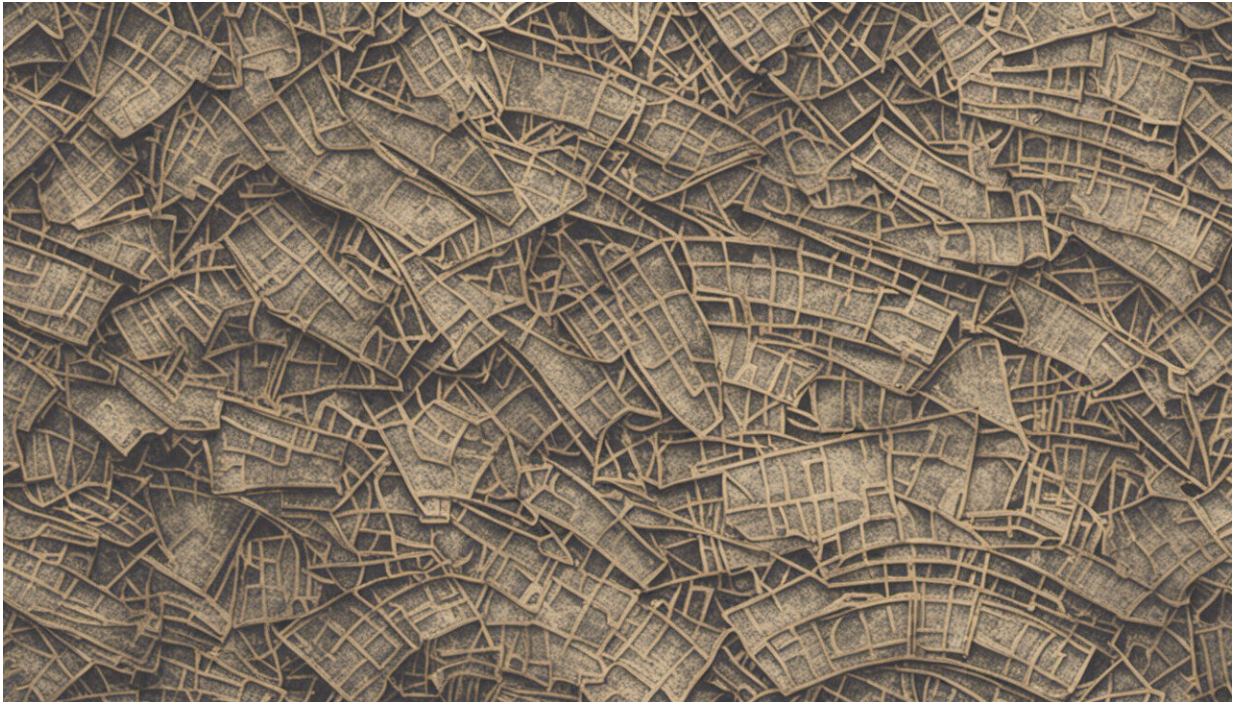


The secret to making it out of poverty

March 27 2018, by Heather Ashbach And Aaron Orlowski



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Poverty is an incredibly complex issue. Just ask Martín Burt, former mayor of Asuncion, Paraguay, where one-third of the people live below the poverty line.

"When people think of poverty, a lot of times they immediately think income is the solution," he says. "But poverty is multidimensional and much more complicated than a dollar figure."

As the director of Fundacion Paraguaya, a nongovernmental organization that advances microfinance and entrepreneurship in the South American country, Burt has devoted his life's work to eliminating poverty around the world—most notably through creation of an interactive, ground-level [family](#) assessment and analysis tool called Poverty Stoplight. And as a new UC Irvine visiting distinguished scholar, he's spending the next five years sharing his knowledge and applied approaches with UC Irvine students, faculty and communities.

"I think of myself more as a social entrepreneur in residence—more of a practitioner," he says. "I love showing students the real challenges and opportunities of improving people's lives."

The academic appointment at UC Irvine is with both the School of Social Ecology and the School of Social Sciences. Burt will help expose students to international issues and the possibilities in social innovation, while strengthening UC Irvine's presence in the world and increasing opportunities for Anteaters overseas.

"Social entrepreneurship allows you to see social and environmental problems as opportunities for ingenuity and for combining existing resources to create value," he says.

Seizing opportunities

Burt's optimistic framework was inspired by the example set by both his grandmother and father.

"They showed me how even in poor countries there are many opportunities. Those who have an education, those who were born in the right zip code—they have a responsibility to help others," he says. "They taught me the very profound sense that everybody has dignity."

In 1976, Burt came to California to pursue his undergraduate degree in public administration and inter-American studies at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. During that time, he also met his wife, Dorothy Burt, a Central Valley farmer's daughter. They married in 1982 and moved back to Burt's hometown in Paraguay. Together, they founded Paraguay's first sustainable development NGO, Fundacion Paraguaya.

Through the foundation, they launched the country's first microfinance program, as well as the first youth entrepreneurship program. The work carried out by the foundation linked Burt closely with government programs aimed at alleviating poverty, largely via emphasis on increasing family income. But Burt started to notice a gap.

"We were focusing on ways to build the family up financially, but what the families really lacked was financial literacy," he says.

One thing in common

As the foundation expanded its poverty-fighting efforts, Burt's realization of the complexity of the challenge grew, as did his fascination with solving it.

"We were seeing these families—successful families that had overcome poverty—all had something in common, and it wasn't income. They had this intangible attitude of willing to learn new things. They had a personal motivation and an entrepreneurial spirit," he says. "We started to see that what we needed to do wasn't to provide them resources, but instead unleash the resources they intrinsically had and those at their immediate disposal, and empower them with knowledge to change."

From there, everything took off. Burt returned to the U.S. for a doctorate in international development at Tulane University in New

Orleans, where he honed his statistical analysis skills for real-world application. Those skills would prove key in developing the Poverty Stoplight.

Composed of a battery of 50 indicators on six different dimensions, the app-driven tool helps poor families diagnose the way poverty affects different aspects of their lives using red, yellow or green indicators. Burt and his team consulted with families to find out what the threshold was for families to overcome poverty in different aspects of their lives: employment, health, income, housing, education and others.

The app uses pictures to help families see what each level looks like. After completing the survey, families get a visual printout of their "dashboard"—green areas in which they are doing well, such as having running water, and red areas in which they aren't—for example, not having clean clothes. Their personal antipoverty plan is then set up, using five priorities with goals and dates for follow ups and check ins. Families are provided direct local access to resources for improving areas from red to green.

"The more you allow families to separate different aspects of poverty into something tangible—like fixing a bathroom or developing a budget—you can work on other areas so that income can follow," he says.

People's dignity is universal

The tool has been deployed in six different languages through partnerships with social entrepreneurs, private sector businesses, governments and high schools across 25 countries including the U.S., the United Kingdom, China and India. More than 100 companies in Paraguay are using it as a social responsibility tool for a combined 16,000 employees with the goal of enhancing worker productivity and

prosperity.

The model is ripe for replication, Burt says.

"Every country is different, and different cultures value different things. For some, family is more important, while in others unemployment is more acceptable," Burt says. "But people's dignity and, especially, their desire to improve their family's lot is universal."

Burt's public service career—which includes posts as vice minister of commerce and chief of staff to the President of Paraguay—has helped spread that message further. He's also held multiple academic appointments throughout the U.S., Paraguay and Africa.

While at UC Irvine, he's planning to partner with local organizations to deploy the stoplight tool right here in Orange County. He's also collaborating on an online [poverty](#) course with the Blum Center for Poverty Alleviation, and he's helping set up a UC Irvine center in Paraguay, where students in the Global Service Scholars program can do service learning work during the summer with his foundation, which has turned to teaching youth the business skills they need to start rural businesses, get better jobs or continue their education.

"It's amazing what you can accomplish when you stop focusing on income and start to empower people to create change," he says.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

Citation: The secret to making it out of poverty (2018, March 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-secret-poverty.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.