
BOOK REVIEW

Plowing the Sea: Nurturing the Hidden Sources of Growth in the Developing World

*Michael Fairbanks and Stace Lindsay
Harvard Business School Press, 1997, 289 pages*

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One of the more difficult questions for a thinking Christian is the prevalence of poverty in the world. In many parts of the globe, people who are our brothers and sisters in Christ or fellow human beings face hunger, poor health, oppressive governments, and the inability to educate their children. This sears the soul of a thinking Christian.

As business professors, we teach people how to create wealth. However, the complexities of world poverty are staggering, beginning with flawed social systems, corrupt governments, and lack of resources by the population. Can anything change that?

A few months ago, I ran across an enthusiastic review of the book *Plowing the Sea: Nurturing the Hidden Sources of Growth in the Developing*

World. I was rather cynical, but decided to read the book anyway. What I read made me enthused, too.

First of all, the authors do not speak from an ivory tower. They have worked in the developing world, both at a grass roots development level and as government and business consultants. South America is the focus of their expertise and provides most of the examples in the book. However, most, if not all, of the principles they discuss can be utilized in other parts of the globe.

The authors use Porter's "Diamond of Competitive Advantage" (1990) to frame the discussion. They begin with what they call Seven Deadly Patterns of non-competitive thinking which, they say, are inherent in many developing nations: Over reliance on basic factors of

production, poor understanding of sophisticated customers, defensiveness, paternalism, and so forth. In each case, they offer specifics and examples of how to change these patterns and replace them with relationships that will gain and sustain wealth.

But the authors go much deeper than a “how to” book for acquiring and maintaining national wealth. Possibly their most valuable contribution is a section on understanding the root causes of the deadly patterns they outline. The reader gains a realistic sense of the issues involved in world poverty and some of the solutions that have been and are being tried. Both perspective and practicality are conveyed.

This book has valuable content and the advantage of being highly readable. I recommend it, in full or in sections, as supplemental reading in an international, strategic, or economic class or any class in which world poverty is addressed. It will provide encouragement for the pessimist, a place to begin for the realist, and a reality check for the idealist.

References

Porter, M.E. (1990). *The competitive advantage of nations*. New York: Free Press.