



## Q&A: Renee C. Byer

June 9, 2014

This year's [annual letter](#) by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation aims to dismantle three common myths around the world about development and poverty. "The belief that the world can't solve extreme poverty and disease isn't just mistaken. It is harmful," stated the opening of the letter. The letter points to a couple of astonishing development facts: more than a billion people have risen out of extreme poverty; foreign aid has and does save and improve lives around the world; child mortality and birth rates are falling and so on.

But there is still much further the world needs to go to eradicate poverty – a completely possible and achievable task. According to the [Forgotten International Foundation](#), as of 2007, there were still 850 million people going hungry everyday, close to 30 thousand children dying everyday from preventable diseases and there were still just over a billion people living on a dollar a day. While so many of the world's poor have been propped up on their own feet, the wave of development has yet to touch so many more.

*Living on a Dollar a Day*, published by the Forgotten International, tries to highlight these points through a compilation of poignant and personal photographs of those living in dire conditions, taken by Pulitzer prize-winning photographer, **Renée C. Byer**.



Credit: Renee C Byer

It is in the face of Subadra Devi, 40, that we can see some of the signs of a hard life. She works construction in Dharamsala, India to provide for her two children. Her husband also works construction. "We have many dreams about the future but what can we do? This is our reality," said Devi.

**Most people are desensitized to images of poverty. How do you manage to capture that in a way that is still engaging and touching for a viewer?**

I strive to make an emotional connection through my photographs. All the people I photographed invited me into their lives and I spent a considerable amount of time with them. That allowed their stories to unfold naturally and enabled me to capture a range of emotion that people can relate to. These are not nameless faces and I feel that adds validity to the

images beyond just a photograph. Time, access and an emotional connection are the essence of compelling photojournalism.

My subject's dignity is foremost in my mind every time I make an image. I'm very sensitive to their human condition and I spend a lot of time understanding their plight and gaining their trust. Most are living in these conditions by no fault of their own and are very hard working. My pictures portray the unvarnished realities of life in an effort to elevate the public's understanding and compassion. I work with a team of interpreters, social workers and local non-profits to identify and translate my objective before I make any images. I am always humbled by the grace, generosity, fortitude, and bravery of the hardworking men, women and children that allowed me into their lives to tell their stories. Through them my life is enriched.

### **What are the major roadblocks that come in the way of alleviating poverty?**

There are not enough resources allocated to help the poor. The myth is that the poor are lazy but the reality is they work very hard just to survive and the cycle is impossible to break without help. Many point to overpopulation as a problem not understanding that many women have been exploited, raped, abused and have no control over the children they bare. Women are the most vulnerable and if one helps a woman, in most cases they are helping a child.

It's very complex but there are examples in this book that portray extraordinary examples of what one person can do. We all need to start by having a shared humanity. The 14th Dalai Lama who wrote the forward to the book has a meaningful quote on the cover, "Unfairness in the human condition can only be remedied when people everywhere care."

It's a hard reality to face, never mind try and fix. But if we cannot connect, cannot imagine, cannot see, we can never hope to change. That's why we have to continue to bring this issue to light. The numbers are improving but not fast enough. The United Nations millennium development goals are up for review in 2015 and the time has come to end extreme poverty.



Credit: Renee C Byer

Alvaro Kalancha Quispe, 9, opens the gate to the stone pen that holds the family's alpacas and llamas each morning so they can graze throughout the hillsides during the day. He then heads off to school, but must round them up again in the evening in the Akamani mountain range of Bolivia in an area called Caluyo, about an hour from the city of Qutapampa. In this part of the world, the

highlands of Bolivia, approximately 13,000 feet above sea level, residents live in homes with no insulation, no electricity, and no beds. Their water comes from streams that run off the snow-covered mountains. Their livelihood lies with their animals, for each animal produces about three pounds of fur each year, and each pound of fur is sold for 18 bolivianos, which amounts to about \$2.50 U.S. All in all, this family may earn about \$200 of income each year from the herd they watch over.

## **Did you come across the effects of global warming? Where did you see the impact of global warming the worst?**

I photographed and interviewed Jacaba Coaquisa Illari, 80, in Bolivia that works her own little farm. She grows wheat and beans. And she frankly didn't like us—largely because we were from the US. Over the past 20 years, she says, her wheat no longer grows, there's not enough rain, there's too much heat, and her beans are almost worthless. She says the biggest reason for this is countries like the United States putting so much carbon in the air. Her climate has changed and made it hard for her to survive. She lives on a mountainside where there used to be quite a bit of rain, snow, and fresh water. Subsistence farming is the number one livelihood of the rural poor so its impact is severe. Climate change is affecting an awful lot of the poorest of the poor, so they are the first to feel the effects when there's not enough rain or there's more drought or flooding.



Credit: Renee C Byer

Four-year-old Ana-Maria Tudor, above, stands in the light of her doorway in Bucharest, Romania, hoping for a miracle as her family faces eviction from the only home they have ever had. Her father recently had a gall bladder surgery that resulted in an infection and left him unable to work. The one room they live in has no bathroom or running water.

## **What are the stories that really touched you during the making of this project?**

In India, I photographed a 22-year-old mother who was starving her child so she could use her to beg on the streets to earn money to feed her other children. The child was two years old and weighed nine pounds. Sacrificing one child to feed your others is almost unimaginable. This photograph is so searing that I fear you will dismiss it as something alien, something so outside your experience that it doesn't feel real. I'm asking you not to turn the page so quickly. Look, really look, at these faces. Imagine yourself behind these eyes.

I learned the human spirit transcends even the worst deprivation. *Living on a Dollar a Day*, shares the personal stories of some of the poorest of the poor, honoring their lives, their struggles, and encouraging action in those who can help. The resulting photographs and stories offer a heartrending glimpse into the everyday realities of individuals and families facing extreme poverty. Personal profiles give a voice to their experience, and research about the root causes of global poverty is shared along with information on how those in more fortunate circumstances can get involved. *Living on a Dollar a Day* gives the largely invisible poor a face and voice. In a world that grows more and more connected and interdependent, the issues that affect one person eventually affect us all.

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