



from *Where
There Is No
Doctor*, p. 114

WHY THIS BOOK IS SO POLITICAL

When, 17 years ago, I (David Werner) first began working for improvements in health with villagers in western Mexico, I did not look far beyond the immediate causes of ill health. As I saw it, worms and diarrhea were caused by poor hygiene and contaminated water. Malnutrition was mainly caused by scarcity of food in a remote, mountainous area where drought, floods, and violent winds made farming difficult and harvests uncertain. The high death rate in children (34%) resulted from the combination of infection, poor nutrition, and the long distance to the closest health centers.

In short, I saw people's needs in physical terms, as determined by their physical surroundings. This short-sightedness on my part was understandable, for my training had been in life sciences. I had little social or political awareness.

I might have remained that way, as do many health workers, except that I came so close to the mountain people. I knew from the first that they had strengths, skills, and endurance that I lacked. And so I was able to let them teach me about the human—and inhuman—side of their needs and their lives. They did not sit down and spell things out for me; rather they shared with me their homes, their hardships, and their dreams. Many times I have struggled with a family, against odds, to prevent the loss of a child, a cornfield, or hope. Sometimes we won; sometimes we lost.

Little by little, I became aware that many of their losses—of children, of land, or of hope—not only have immediate physical causes, but also underlying social causes. That is to say, they result from the way some people treat or affect the lives of others. Time and again, I have experienced occasions where death and suffering of children and other persons I have to come to love have been the direct or indirect result of human greed.

On page 114 of *Where There Is No Doctor* there is a photograph of a very thin little boy in the arms of his malnourished mother. The boy eventually died—of hunger. The family was—and still is—very poor. Each year the father had to borrow maize from one of the big landholders in the area. For every liter of maize borrowed at planting time, he had to pay back 3 liters at harvest time. With these high interest rates, the family went further and further into debt. No matter how hard the father worked, each year more of his harvest went to pay what he owed to the landholder. Each year he had to borrow more, and pay back 3 times as much. Eventually, the family had to sell their few chickens and pigs, and finally even the beans they had grown on the steep mountain slopes, to buy enough corn to survive.

With no eggs or beans to eat, the mother became increasingly malnourished. Her breasts failed to produce milk for her baby. So she fed him the only food they had—cornmeal and water. In time the child died.

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Part of the problem may also have been that the father occasionally drinks with the other men. When he gets drunk, he loses his judgement and sometimes, to buy rounds of drinks, sells a part of the family's precious supply of corn.

This is sad. But look at the father's life. The hard work he does only to go deeper into debt. The death of a child he loved and whom he feels he failed. The apparent hopelessness of his situation. And frequently his own hunger—not only for food, but for a fair chance to benefit from his own hard work. We cannot blame him if he occasionally drinks too much!

Perhaps no one is really to blame. Or perhaps we all are—all of us, at least, who live with more than we need while others hunger. In any case, it is not right, it is not kind, it is not human, to remain silent in a world that permits some persons to grow fat from the hard work of others who go hungry.

The child in the photograph who died is not alone. In the mountain villages I know, there are hundreds of similar children—some dead and some waiting. In the world there are millions. One fourth of the world's children are undernourished, most for reasons similar to those I have just described. Their problems will not be solved by medicines or latrines or nutrition centers or birth control (although all of these, if approached decently, may help). What their families need is a fair chance to live from their own labor, a fair share of what the earth provides.

Do I make myself clear? Let me tell you about Chelo and his family, whom I have become close to over the years. Chelo has advanced tuberculosis. Before the villager-run health center was started in his village, he received no treatment. He knew he had tuberculosis. He wanted treatment. But he could not afford the medicines. (Basic tuberculosis medicines are not expensive to produce. But in Mexican pharmacies, they are sold at up to ten times their generic price in the United States and other developed countries.) Although the government's tuberculosis control program does give free medication, it requires that patients go often to one of its city health centers for tests and medication. For Chelo, this would have meant 250 kilometers of travel every two weeks. He simply could not afford it.

For years, Chelo had worked for the richest landholder in the village. The landholder is an unhappy, overweight man who, apart from his enormous landholdings, owns thousands of cattle. When Chelo began to grow weak from his illness and could not work as hard as before, the landholder fired him, and told him to move out of the house he had been lending him.

Chelo, his wife, Soledad, and his stepson, Raul,* built a mud-brick hut and moved into it. By that time Chelo was coughing blood.

Around the same time, the community-based health program was getting started in the area, but as yet no health worker had been trained in Chelo's village. So a visiting health worker taught Chelo's 11-year-old stepson, Raul, to inject him with streptomycin. Raul also learned to keep records to be sure Chelo took his other medicines correctly. The boy did a good job, and soon was injecting and doing follow-up on several persons with tuberculosis in the village. By age 13, Raul had become one of the central team of health workers in the area. At the same time, he was still attending school.

*These are real persons, but I have changed their names.

Meanwhile, Chelo's family had cleaned up a small weed patch and garbage area at the lower edge of town. With much hard work they had constructed a simple irrigation system using ditches and grooved logs. At last they had a successful vegetable plot, which brought in a small income. Chelo's health had improved, but he would never be strong. Treatment had begun too late.

Economically, Chelo had one setback after another. Just when he was beginning to get out of debt to the storekeepers and landholders, he fell ill with appendicitis. He needed hospital surgery, so health workers and neighbors carried him 23 kilometers on a stretcher to the road, and from there took him to the city by truck. The surgery (in spite of the fact that the doctor lowered his fee) cost as much as the average farmworker earns in a year. The family was reduced to begging.

The only valuable possession the family had was a donkey. When Chelo returned from the hospital, his donkey had disappeared. Two months later, a neighbor spotted it in the grazing area of one of the wealthier families. A new brand—still fresh—had been put right on top of Chelo's old one.

Chelo went to the village authorities, who investigated. They decided in favor of the wealthy thief, and fined Chelo. To me, the most disturbing thing about this is that when he told me about it, Chelo did not even seem angry—just sad. He laughed weakly and shrugged, as if to say, "That's life. Nothing can be done."

His stepson, Raul, however, took all these abuses very hard. He had been a gentle and caring child, but stubborn, with an enormous need for love. As he got older, he seemed to grow angrier. His anger was often not directed at anything in particular.

An incident with the school was the last straw. Raul had worked very hard to complete secondary school in a neighboring town. Shortly before he was to graduate, the headmaster told him in front of the class that he could not be given a certificate since he was an illegitimate child—unless his parents got married. (This happened at a time when the national government had decided to improve its statistics. The president's wife had launched a campaign to have all unwed couples with children get married. The headmaster's refusal to give graduation certificates to children of unwed parents was one of the pressures used.) Chelo and his wife did get married—which cost more money—and Raul did get his certificate. But the damage to his pride remains.

Young Raul began to drink. When he was sober, he could usually control himself. But he had a hard time working with the local health team because he took even the friendliest criticism as a personal attack. When he was drunk, his anger often exploded. He managed to get hold of a high-powered pistol, which he would shoot into the air when he was drinking. One night he got so drunk that he fell down unconscious on the street. Some of the young toughs in town, who also had been drinking, took his pistol and his pants, cut off his hair, and left him naked in the street. Chelo heard about it and carried Raul home.

After this, Raul hid in shame for two weeks. For a while he did not even visit his friends at the health post. He was afraid they would laugh. They did not. But Raul had sworn revenge—he was never quite sure against whom. A few months later, when drunk, he shot and killed a young man who had just arrived from another village. The two had never seen each other before.

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This, to me, is a tragedy because Raul was fighting forces bigger than himself. As a boy of 12, he had taken on the responsibilities of a man. He had shown care and concern for other people. He had always had a quick temper, but he was a good person. And, I happen to know, he still is.

Who, then, is to blame? Again, perhaps no one. Or perhaps all of us. Something needs to be changed.

After the shooting, Raul fled. That night, the State Police came looking for him. They burst into Chelo's home and demanded to know where Raul was. Chelo said Raul had gone. He didn't know where. The police dragged Chelo into a field outside town and beat him with their pistols and rifles. Later, his wife found him still lying on the ground, coughing blood and struggling to breathe.

It was more than a year before Chelo recovered enough to work much in his garden. His tuberculosis had started up again after the beating by the police. Raul was gone and could not help with the work. The family was so poor that, again, they had to go begging. Often they went hungry.

After a few months, Chelo's wife, Soledad, also developed signs of tuberculosis and started treatment at the village health post. The local health workers did not charge for her treatment or Chelo's, even though the health post had economic difficulties of its own. However, Chelo's wife helped out when she could by washing the health post linens at the river. (This work may not have been the best thing for her TB, but it did wonders for her dignity. She felt good about giving something in return.)

About 4 years have passed since these last incidents. Chelo and his wife are now somewhat healthier, but are still so poor that life is a struggle.

Then, about a year ago, a new problem arose. The landholder for whom Chelo had worked before he became ill decided to take away the small plot of land where Chelo grew his vegetables. When the land had been a useless weed patch and garbage dump, Chelo had been granted the rights to it by the village authorities. Now that the parcel had been developed into a fertile and irrigated vegetable plot, the landholder wanted it for himself. He applied to the village authorities, who wrote a document granting the rights to him. Of course, this was unlawful because the rights had already been given to Chelo.

Chelo took the matter over the heads of the village authorities to the Municipal Presidency, located in a neighboring town. He did not manage to see the President, but the President's spokesman told Chelo, in no uncertain terms, that he should stop trying to cause trouble. Chelo returned to his village in despair.

Chelo would have lost his land, which was his one means of survival, if the village health team had not then taken action. The health workers had struggled too many times—often at the cost of their own earnings—to pull Chelo through and keep him alive. They knew what the loss of his land would mean to him.

At an all-village meeting, the health workers explained to the people about the threat to Chelo's land, and what losing it would mean to his health. They produced proof that the town authorities had given the land rights to Chelo first, and they asked for justice. Although the poor farm people usually remain silent in village meetings, and never vote against the wishes of the village authorities, this time they spoke up and decided in Chelo's favor.

The village authorities were furious, and so was the landholder.

The health team had taken what could be called political action. But the health workers did not think of themselves as 'political'. Nor did they consider themselves capitalists, communists, or even socialists. (Such terms have little meaning for them.) They simply thought of themselves as village health workers—but in the larger sense. They saw the health, and indeed the life, of a helpless person threatened by the unfairness of those in positions of power. And they had the courage to speak out, to take action in his defense.

Through this and many similar experiences, the village health team has come to realize that the health of the poor often depends on questions of social justice. They have found that the changes that are most needed are not likely to come from those who hold more than their share of land, wealth, or authority. Instead, they will come through cooperative effort by those who earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. From themselves!

More and more, the village team in Ajoya has looked for ways to get their fellow villagers thinking and talking about their situation, and taking group action to deal with some of the underlying causes of poor health.

Some of the methods they have developed and community actions they have led are described in several parts of this book. For example, three of the village theater skits described in Chapter 27 show ways in which the health team has helped the poor look at their needs and organize to meet them.

These 3 skits are:

SMALL FARMERS JOIN TOGETHER TO OVERCOME EXPLOITATION
(page 27-27),

USELESS MEDICINES THAT SOMETIMES KILL (page 27-14), and

THE WOMEN JOIN TOGETHER TO OVERCOME DRUNKENNESS (page 27-19).

These popular theater skits had, and are still having, a marked social influence. Villagers participate with new pride in the cooperative maize bank set up to overcome high interest on loans. Women have organized to prevent the opening of a public bar. And storekeepers no longer carry some of the expensive and dangerous medicines that they sold before. In general, people seem more alert about things they had simply accepted.

On the other hand, new difficulties have arisen. Some of the health workers have been thrown out of their rented homes. Others have been arrested on false charges. Threats have been made to close down the villager-run program.

But in spite of the obstacles, the health team and the people have stood their ground. The village team knows the road ahead will not be easy. They also know that they must be careful and alert. Yet they have chosen to stand by their people, by the poor and the powerless.

They have had the courage to look the whole problem in the eye—and to look for a whole answer.

The story of Chelo and his family is true, though I have not told the half of it. It is typical, in some ways, of most poor families. Persons in several parts of the world who are poor or know the poor, on reading Chelo's story have commented, "It could have been written here!"

I have told you Chelo's story so that you might understand the events that have moved us to include in this book ideas and methods that might be called 'political'.

What I have tried to say here has been said even better by a group of peasant school boys from Barbiana, Italy. These boys were flunked out of public school and were helped, by a remarkable priest, to learn how to teach each other.*

The Italian peasant boys write:

Whoever is fond of the comfortable and the fortunate stays out of politics. He does not want anything to change.

But these school boys also realize that:

To get to know the children of the poor and to love politics are one and the same thing. You cannot love human beings who were marked by unjust laws and not work for other laws.



**Letter to a Teacher*, by the school boys of Barbiana. For more ideas of these school boys, see p. 16-16.