Articles

Trust and Vulnerability: being vulnerable to failures in trust as part of missionary service in Africa
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Abstract

Unwarranted trust brings relational tension that could be avoided using more caution. Hence advocating “trust” is sometimes ill-advised. Inter-culturally, trust is likely to be particularly fraught, as intercultural gaps result in reduced levels of mutual understanding. Breaches of trust, both historical and contemporary, probably contribute to much mission work in recent times being short-term. Issues related to trust, such as time-keeping, how to ask questions, levels of expectation arising from particular ways of phrasing things, and financial predictability, are culturally dependent. Vulnerable missionaries, those who use local languages and local resources, can through making fewer demands on local people, while acquiring greater in-depth understanding, avoid many breaches in trust.

Introduction

“I can’t work with that person because they can’t be trusted.” We have probably heard these kinds of words before. See Acts 13:13 and then 15:36-40. A lack of trust challenged the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas travelled with Mark. Paul refused too. Presumably he had lost ‘trust’ in Mark. What does it look like to continue in a relationship after trust has been “broken”? Perhaps this is vulnerability?

Trust is clearly an important part of normal inter-human relationships. Without some level of trust, it is very difficult indeed to relate to someone closely. It could even be said that much of life is about developing trust. Husbands learn to trust their wives. People get to trust one another in the workplace, in social settings, in the family, in the church. It is in so far as people trust each other that they can make progress. Where there is no trust, there could be little peace and little progress.

Where does the above kind of view of trust leave us with respect to intercultural mission? Trust would seem to be essential for inter-cultural relationships. At the same time, cultural differences can make trust difficult. The arena of intercultural communication is littered with broken relationships in which “trust” appears not to have been honored. Such broken relationships are not usually broadcast using trumpets. They are concealed, covered over, maybe even “forgiven,” but yet often hard to forget and sometimes very painful.

Sometimes the question is who to trust? “When I went on short-term trips to Africa, everything seemed to be OK,” a woman told me. “But then, after I had lived there for a while, I

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discovered that things were different,” she added. She was articulating what had happened in the course of her experience as a missionary. She discovered that the African bishop she was working under did not live up to the high standards that she expected of a bishop. That was more than this British woman could cope with. She threw in the towel on her project, and under much distress, she returned home to the West. Back in the West, when she told her church leaders about the deceitfulness, untruthfulness, corruption, and immorality of the African bishop, the leaders had to choose between her and the bishop. They felt they really had no choice but to trust the integrity of the bishop. Distraught and deeply discouraged, the one-time missionary woman tried to pick up the pieces of her life and carry on.4 I suggest that she would have been better off had she known the appropriate ways to “trust” the African bishop in the first place.

Trust that sets One up for Failure, Division, and Conflict

Local churches in the West who do not trust neighboring churches, can at the same time develop deep implicit trust in culturally diverse faraway bodies of believers.5 In one’s hometown back in the West, someone has a lot of choices about who to trust. One may also work through past circumstances to enlarge their trust with others. Many Protestant Christians’ distrust of Catholicism does not arise from their personal experiences with the Catholic Church. It has developed as a result of frequent warnings, teachings, and accounts of a presumed antagonism that has been passed down through the generations. A particular Protestant denomination developing a relationship with another church in Africa might have no such scruples, even though the same Protestant church that is seeking ways to relate could be vastly different from the Catholic Church down the road. A church in the West may spend vast sums in support of a project in Africa, while they may not contribute at all towards the fundraising for the Christian community next door. Hence “trust” can appear to be at a higher level inter-culturally than it is intra-culturally.

It is almost as if enormous barriers to mutual trust can necessitate trust at all costs. The very anticipated and often very real difficulties of developing mutual understanding with a body of Christian believers of a vastly different culture and in a vastly different part of the world seems to necessitate a determination to “trust them no matter what.” Breaking a missionary-relationship with a distant church over issues such as lack of trust could bring accusations of racism, neo-colonialism, and chauvinism, that are not there when it comes to breaking trust with the church next door back at home. The African bishop must be given a wide margin of “the benefit of the doubt.”

The dilemma a missionary may be put into, as a result of the above scenario, is not always realized. Many Westerners’ levels of trust of African churches is not, I suggest, based on experience, but on conviction, determination, idealism, and romanticism.6 Missionaries sent to work on the “field” are expected to honor that trust. They are expected to develop close untroubled working relationships with the African people they meet. They may express frustrations; that would only be normal, as they attempt to adjust to a different way of life. Any
suggestion that the African bishop appears to be less than ultimately honorable, genuine, honest, or trustworthy are however unlikely to be accepted. If any head will roll, it is likely to be the one belonging to the missionary. So indeed – since the West has given up leadership of many Majority World churches (especially since the 1970s), missionary work has gone into decline. Many Western missionaries who do go onto the field in Africa prefer to work in technical roles with institutions affiliated with churches, rather than with the church hierarchy itself, and for relatively short periods of say four years or less.8 Ostensibly, this is because long-term roles are no longer needed. Other issues may be lurking under the screen of this ostensive reason.

I wonder if advocating a level of distrust may be preferred to the crises that all too easily arise when assumed trust is eventually shattered? Instead of sacrificing missionaries on the altar of broken-trust relationships, should excesses of “trust” be avoided in the first place? Might it be helpful for “trust” to be minimised between strangers? Surely this is “normal” for many working relationships? I simply do not “trust” my female work-colleague as much as I do my wife. My female work colleague, being in some ways untrustworthy, needs not preventing our working together, if we remain faithful within the limits of our work relationship and not comprise that relationship with romance. I can enjoy fellowship with a stranger, someone I meet on a bus or a train, without knowing much about him/her, without having to entrust my life to him/her. Trust levels for someone to be a “good neighbor” are relatively low. Once finance enters into a relationship, breaking of trust can become problematic. Perhaps to engender trust, financial inter-dependencies are best left out of some sensitive relationships. Should they also be left out of inter-cultural relationships entered into by some missionaries? Before looking at this possibility in more detail below, let us consider how language and cultural differences together threaten “trust” relationships.

Inter-cultural Linguistic Communication and “Trust”

Not saying what one thinks one is saying can undermine trust. So if I intend to say to you, “I will give this money to you, on the condition that you return it tomorrow,” but I actually say “on the condition that you return it in 10 years,” who is at fault if I do not get my money back the following day? Presumably I am at fault. This is the kind of error that could be made by someone who has not yet mastered the language he/she is using in intercultural mission. Hence this is one reason one should not presuppose too much trust between people of distinct language communities.

It can be very unwise to “trust” someone who is not familiar with the parameters and boundaries of the “trust” you are supposing. Boundaries of trust are culturally related. Someone borrowing my radio without first asking for permission may be considered to commit a breach of trust in England, but not in parts of Africa.9 It is said that a member of the Maasai tribe of Kenya and Tanzania, finding a colleague’s spear outside his door, will allow the owner of the spear to spend the night with his wife, an act that in some cultures would be a serious breach of trust.10 In many African ethnic groups, an African wife may not be considered trustworthy until dowry has been paid for her. The parameters of trust are culturally defined.
What should happen if we take into account difficulties in translation that arise from differences in worldview as expressed in different languages? Timekeeping would be one such example. In British English use, if someone tells you “we are just going out shopping and we’ll be back in a minute,” that does not mean “a minute” in the literal sense. Use of the term “back in a minute” implies that the person is wanting to minimize the time they take. Even if they know that it will take them at least five minutes to walk to the shop, they could still say, “I’ll be back in a minute.” If on their return 18 minutes later you consider them to have broken trust by telling you a flagrant lie, you have missed the point; language is often not used literally. If everyone knows that language is not being used literally, then there is no issue in communication. But what if ways, degrees, and cases of literalness vary between cultures? “It was amazing. Five minutes before time, nobody was there, then by a minute after the advertised start time, the hall was filled and everyone was sat quietly” were thoughts shared by an African church leader with me on one occasion, recalling a church gathering he attended in England. That evidently does not happen in his home community. Instead, many people typically arrive long after the advertised time for a gathering. Telling the African church leader, “I cannot trust you because you are never on time,” causes a breaking of trust due to ignorance; if the Westerner had known about African timekeeping, that person should have realized that the above kind of “late-coming” should not be a breach in “trust.” It is a different understanding of time that the Westerner should be aware of.

Allow me to add some more examples. Part of “trust” in Western nations like the United States and England, is being frank and what we call “honest,” even if one’s honesty may not be immediately pleasing. Perhaps a person is looking for a driver to take a sick person to hospital. The second person is asked whether they will be free to perform this role. That second person thinks about their following day’s program and says, “I am not yet certain.” So, the first person responds, “Tell me yes or no because we need someone to rely on.” My understanding of British culture is that someone will only agree to perform the said role if they are 99% certain that they will be able to make the appointment concerned (of course no one can ever be totally certain). In African cultures that I am familiar with, the offense of saying “No, I cannot do it,” to someone’s face can easily be more serious than not turning up the following day after having made a commitment. Hence someone can agree that they will pick up the sick person, even if that second person actually has another important appointment that takes greater priority at the same time. So, when the second person does not show up to help the first person, have they broken trust, or has the person looking for a driver used an illegitimate means to ask the question, and not correctly understood the answer (yes means no)?

Does success come from work or from prayer? “Pray hard to succeed” and “work hard to succeed” can seem to be equivalents. After all, one could be praying for work, or even working on prayer! So, you could say to someone, “success comes through hard work,” and they can agree. Yet, if you think their agreeing means that this person has the kind of strong work ethic recognized in the West, you may be deceiving yourself. If that person does not subsequently “work hard” as you think ought to be achieved, has trust been broken, or have you simply not understood them implementing their own cultural practices?
Fear of spirits or witches can play into issues of trust. Witchcraft is often inspired by jealousy. One way to avoid becoming the victim of witchcraft is avoiding behavior that is likely to make others jealous. This avoidance can be practiced by imprecision or even denial regarding one’s personal wealth. In a society in which it is normal to try to avoid being attacked by witchcraft, it may also be normal to endeavor to avoid revealing one’s wealth. Questions such as, “how many cows do you have?” should thus be avoided, because they are over-intrusive on someone’s privacy. Is giving a “wrong answer” when asked a question that should not be asked to avoid breaking trust possible to commit, or was the trust broken through the ignorance of the person who asked the question in the first place? Breaking of trust could have been avoided through better knowledge of the person’s language and culture. Issues of spirits are similar. Someone may well agree that “you can’t be a Christian and at the same time make sacrifices on behalf of ancestors,” while at the same time, that person makes such sacrifices in order to avoid being haunted by ancestors angered through neglect. If a person who does this act is to be considered “untrustworthy,” then lack of trust may appear indeed to be widespread. Such apparent incongruity may be dealt with differently by some African people.

There is a notion of “success” in spiritual circles in the West that may not include material wealth. The Egyptian desert fathers, such as St. Anthony, famously contributed to this point. St. Anthony himself gave away his family’s wealth so as to live in the desert as a hermit. It appears that Egyptian Christians respected him for this commitment. Voluntary poverty in God’s service has become a deeply held value in Western Christianity. It may not always be a deeply held value by African Christians. On the contrary, it may be vitally important for African church leaders to acquire wealth so as to prove that they are blessed by God, and so that they should be taken seriously. Being a “good Christian,” which in the West may deal with morality and denial of the world, can, when heard in Africa, include content that a Westerner would never imagine, pressurising the African believer to make money at all costs in order to give a Christian testimony.

Three more examples to conclude. In English we say that we “believe in God,” to mean that we hold as true some ultimate notion that God “exists,” created the world and is responsible for my eternal well-being. Taking Dholuo of Western Kenya, a language with which I am somewhat familiar, “vie kuom Nyasaye” is probably the closest translation we have to “believe in God.” This Luo version of the English, however, frankly can be understood as something like “agree that there is a power who will bless me with material wealth.” One can ask someone “is that your sister?” Let’s say the girl concerned is the granddaughter of a brother to the person’s grandfather. In English, in which a “sister” is someone with whom one shares a common parent, the answer should clearly be “no.” In many African languages, terms translated into English as “sister” are much broader in meaning. When the African person being asked takes “sister” as a translation of their equivalent terms, they will say “yes she is my sister”. Has the African person lied and been untrustworthy? According to Western English apparently yes. According to widespread African uses of English (if “sister” is taken as a translation of some African term) that is clearly not true. My final example; in the Luo language, a brother or sister can
affectionately be known as “nyathiwa”. Literally translated this seems to be “our child.” Nyathiwa however is said of a brother or sister (i.e. our fellow child) and not of a member of the next generation, as is strongly implied using English. It could be very easy to mistranslate nyathiwa.

The examples above should be making it clear that mutual trust requires mutual cultural and linguistic knowledge. In the absence of such knowledge, to say that one “trusts” somebody can be almost meaningless; one trusts them to do what? Does one “trust” them to the degree that one will ignore apparent breaches in trust such as listed above? What does that mean? How can one claim to truly “trust” someone if their words and behavior can be so contrary to one’s expectations?

I suggest that trust cannot be separated from linguistic-cultural understanding. This is why, when a missionary who has learned language and culture relates to people on the field, they will do so in a way that is different from the way in which a visitor from the West will relate to them. This will be the case even should there be a common language such as English that unites. A visitor from the West is a poor assessor of whether trust has been honored, or otherwise. A missionary who has reached this culturally-informed level of trust, knowing the kinds of foibles we have discussed above, might have to say to a visitor that they must not “trust” the local people, and that they should not expect to be trusted by them.

Vulnerability: An Alternative to Trust

The final paragraph in the above section suggests that a visitor from the West can be a very poor judge of the context of a Western missionary in an African context. From earlier in this article, we have learned that the visitor has usually had to decide to accept apparent breaches in trust from the African as arising from “misunderstanding.” Meanwhile, we have also learned that the African person can be very concerned that they acquire wealth. It is typically Western people who have this on offer. In any competition between the two, which are the Western missionary and the native African leader, Western supporters will often stand with the African. The informed Westerner is judged as “wrong”; how can a Western missionary be right all the time and an African church leader be “wrong” all the time? We seem to have gotten ourselves into an insoluble dilemma. The only long-term missionaries likely to survive these kinds of dilemmas may be those who choose to ignore cultural complexities while continuing to bring in plenty of funds; i.e. those who continue to be in demand for their money and refuse to take notice of what is going on around them.

Two things stand at the root of the above dilemma; the fact that the West has the resources that the African leader desires, and that the West is ignorant of the linguistic/cultural context within which the African is operating. Hence in the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, we suggest, to avoid the above dilemmas, that some Western missionaries operate using local languages and through locally available resources.

The vulnerability we are looking at can be said to express itself in two ways. One, a “vulnerable” missionary who does not have a lot of wealth to hand out, is vulnerable to the pushes and shoves of the culture they are entering. Because confronting them is not to put major
resources at risk, local people can afford to be honest with them. They can be told when they are wrong. They can be ignored if they are misguided, without the risk of losing funds. Because they are not trying to be accountable for funds, they are not insisting that local people keep to some foreign standard. Instead, they are ready to go with the flow. Because they have not invested majorly in whatever project they are involved in, they can allow “their project” to collapse, and still be around and smiling.

Two, because vulnerable missionaries operate using indigenous languages (learning of which requires exposure to the culture), they can hear and understand what is being said around them. They are vulnerable in the sense that one’s eardrums are “vulnerable” to sounds. As eardrums reverberate in response to even low levels of sound, so a vulnerable missionary perceives things that a non-vulnerable missionary may not. In this sense they are “vulnerable” to the pushes and pulls of community and religious life where they are serving. For example, they know what someone means when they say, “this is my sister.” They appreciate that there is no point in getting angry with someone who said they would come tomorrow but does not show up. They appreciate that “belief in God” means “agreeing that it is good to acquire wealth,” and that to change this belief will requires a lot of effort. It is as if they have finely tuned ears that can listen to whispers, whereas other missionaries may only be able to hear words that are broadcast using a loudspeaker.

Hence, I suggest that “vulnerability” is an alternative to “trust.” In a sense it is the opposite to trust. It is like a balancing counterpoint to trust. Westerners who come to Africa and on day one they say to an African, “I trust you” are implicitly assuming their own cultural superiority. They are saying, “I already understand you sufficiently for me to enter into relationship without my first having to learn about you, or your language, or your culture.” This is not to say that “trust” is not important. It is to say that true trust cannot be presupposed to exist in advance of “vulnerable relationship.” Interculturally, trust must be acquired in the course of vulnerable relationships. This applies even if both parties entering into relationship are sincere believing Christians. In a sense we can say that a vulnerable missionary is one who sees compromises of trust as learning experiences. Vulnerable missionaries are determined to ride breaches in trust rather as a surfer rides waves. They will not scuttle their craft or allow breaking waves to crush them or to wash them onto the beach. Developing the trust that arises from vulnerability can mean avoiding the confrontation of powerful players. A missionary who seeks to maneuver large amounts of resources will draw the attention of powerful figures in their target community. As a result, they can brazenly challenge people who have the power to avoid being challenged. I have said above that Western Christians sometimes allow breaches of trust with African Christians that they would never permit with their fellows at home. The vulnerable missionary does the same, but from a position from which they learn from such breaches.

It needs to be added that vulnerable missionaries set themselves up in a very delicate position with their fellow countrymen. Because they are Western in origin, they can be expected to keep high standards of trust on Western standards, while being used in operating with African ways of looking at trust. Whereas the Westerners may be ready frequently to “forgive” the
African, they may not be ready to so forgive their fellow Western missionary. Hence vulnerable missionaries expose themselves to criticism or even condemnation by their Western missionary colleagues.

**Trust, Vulnerability, and Dependency**

We have seen that it can be very problematic to approach a Majority World community without putting in mechanisms for learning and vulnerability, while determined to demonstrate “trust” in them in key ways, such as in the investing of major resources. Resulting breaches in trust can result in serious division, conflict, crisis, and then “failure.” A look at some intercultural linguistics gives very good reasons for these points. We have looked at vulnerability as a missionary approach that is an alternative to “trust.” In this final section, I want to consider the above in relation to unhealthy dependency.

Unhealthy dependency arises when Westerners establish ways of operating in Africa that prove to be unsustainable without ongoing outside funds or expertise, whenever the ongoing acquisition of those funds or that expertise is in some way problematic. A direct relationship between this and vulnerable mission should be evident. Vulnerable mission is practiced using local languages and resources. By definition, it is done over a long-haul (Vulnerable mission cannot succeed or be practiced over a short term. See Henry (2014).). The alternative to vulnerable mission is mission carried out using outside languages and outside resources. Establishing work using outside resources is likely to mean that it will continue to need those outside resources. The presence of outside resources tends to result in misunderstandings. Establishing work using outside languages is likely to mean that misunderstandings, in relation to the local cultural context, are incorporated.

A famous example in which use of outside resources did not result in ongoing dependency is that of Marshall Plan funds given to Germany after World War II. Germany had been flattened during the war. Its economy was in shambles. It might have taken it many more years to pick itself up, if America had not given Germany a leg-up in the form of large amounts of loaned capital. Many people took that as a good model and wanted to repeat what happened in Germany in the rest of the world. In doing so, unfortunately, they failed to realize that Germany had already had a powerful economy, and that German people were oriented to and capable of building up a powerful economy. The same cannot be said for much of Africa. When African people received large donations of capital, it did not help them to build sustainable industries. African communities are different from German communities.

Things have moved on since the 1950s and the Marshall Plan. Levels of education have escalated in Africa as throughout the world. Many people in Africa are as a result very familiar with the discourse of industry, development, economics, progress, and growth. Unfortunately, many of these things have not grown indigenously as they did in Germany. They have been brought in as solutions with outside input and imposed through foreign-funded education (I do not have space to consider this concern further in this article but have done so elsewhere. Suffice it to say that it is difficult to get such wholesale importation of an economic system to work.). As
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a result, whether donations be to churches or to nations; talk may not be backed up by substance. Unless outside-controlled (outside control seems to be rising, even if it is often hidden, in Africa and other parts of the majority world (Bronkema 2015)), many projects designed in the West cannot work in Africa. They depend on outside personnel, and ongoing flows of funds from the outside. That is, they create dependency. Not to bring in outside money is to not create dependency.

The issue of “trust” is alluded to above. Many African people are highly educated. Their discourse seems to warrant that they should be “trusted” by others. But unfortunately, their discourse is borrowed. Thus “trusting” them can be to invite failure, embarrassment, crises, etc. To so “trust” them can also be to distract them from what they might have been doing, had they been left to their own devices instead of being encouraged to imitate Western discourse (i.e. education).14

A Westerner who comes to Africa and uses a Western language attaches presupposition that they have held (and that are true in the West) to discourses in Africa. Even when he is in Africa, when someone talks to an Englishman using English, it is very difficult for the latter not to link the terms he hears with his experience in England. Yet much of the context of England (Germany, America, etc.) is absent in Africa. Thus, the Westerner speaking, and hearing English can be misled, and misleading.

The process of learning language opens up a liminal period before serious engagement occurs. That period forces the learner to slacken off, to re-think, to adjust, to some extent at least, to their new context (The new language should, of course in so far as possible, be learned “in context” and not learned as if independent of context.). To some extent at least, the newly learned local language will rhyme with, engage with, and maintain meaningfulness in the local context. The examples cited above, of sister, of timekeeping, and of not saying “no,” all illustrate the kinds of things that a language learner should be picking up as they learn their new language. Engaging in a local language in the implementation of one’s work or project is a way of helping to align with local reality. If sufficient alignment with local reality is achieved, then the project can be sustainable in the local context without unhealthy dependency on sources for outside input. Language should be learned first. Then that language should be used in engaging people with whatever project is on hand. Thus, one can ensure, as Jean Johnson shares with us; that you start on day one as you mean to continue on day 100.15

Conclusion

Mutual trust between people can be a wonderful thing. Misplaced trust can be a terrible thing. A look at the linguistic and cultural parameters of intercultural relationship shows that intercultural / inter-linguistic understanding will always be limited. Hence it is advised that trust across cultural divides should be guarded. Vulnerability is in this article set up as a balancing counterpoint to unhealthy blind trust; vulnerability is a form of trust that favors sustainability.

The “vulnerability” here considered is that which arises when a Western missionary or development worker ensures that key ministries are engaged using local languages and
resources. This “limits” the need for trust, because it means that there will be no component of foreign financial investment needing outside accountability in the relationships concerned. It helps to solidify what trust there is, because through relating using the indigenous language, the outsider maximizes their receptivity to nuances and categories of local understanding. It elicits trust because the ministry of the outsider comes to be dependent on the free cooperation of locals; that is to say that the outsider cannot march on ahead and beyond the reach of local support or approval (that is not motivated by money) for their activities.

This article suggests that misplaced trust underlies a lot of unhealthy dependency in intercultural relationships. The use of globalized languages contributes to this fact. Someone hearing their own language used back to them, as many native-English speaking missionaries in Africa, link the language uses they hear to types of trust that they are accustomed to within their own more familiar culture. In addition, they may well be under pressure not to be racially biased, i.e., not to respond to communication by nationals of the people they are reaching any differently to the way they would respond to the same from their own people. They are likely to want to give the “benefit of the doubt, “should there be any. Unfortunately, once trust is extended, e.g., in the handing over of money following an agreement about terms of operation in some project, it not being honored produces problems, which includes unhealthy dependency.

**Bibliography**


1 “John” mentioned in Acts 13:13 is the same person as the Mark mentioned in Acts 14.

2 “Only those societies with a high degree of social trust will be able to create the flexible, large-scale business organizations that are needed to compete in the new global economy” (Fukuyama 1996: back cover).

3 For an example of broken trust in intercultural mission, the reason for which seems to be shrouded in mystery, see http://blog.rainerbrose.net/on-strike-in-the-refugee-camp-gospel-celebration-in-adjumani-uganda/

4 The lady on whom I base this story wrote her own testimony here: http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/discussion/my-experience.html

5 I illustrate ways in which this happens in the article: Harries (2008).

6 I have articulated in more detail elsewhere ways in which citizens of Western countries consider themselves to be “trusting” of others so as to avoid accusations of racism (Harries unpublished). Western people are reluctant to let go of poorly founded notions of romanticism of non-Western communities (Pinker 2002:26).

7 After African countries became politically independent, and when there were calls for a missionary moratorium.

8 http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jbtm/05-1_103.pdf


11 To say that they are “intrusive on someone’s privacy” is a native English equivalent to a concern held in parts of Africa that one does not want to be too quick to reveal details about one’s personal wealth.

12 http://www.idahomonks.org/sect401.htm

13 http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/marshall-plan

14 For more on this see the immorality of aid (Harries 2011).

15 http://mikejentes.com/2013/04/02/quotes-from-we-are-not-the-hero-by-jean-johnson/