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NEWS AND ANALYSIS

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From Columnist's Pen to Charity Coffers

Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times writes vivid accounts of hardship and inspiration that prompt readers to give millions — but are the recipients always deserving?

By Marc Gunther



COURTESY OF NICK KRISTOF

REACHING OUT: Nicholas Kristof interviews villagers in the rebel-held Nuba Mountains of Sudan last year.

Last June, Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* wrote a powerful column about Tom Catena, a physician and Catholic missionary who oversees a hospital in South Sudan, where some of the world's poorest people are under savage attack from their own government. The column, headlined "He's Jesus Christ," described how Dr. Catena delivers babies, battles leprosy, and amputates the limbs of kids hit by shrapnel, all in a hospital without running water or an X-ray machine.

Mr. Kristof wrote: "For his risks and sacrifices, Dr. Tom earns \$350 a month — with no retirement plan or regular health insurance." He provided a link "for those who want to support his work."

What happened next was heartwarming — and entirely predictable. Mr. Kristof's readers responded by donating more than \$850,000 to the 435-bed Mother of Mercy Hospital. "Nick has a huge readership, and his word seems to carry quite a bit of weight," Dr. Catena says.

TOM CATENA, PHYSICIAN AT MOTHER OF MERCY HOSPITAL, SUDAN

"It is left to Dr. Tom, as he is universally known here, to pry out shrapnel from women's flesh and amputate limbs of children, even as he delivers babies and removes appendixes."

Profiled on June 27, 2015

Result: \$850,000 in donations

Of that there's no doubt: When Nicholas Kristof speaks, donors listen. A Harvard graduate, Rhodes scholar, and two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Mr. Kristof commands attention with his widely read columns, his PBS television specials, two best-selling books written with his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, a Facebook page with more than 640,000 "likes," and 1.75 million followers on Twitter. No journalist — and few celebrities — has as much impact on the philanthropic sector. Over the years, Mr. Kristof has recommended big, well-known charities like CARE, Save the Children, and Heifer International and lifted many smaller ones, like Dr. Catena's hospital, out of obscurity.

"I think of myself as in the lighting business," Mr. Kristof has said. "I have a spotlight. And it's a privilege to be able to shine that spotlight on people doing great work in the field."

But just how great is their work? That's harder to know.

Some charities highlighted by Mr. Kristof have generated independent evidence of their effectiveness, but many have not. This points to a fundamental tension underlying his writing about philanthropy.

As a columnist, Mr. Kristof tells heart-tugging stories about heroes, victims, and making a difference because he wants to get readers to care about social justice in faraway places. He's far less likely to train his spotlight on the kinds of systematic, data-driven interventions that social scientists say do the most good for poor people at the least cost.

Closer Scrutiny

Mr. Kristof's critics say he should pay more heed to data when recommending charities. "As a general principle, I think we should support charities that implement programs that have been the subject of rigorous evaluations," says William MacAskill, the author of *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism and Can Help You Make a Difference*.

Mr. MacAskill says he admires Mr. Kristof but believes the columnist has an obligation to make sure he's recommending charities that make the most impact.

Then again, as a seasoned reporter who has lived on four continents and traveled to more than 140 countries, Mr. Kristof has watched dozens of nonprofits and seen first-hand the impact they can have.



AUDREY HALL FOR SHOW OF FORCE

EDUCATING NICK: Mr. Kristof with Kennedy Odede, the founder of Shining Hope for Communities. The columnist has written a number of times about the group, which has built two tuition-free school for girls in Kenyan slums.

The charity set up a web page to track donations sparked by the story, and after two of its board members created a \$100,000 matching fund, it brought in an additional \$650,000.

Women on the Rise

John Wood, who left an executive job at Microsoft to start the nonprofit Room to Read in 1999, says of Mr. Kristof: "He does his due diligence. I've been in the field with Nick at 9 o'clock at night in the Mekong Delta, being eaten by mosquitoes, and he's still asking a gazillion questions. He's got the passion. He's doing the fieldwork. He's spending time on the ground."

Room to Read, which supports literacy programs and secondary-school education for girls in 10 countries, was well-prepared when Mr. Kristof traveled to Vietnam in 2011 to write a column about Mr. Wood, headlined "His Libraries, 12,000 So Far, Change Lives."

Shining Hope for Communities, which has built two tuition-free schools for girls in Kenyan slums, has been another favorite of the columnist. Shining Hope was brought to Mr. Kristof's attention by four women from Connecticut who started the Mothers' Day Movement after reading *Half the Sky*, the book by Mr. Kristof and Ms. WuDunn about empowering women. It's a charity with a great backstory: Founder Kennedy Odede, who grew up in the Kibera slum, met Jessica Posner, a Wesleyan student, when she was studying abroad. They fell in love and got married, and he got a full scholarship to Wesleyan. He graduated in 2012 and gave the commencement address.

Mr. Kristof has written multiple times about Shining Hope since 2011, and featured it in *A Path Appears*, the 2014 book and three-part PBS series by Mr. Kristof and Ms. WuDunn about how to make a difference in the world. "Every time Nicholas Kristof mentions Shofco, we see a huge spike across board," says Susan Varghese, the group's communications and marketing officer. Shining Hope's budget grew from \$566,000 in 2010 to \$3.6 million in 2014; its leaders have won numerous awards, and its schools, which offer small classes, daily nourishment, health care, and psychosocial support, get rave reviews in the media. But they are very expensive to run and have never been independently evaluated.

'Deluged With Checks'

In an interview with *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Mr. Kristof says he never set out to advise readers about charitable giving. The role was forced upon him, starting in 1990, when, as a correspondent in China, he wrote about a girl who had to drop out of school because she could not pay her fees. "I just got deluged with checks from readers," he says. "They didn't want to just learn about a given situation. They wanted to know what they could do to make a difference."

SHINING HOPE FOR COMMUNITIES, WHICH BUILDS SCHOOLS IN KENYA

"The school has helped prosecute a man accused of raping a 4-year-old kindergartner who required surgical repairs and is working to end the impunity on sexual violence in the community. It also provides a dormitory for half a dozen girls who are at risk of sexual violence in their own homes."

Featured on September 28, 2011

Result: Shining Hope's budget grew from \$566,000 in 2010 to \$3.6 million in 2014

He's now more systematic about suggesting nonprofits. Since 2009, he has written an annual column highlighting what he has called "my quirky holiday list of nifty, unknown charities." The website for *A Path Appears* includes a "donate" button that links to several dozen charities, and the book includes a list of 124 "useful organizations."

Mr. Kristof says he relies on evidence where possible. "I'm generally a great believer in randomized, controlled trials to prove effectiveness," he says. In a 2015 column about Peter Singer, the Princeton University philosopher and leader of the effective-altruism movement, Mr. Kristof voices a few reservations about effective altruism before concluding: "Singer's argument is powerful, provocative and, I think, basically right. The world would be a better place if we were as tough-minded in how we donate money as in how we make it."

He has praised organizations like GiveWell and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab that recommend giving to groups that have been well researched. And Mr. Kristof has recommended such charities as Against Malaria Foundation, the Deworm the World Initiative, the Nurse-Family Partnership, and Trickle Up, whose programs have been rigorously tested.

Dean Karlan, a Yale economist and the founder of ImpactMatters, a start-up that independently evaluates nonprofits, says: "The types of charities that he has publicized have been, for the most part, thoughtful and, where possible, evidence-based."

A Few Missteps

But Mr. Kristof has made a few bad calls. He lavished praise on Greg Mortenson (for example, in the *Times* articles "Dr. Greg in Afghanistan" and "1 Soldier or 20 Schools?"), a mountain climber who started a charity to build schools in Central Asia and wrote the bestseller *Three Cups of Tea* about his exploits. In 2008, Mr. Kristof wrote of Mr. Mortenson: "A lone Montanan staying at the cheapest guest houses has done more to advance U.S. interests in the region [Afghanistan and Pakistan] than the entire military and foreign policy apparatus of the Bush administration."

The two men became friends, and Mr. Mortenson wrote a blurb for one of Mr. Kristof's books. In 2011, *60 Minutes* and writer Jon Krakauer exposed fabrications in Mr. Mortenson's memoirs and questioned the management of his organization, the Central Asia Institute.

After an investigation, Mr. Mortenson agreed to pay the charity \$1.2 million in restitution, including \$214,000 he'd charged "for such things as L.L. Bean clothing, iTunes, luggage, luxurious accommodations, and even vacations," according to a report by the attorney general of Montana, where the institute is based.

Mr. Kristof now says he was "led astray" by Mr. Mortenson, as he was by Somaly Mam, a Cambodian anti-trafficking activist whose charity he had recommended in his columns and books. "I now wish I had never written about her," he wrote on his blog after it was revealed that her story about having been trafficked into a brothel may have been false. Mr. Kristof wasn't alone, of course. Numerous media outlets feted Mr. Mortenson and Ms. Mam.

Mr. Kristof's shortcomings as a philanthropic adviser arise, in part, from the demands placed on him as a columnist. He seeks out vivid characters — sometimes local victims, sometimes what he calls "westerners on white horses" — to draw readers into his writing about grim subjects such as genocide, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, disease, and poverty.

On his blog, he once mused: "If we do want to get people to pay attention to these issues, if we want to preach beyond the choir, it's a challenge — and it hugely helps to have appealing and charismatic characters who readers can immediately identify with." Mr. Kristof says he has been influenced by social scientists like Paul Slovic, a psychologist who has found that people are motivated to care not by data but by "individual stories and the chance to make a positive difference. I try more and more to put a specific human face on broader problems."

But charismatic heroes do not necessarily possess the management skills needed to build effective organizations. Paul Niehaus, an economics professor and the co-founder of GiveDirectly, which makes cash transfers to poor people in East Africa and uses randomized, controlled trials to shape its work, says: "Stories are powerful and important, and they help us understand the world. But stories don't scale. Organizations scale."

ROOM TO READ, WHICH HAS OPENED 12,000 LIBRARIES WORLDWIDE

"I came here to Vietnam to see John Wood hand out his 10 millionth book at a library that his team founded in this village in the Mekong Delta -- as hundreds of local children cheered and embraced the books he brought as if they were the rarest of treasures."

Featured on November 5, 2011

Result: an estimated \$650,000 in new funding

Overwhelmed by Donations

Even if Dr. Catena's heroism in South Sudan is above reproach, it's hard to know whether he can build and organize a well-functioning hospital. The outpouring of support from Mr. Kristof's column overwhelmed his fiscal sponsor, a religious order called the Comboni Missionaries, leading another nonprofit, the African Mission Healthcare Foundation, to step in and manage the funds.

Less than \$100,000 of the \$850,000 has been spent so far, most of it to buy equipment, pay nurses, and train staff, according to Jon Fielder, executive director of the New York-based foundation. The rest has been earmarked for training and education, equipment, and ongoing operations.

Asked if the money could be better spent elsewhere, Mr. Kristof says: "It sure feels to me that money is saving lives very inexpensively."

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