looking into the eyes of a screaming Iraqi farmer who just had his family shot to pieces right in front of him. I watch our Kenyan farmers roll out their planting strings to properly space fertilizer and seed, and in my mind’s eye, I look through my scope at untrained, desperate farmers rolling out fuse lines that lead to poorly disguised road-side bombs next to the main supply route south of Baghdad. Two worlds, blurring together as I walk.

Even though the settings are very different, my new work in Kenya is similarly critical to U.S. national security. In fact, thoughts of U.S. national security occupy my mind as much now (or perhaps even more) as during my seven years as an infantry and special operations platoon commander in the Marines. I served four operational tours in Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and areas of southwest Asia alongside some of the bravest individuals I have ever encountered in my life.  We fought side by side on the frontlines of the “War on Terror” – a war that has cost so many lives, including many of my closest brothers. But as we fought together in that war, I came face to face with an unnecessary evil that takes more lives each day than are lost in Fallujah, Gaza, Kandahar, Mogadishu, and Jaffna combined, an evil that is directly connected to the proliferation of the terrorism and insurgency that we were fighting: the evil of extreme poverty.  
  
Extreme poverty is the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time and a fundamental contributing factor to 21st century terrorism and insurgency. I’ve discovered that it is controversial to make this claim, so don’t take my word for it. Brilliant people of our time have also made this connection, and are attempting to shake our generation from its slumber and catalyze global action in the fight against extreme poverty. [Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu said](http://articles.cnn.com/2007-09-16/world/talkasia.tutu_1_south-africa-s-anglican-archbishop-desmond-tutu-military-junta?_s=PM:WORLD), “You can never win a war against terror as long as there are conditions in the world that make people desperate — poverty, disease, ignorance.” [Former U.S. Secretary of State General Colin Powell stated](http://money.cnn.com/2002/02/01/news/davos_powell/), “We can’t just stop with a single terrorist or a single terrorist organization; we have to go and root out the whole system. We have to go after poverty.”

The World Bank defines extreme poverty as consuming $1.25 or less per day. This is an extraordinarily limited definition, and one that I believe prevents us from tackling the problem in a way that creates truly sustainable, catalytic solutions. Focusing on the economics of extreme poverty has too often led to solutions that address immediate material need rather than solutions that are sustainable for the long-term: wells with pumps that break from wear-and-tear within a few years; beautiful classrooms that lie empty because trained teachers are nowhere be found; insecticide-treated mosquito bed nets misused as fishing nets or curtains. Short-term solutions are not only ineffective, they are also counterproductive in the fight against extreme poverty. Material resource and infrastructure-focused solutions created in isolation perpetuate dependency and can actually further widen the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

In fact, extreme poverty is more than the lack of material resources necessary to meet an individual’s basic needs. One critical component of the phenomenon is when an individual lacks the opportunity to make meaningful choices that will sustainably improve her life. The work of Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen emphasizes the need for meaningful choice as the end and the means of development. Choice is powerful and opens the door to hope, opportunity, change, and a better future.

In the West, most of us live in a world of choices. What do we want to eat for lunch? What school do we want to attend? What neighborhood do we want to raise our kids in? But this is not true for a very large portion of the world.  Extreme poverty strips a person of her dignity, her opportunities and worst of all, her choice.  One out of six people lives in a condition where she cannot make choices to meet the basic needs of her children or give them hope for a better tomorrow.  A lack of choice leads to desperation. Desperate situations cause people to commit desperate acts. Most of the time people commit these acts not out of some misplaced hatred for the West, but out of love for their five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter at home who are starving to death. It is love that compels a father to say yes to the extremist that shows up at his hut, promising food and education for his children if he will only sacrifice his life by attacking people he knows nothing about, living across the ocean. Think about it.  What would you do if your child hadn’t eaten in days, or if your daughter had to walk 5 hours every day to find clean water – only to be raped on the way there?  How far would you go in a world where you couldn’t meet the basic needs of those you hold dearest to you?

Terrorist organizations’ community development activities hint at the link between insurgency and extreme poverty. [Hamas spends the majority of its resources](http://www.cfr.org/publication/8968/) providing “social, welfare, cultural, and educational activities” for the Palestinian people, and [Hezbollah operates schools](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9155/hezbollah.html?breadcrumb=%2F), hospitals, and agricultural services for poor Shiites in Lebanon.  The [Taliban build madrassas](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1581119,00.html) to offer free education to the poor in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The reality is that terrorists and insurgencies cannot function without the support of the communities in which they operate. [Studies show](http://economics.com.au/?p=4976) that they earn this support by providing social services for their often impoverished constituency. But the services provided by these organizations come at a great cost to the community – including economic oppression and coercion into violent activities – which perpetuates [the cycle of extreme poverty](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/07/business/07shelf.html?_r=1).

While in combat, my eyes were opened to this connection. I realized that I personally could make greater gains in the war against terrorism and insurgency by joining the fight against extreme poverty. I left my job as a Marine with a vision to help create a world where people living in extreme poverty could have the choice to determine their future. My journey took me to the Stanford Graduate School of Business, where I hoped to gain the tools necessary to build an organization that could effectively combat extreme poverty. It was there that I founded [Nuru International](http://www.nuruinternational.org/), a social venture committed to ending extreme poverty in remote, rural areas. Nuru equips people with knowledge and tools that enable them to make meaningful choices to improve the lives of their families. Nuru now works with thousands of farmers in Kenya, empowering them to create sustainable and scalable solutions to lift their families out of extreme poverty – not for one year or five years, but permanently. From these new frontlines, I have seen how access to opportunities can restore an individual’s dignity and set the wheels of change in motion to transform communities. There is hope. As long as we continue to create environments where choice can flourish, I believe that we will see an end to extreme poverty in our lifetimes. A revolution has begun; a revolution to awaken and mobilize a generation to win the war against extreme poverty once and for all. In the end, we will find that a world free of extreme poverty will also be a much safer, more stable world for all global citizens. Nuru was the path I took when I was awakened to the link between lack of choice and global insecurity. What will your path be?

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