



A Nigerian blender

Recently, I read of a Nigerian village that installed a large blender for the village's use. The women of the village now make a supply of peanut butter in a matter of minutes instead of taking the entire day. Their freed up time is devoted to other things such as learning to read and keeping children in school. This is good.

With the increased production comes more money in everyone's pocket, higher expectations of what that money is used for, and some newly acquired leisure time in which to spend it. While this too is positive, there are also troubling concerns the village did not have before. Will families remain intact now that there are more economic freedoms? Will the courage to try other business ventures bring further harm to an already fragile environment? Will cooperation diminish as certain families make better use of their purchasing ability than will others?

Being poor is horrible. No caring person wishes it to continue. Generous people hope, pray and give what they can to reduce suffering, celebrating stories of Nigerian villages like this one when they occur. Still, one does not leave poverty to find themselves in utopia. Gaining money reduces suffering, but it is a swap of problems not a cessation.

Newfound wealth tends to reduce cooperation in communities – everyone is now expected to pay their own way. An ability to purchase education promotes individuality, creativity and adventure, which tends to increase the pace of life, adds stress and reduces family time. Better medical care brings longer life spans and that many more possibilities for diseases that kill and maim. Increased wealth breeds suspicion between neighbors. Family relationships become more complicated. Fear about losing what one has tends to grow. More money brings newfound spiritual troubles too -- a tendency to worship wealth instead of the Creator. No matter where on the economic ladder one lives, there are worries. More access to wealth does not reduce problems, it brings entirely new ones and adds unique dimensions to old ones.

"Gaining money reduces suffering, but it is a swap of problems, not a cessation."

It is wise for these Nigerian families, and for us, to recognize all the costs associated with money, both when earning and using it. Where we live, how we live and the tools for our living should not be counted in currency alone. There are costs in relationship, community, time, and environment as well. We should carefully think through these dimensions. That way we manage our problems instead of become victim to them.

-mark