Good intentions

It is possible to do terrible harm with good intentions. But good intentions with proper awareness can create great things (see #Antidotes below).

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Political leaders

Consider Julius Nyerere, first President of Tanzania, praised for his principles but who brought economic disaster on his country, and with it great suffering. In his farewell speech, commenting on his economic policies, he said "I failed. Let's admit it."[1]

Compare Sukarno and Suharto, the first two presidents of Indonesia. The first was a much-loved leader who led his nation to independence, and then through much political turmoil and into a stagnant economy and cases of serious hunger. The second is widely regarded as having been brutal and corrupt, but he followed some of the key advice of his advisors, a group of technocrats[2] who helped lead Indonesia through many years of growth.[3] For a country at these stages of development, economic growth can make a life-or-death difference, in allowing public health expenditure, and private incomes to pay for medicine as well as proper food and shelter.

Colonial rulers

The Dutch government instituted a number of programs[verification needed] - in particular the Ethical Policy[4] - which were intended to improve the welfare of the native Indonesians, but these were plagued with problems and in many way made things worse and placed restrictions on the freedom of the colonial subjects.
Aid and development

Bad international development projects are worse than no help at all. A bad project can break a local economy, create a culture of dependency, and damage a community until community members cannot even imagine attempting to solve their own problems. This is what the do no harm approach is all about. This the lesson you should learn from critics of aid such as James Shikwati. He lumps all aid together, true, the good and the bad, but he's right about how dangerous bad aid can be.

Those of us involved in international aid should take our role seriously. When your project takes criticism, you shut up and listen. You act like any other professional, and you examine the criticism to see if it is accurate.

Here's what you don't do. You don't say, ever "Why would you be so mean when we are just trying to help?" If you find yourself about to say that, it means you have failed. Pack up your souvenirs and go home.

Lesson: There is no free pass for good intentions.

Effect on civil society

See How international NGOs killed civil society in developing countries, Paul Currion, humanitarian.info, February 1st, 2010.

Official development assistance

Main article: Official development assistance

Modern foreign aid programs (and to an extent welfare policies in wealthy nations) are often criticized for being ineffective (inappropriate solutions that end up unused) or even causing harm (creating a handout mentality, putting rich foreign aid workers in a poor context and causing envy, supporting corrupt authorities).

Antidotes

Preparation is essential, ensuring foreign consultants and aid and development workers have:

- Local knowledge
- Language skills
- Humility. In particular, the recognition that locals will often know more than you, the official expert. (And that's okay - "knowing everything" isn't what you're here for.)
- A proper understanding of development principles
- Access to good Country Guides and other resources.

See Being an effective aid or development worker.

Notes
2. These technocrats, nicknamed the a, led a program emphasizing some deregulation, bringing inflation under control, balancing the budget, rehabilitation of infrastructure, and development of the agriculture sector.

3. It must be noted though that even on economics Suharto had many failings. It is said that he did not always follow advice on liberalization of the economy, when it would have interfered with the business interests of his family and cronies, and these were probably major contributors to the 1998 monetary crisis and the economic problems which plagued Indonesia for many years afterwards.

4. Though of course without stopping the exploitation and control by the Dutch.

5. A summary of some of the criticisms, with an aid workers own responses, is given at Customer Review of The Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business by Graham Hancock - review by Sithara Batcha, May 29, 2006, Amazon.com

**External links**

- How Not to Ruin the World with Your Good Intentions, Sarah Pomeranz, TEDxRutgers, 2020.
- The Road to Health: Paved With Good Inventions, Ruth Levine, Global Health Policy blog, April 01, 2008. A satirical post from April Fools Day, suggesting a medication program for "those in the global health community to sustain their attention for up to two decades...a long-acting anti-hyperactivity medication that increases attention span (and) an anti-depressant activated when the individual is exposed to negative headlines or political setbacks."