BOOK REVIEW

Out of Poverty: What Works When Traditional Approaches Fail
by Paul Polak, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009

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In *Out of Poverty: What Works When Traditional Approaches Fail*, Paul Polak shares his strong views on what it takes to effectively reduce extreme poverty. Polak's perspective comes from over two decades as a founder and leader at International Development Enterprises (IDE), a successful organisation that develops and sells products and establishes enterprises to support the poor.

Polak starts with his three great poverty eradication myths: (1) donations will end poverty; (2) national economic growth will end poverty; and (3) big business will end poverty. Polak claims that while these approaches make a contribution to poverty, they will leave many of the poor behind, and remain unsustainable models of improvement. Polak's arguments are that charitable giving is too small an amount to make a significant dent to pull the poor out of poverty, and that big business' focus is only on the richest market segments. His second argument seems the weakest of the three and, while he is correct that national growth is not always equally distributed, countries that move up the ladder of economic development do tend to increase incomes at all levels. Despite this, in calling for action, he instead puts forward the IDE approach: understanding the needs of the poor; developing profitable products and services that can serve people who live on less than one dollar a day at fair market price; create supply and distribution mechanisms; and design for scale. The experience of IDE and similar organisations has shown this to be an effective approach—although with a fairly narrow focus.

Polak's successful product is the treadle pump, a human-powered pump that moves well water for irrigation during dry seasons. These pumps are low-cost mechanical irrigation pumps that provide water for small-acre farmers and aim to improve crop yields, and therefore income, for the millions of sustenance farmers worldwide. There are over 2.25 million of these pumps around the globe (from IDE and other enterprises) generating more than $200 million new net annual income for one-acre farmers.

For engineers and designers, one of Polak's greatest contributions from this book is his call to "Design for the Other 90%." Polak argues that, "the problem is that 90 per cent of the world's designers spend all their time working on solutions to the problems of the richest 10 percent of the world's customers. A revolution in design is needed to reverse this silly ratio and reach the other 90 percent." This is a bold and worthwhile call to action for technology professionals worldwide. He urges an overwhelming focus on affordability and has developed guidelines including: removing product weight; taking out redundancy; and a focus on products that can be expanded upon, piece-by-piece, over time. Polak again emphasises the need to really understand the needs of the poor and to ensure that the product is appropriate.

Through his work with International Development Enterprises, Polak is keenly focussed on developing tools and techniques to raise the incomes of the poor, particularly small-scale farmers. He has an almost singular focus on raising the incomes of these individuals. He tends to dismiss
focussing on the issues around poverty and writes, “It all boils down to this: While it certainly is true that powerlessness, poor health, poor education, and absent transport infrastructure are important root causes of poverty, there can be no question that the most direct and cost-effective first step out of poverty is to find ways to help poor people to increase their income.” There are many facets of poverty that Polak does not attempt to explore in further detail, something which can be seen as a limiting factor of this work. Human rights and equality are not examined in detail—but rather Polak focuses on efficiency and scalable ways to create large and rapid ways to improve the outcomes of the poor. Social justice practitioners will likely complement this work with other writing that explores these themes in more detail (see Kabeer, 1994, below).

In summary, *Out of Poverty* is a powerful call for designers to work to develop the tools that help the poor, particularly the millions of one-acre farmers worldwide. While social justice practitioners may have differing opinions of his approach, something that Polak advocates for strongly and is hard to argue with is the need for designers to spend significant time with people living in poverty to genuinely understand their circumstances. This book is only one piece of the puzzle, however, and the reader is well advised to explore the complexities that surround people living in poverty. With a proven track record and years of experience, Polak’s call for a “Design Revolution” is one worthy of action.

**FURTHER READING**


