



Title >> Balancing Word and Deed - Challenges of Forging a Common Development Thinking in Faith-based Organisations: A study of Norwegian Lutheran Mission

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Biographical Details

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Abstract

This paper is drawn from a thesis submitted to the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Development Studies. The paper reflects on the characteristics of faith-based organisations – with a particular focus on evangelical faith-based organisations – and the roles of these characteristics in shaping views and practices of development, particularly among field workers.

What people believe in affects what they do and how they do it. Faith therefore, expectedly, affects development practice. But a shared faith on its own does not necessarily guarantee a coherent approach to development among staff, as this case study of Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) illustrates. Despite the common denominational and cultural background, there were in this particular organisational environment still signs of unclear or dual purposes, and somewhat fragmented approaches to development thinking in the field. Defining the role of faith in forging development views very much seemed to be up to the individual field worker.

Faith-based organisations may at first glance seem to have an advantage compared to mainstream NGOs, in terms of being made up of a relatively ideologically homogenous staff body. However, a faith-based organisation (FBO) that wants to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to development thinking cannot assume this will happen naturally. It has to work hard if it wishes to forge a common understanding of purpose and practice.

Within this particular organisational environment – the evangelical mission organisation – the hybridity of being ‘both’ a development agency and an evangelising organisation seems to be particularly at the core of understanding how views and practices are shaped. In this paper, the challenges presented by this hybridity are addressed and it is hoped that these considerations will be of relevance for all faith based organisations.

Abbreviations

FBO	Faith-based organisation
FH	Food for the Hungry
MA	Master of Arts
MO	Mission Organisation
NGDO	Non Governmental Development Organisation
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NLM	Norwegian Lutheran Mission
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation



1. Introduction

This paper partially draws on my experience of working with Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) in a leadership capacity in Indonesia. This first-hand experience was complemented by research involving twelve semi-structured interviews with local and expatriate NLM field workers in Mongolia, Indonesia and Norway between June and September 2009. Workshops were also conducted with groups of field staff, as well as document and literature reviews.

The sample assessed in this piece of research is too small to reflect all attributes of this type of organisation, or of organisations in general. It does, however, still represent a reasonable number of respondents from one particular environment, which enables us to identify potentially relevant patterns of organisational behaviour, particularly for FBOs.

1.1 The Mission Organisation

Clarke (2006 p.840) describes faith-based organisations as a complex set of actors, as they come in “a variety of organisational guises, each of which warrants attention in development discourse and policy”. The “extraordinarily heterogenous” ways FBOs allow faith identity to impact upon actual work is also emphasised by James (2009 p.4). Thus, oversimplification is always a danger when dealing with FBOs.

NLM defines itself as a ‘mission organisation’ and it conducts its ministry through a combined – or should we say ‘hybrid’ - approach of ‘word and deed’, that is, through a combination of evangelism and development/charitable work. On this point, NLM and certain other evangelical FBOs are likely to differ from most other ‘classic’ development NGOs – and even FBOs – that have an explicitly more singular approach and understanding of core purpose.

1.2 The Key Role of the Field Worker

The analysis in this paper is to some extent based on the notion that the people in the field – and their attitudes and behaviour - are also the ‘true face’ of an organisation (Myers 1999). The role of the autonomous individual in organisational cultural and ideological shaping is highlighted by, among others, Pialek (2008). In a strongly value-driven environment, like the non-governmental development organisation (NGDO) or faith-based organisation, individual perceptions may be a particularly strong force in shaping actual organisational convictions and practices (Edwards 2002). People who join an organisation will inevitably bring along with them already learned patterns of world-views, thinking and emotions (Hofstede 1997) that we can never be completely free from (Jarvis 2005). In other words, where organisational staff come from, does matter. As a general statement, Edwards (2002) describes the NGDO as a highly diverse system of individual values and beliefs, where confrontations between practice and convictions are frequent. Such confrontations may, in turn, affect both organisational performance and practices negatively.

Is the notion of high diversity in views and practices also true for the evangelical mission organisation? Or can we expect to find that a relative homogeneity in staff background and values which skews the FBO towards a higher degree of consensus and unity in development views?



2. Homogeneity or Diversity?

At first glance you might expect a faith-based organisation to take a consistent approach to development thinking. In NLMs case, most staff share a very similar fundamental value basis and world view – in this case evangelical Christian Lutheran faith. A considerable number of field workers are Norwegian or Scandinavian, and they are often recruited from within the NLM ‘organisational environment’ in Norway. Overarching development strategies of NLM are to a certain extent centrally defined, and to a degree shaped by donor (Norad) requirements. It would be easy to assume, therefore, that the staff have a fairly common understanding of, and approach to, principles and purposes of development.

However, my own experience of NLM, reinforced by the research undertaken, reveals that in this particular case, a shared faith and value basis did not necessarily lead to a coherent approach to development work.

Operationalising faith in development is not an automatic process. The core issue seems to be how people interpret the relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of development – the theory and theology of development. For a coherent approach there needs to be consensus within the organisation on the meaning of development. This is more elusive than appears at first sight, due to theological, cultural and contextual differences.

Even within denominations, there are significant differences. For example amongst evangelicals there are different views about the relationship between evangelism and social action (development). Some emphasise the importance of one over the other. Others argue in favour of strict separation. Others argue that they should be indivisibly integrated (Chester 1993, Myers 1999 and Hovland 2007). Stott (1975 p.26) outlines three dominant views on the relationship between evangelism and social action:

1. Social action as a means to evangelism.
2. Social action as a manifestation of evangelism. Social action is a natural part of Christian life, but also a ‘visualisation’ of the gospel.
3. Social action as a partner of evangelism - the two belong to each other yet are independent of the other as each is an end in itself. Neither is a means to the other.

There may even be a fourth approach - outright ‘suspicion’ of social action – particularly when evangelicals adhere to conservative theological views, possibly because social action in Protestant traditions, to some extent, has been the domain of the more liberal wings of the church.

As well as theology, there may also be important cultural differences. Many international staff of Northern FBOs have been brought up in predominantly secular contexts which emphasise a clear division



between the physical and spiritual realms, and thus between the 'real world' and religion. Dualistic thinking separates the spiritual and the physical realms. Mainstream development thinking, born in this environment, is thus often seen as ideally being a rational and secular enterprise (Myers 1999). Sine (1981) suggests that Western development thinking and discourse is a secular ideology influenced by Enlightenment thinking, and that the encounter between this secular world view and alternative, faith-based ideologies inevitably will cause some level of conflict. Western evangelical development workers are thus likely to place less emphasis on the spiritual interaction with the physical world than their non-Western evangelical counterparts.

Another aspect is that the Northern European Christian tradition is influenced largely by classical Lutheran theology, suggesting a 'labour division' between two institutions (or in Luther's more abstract term 'regiments'): The Church and The State. While both are regarded in this tradition as belonging to God, the Church should deal with the eternal things and the next life, while the State should assure peace and well-being in this world (NKRS 2009). Lutheranism may to some extent represent a theologically based dualism, more so than the Reformed traditions, which to a lesser extent differentiate between these two regiments (Haanes et al 2004).

There are also potential tensions which arise from the requirements from external secular donors. In this Norwegian case, Norad, operating in a Scandinavian liberal tradition, requires a division between secular development activities and religious activities (Hovland 2007). In some cases these requirements may contradict the FBO's own 'holistic' ideologies, and even the very world-view of many of Norad's so-called 'beneficiaries' in the global South (Aano 2004).

2.1 Unresolved Dual Purpose

In the case of NLM, research conducted suggested that staff in the field did, to a limited extent, have a shared understanding of development, and therefore of one of the core purposes of NLM's field operations. That is not to say that the individual level of reflection was not high – quite the contrary. Some staff members emphasised spiritual aspects, and others material ones. While there certainly were similarities in views, it seemed to be very much up to the field workers themselves to define the relevance of faith in understanding the organisational purposes and principles of development work. It was hard to find one, defined organisational ideology of development, particularly if the notion of the field representing the 'true face' of the organisation is accepted (Myers 1999).

What repeatedly came up as an issue, in research conducted, was the extent to which development work is the 'real' or 'prioritised' purpose of the organisation. It appeared that NLM, in general, seems to house two overlapping purposes and identities: evangelism and development work. The tension between these was echoed in an evaluation of NLM Mongolia, done by Byrknes et al (2005) four years before my own research. This evaluation highlighted tensions between different in-field perceptions of the core purpose of NLM.



Similarly, some respondents told me that they wondered whether development work was still a 'proper approach' for NLM as, politically, Mongolia is becoming more open to theological staff. Some staff experienced 'conflicting commissions' in the field, between evangelisation and development work. In situations where one seemingly had to make a choice between the two, some tended to choose 'evangelisation' over 'development work'. Others told about missionaries feeling they needed to 'defend' why they were involved primarily in development projects, as opposed to explicitly evangelising activities.

An internal 'dualism' seems to lead to two defined organisational purposes, competing rather than collaborating. This hybridity in understanding of purpose is likely to be one of the most distinct characteristics of the evangelical mission organisation, compared to more singular-purpose NGOs and 'non-evangelical' FBOs. In the latter, the position and value of development work rarely has to be defended. In the missionary organisation, development work, to variable extents, does seem to be skewed towards a secondary position.

2.2 Causes of Unresolved Dual Purposes

But what are the causes of this unresolved dual purpose?

2.2.1 Donor Influence

FBOs commonly complain that their secular funders have caused them to separate the spiritual from the material in their development projects, leading to 'quasi-secularism' (Clarke et al 2008). In the case of NLM, according to my research, the external donor requirements of Norad do not seem to be a major direct influential factor in the shaping of views. There were few obvious confrontations between staff values and Norad requirements and the secular-spiritual 'schizophrenia' suggested by Hovland (2007) was not obvious.

Perhaps NLM's relatively painless relation to secular donors is due partly to the lack of an explicit faith-based ideology of development or 'theology of development'. Thus, there may be few reasons for tensions to arise between NLM and Norad ideologies.

2.2.2 Organisational Influence?

As an organisation, NLM seems to lack a shared theology or ideology of development to bring a clear definition of core purpose. Its general statement of faith does not seem to translate into a common understanding of development. Rather than reinforcing homogeneity in views, from my research, the faith aspect in NLM's case appeared to add to more diversity and fragmentation, due to individual interpretations of how faith may be operationalised. If left vague and undefined by the FBO, this operationalisation of theology is left to individual staff members, with a possible risk of fragmentation in views.



Although NLM also has some official policies on development, these were rarely referred to in the field as a source of inspiration or direction. Having not been involved in the creation of these policies, field staff did not appear to own them, nor to put them into practice. In NLM's case, it was not a matter of active resistance, more that they were just not seen as very relevant. Not surprisingly within an NGO environment, according to research conducted, in NLM there was a limited degree of common organisational development discourse. In this aspect, this particular missionary organisation environment does not seem to differ much from any other mainstream development NGO.

According to missionaries interviewed, NLM did not inculcate a coherent understanding of development in its orientation training and pre-field preparations. Most missionaries felt they had been provided with inadequate training in development thinking. Development realities were not thought through until they reached the field. The mission college used for orientation (ranging from some months to up to several years) was seen as out of touch with field realities in development, concentrating instead on a traditional view of mission practices. They primarily focused on preparing people for evangelising and theological positions in Norway and abroad.

2.2.3 Individual Influence and the 'Mission People'

The lack of an overarching NLM development theology meant that individual opinion was the most important influence on the implementation of development work. Field practitioners' views and behaviour were influenced by "patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime" (Hofstede 1997 p.4) and by perceived and sometimes conflicting commissions (Salamon et al 1991). Myers (1999) claims that, ultimately, the importance of formal policies, strategies, structures and methods are subordinate to the importance of the field practitioners and their behaviour and attitudes. What goes on in the field is the 'true' face of the NGDO.

Roughly two categories of 'culturally-forged' missionaries seem to enter NLM – those insiders close to the core NLM mission culture in Norway – the 'mission people', and those from outside this environment. The 'outside' category seems to be a more dominant group among development workers, as they often are recruited on the basis of a combination of Christian convictions and professional background, rather than organisational belonging or NLM-affiliated theological education. Thus, some do not enter the organisational culture until they reach the field and instantly become key actors in shaping what NLM is and does. The shared ideas and values of the field may thus, over time, begin to differ somewhat from shared ideas and values of the home environment, adding to cultural distance between NLM Norway and the field.

Through interviews, it was possible to see that a certain difference in views was also present between Scandinavian missionaries and Christian national staff. National staff emphasised the relational



and spiritual aspects of development more than did Scandinavian missionaries. Views of missionaries seemed to be more influenced by 'mainstream' modernist thinking, and a number of missionaries outlined a process of having to de-learn and re-learn their own perceptions when entering the field. The secular versus faith-based debate in development was more of a phenomenon among Western than local staff.

The so-called 'mission people' – the core supporters of NLM's mission work - also played a role in defining organisational perceptions of mission and the missionary role. Whilst not necessarily directly affecting concrete and in-field thinking regarding development, the 'mission people' seemed to have a say in defining the relative importance of development work as part of the organisational purpose, compared to the 'other' purpose of evangelism. In terms of 'upward' accountability (Christensen and Ebrahim 2006) it was not primarily external donor requirements that were mentioned, but rather NLM's internal environment, particularly the 'mission people'. Missionaries expressed a need to 'live up to' the expectations of the missionary role. This perceived definition of the missionary role seemed, to a great extent, to be forged by the informal environment of NLM.

Individualism in shaping one's views seems to be a core reason for high diversity in views in the missionary organisation, affirming the view that the field worker is a key agent in shaping an organisation's 'real' policies and practices. Individual initiative is often a positive and dynamic element, but in this particular case, individualism allowed dualistic development thinking and a fragmented approach.



3. Consequences of Hybridity and Unresolved Dual Purposes

The apparent presence of dual purposes, i.e. the hybridity of the mission organisation, requires some investigation. The key question is: Does it matter? The following analysis attempts to highlight some possible impacts of a development agency having an unresolved or unclear understanding of its own purpose:

3.1 Accountability

Balancing accountabilities between ‘upward’ (donor, head office), and ‘downward’ (community) accountability is a challenge to most donor dependent NGOs (Lewis 2001 and Christensen and Ebrahim 2006).

For the NLM, it seemed that at the core of the unresolved dichotomy between its material and spiritual purposes, were differing expectations of what it means to be a ‘missionary’. Expectations of the missionary role and purpose come from a wide range of angles. Not only formal stakeholders have a say in this issue. Some missionaries experience clear expectations from the informal home environment of the organisation, ‘the mission people’. These are not only donors, but they represent the home denominational environment where many missionaries are born, were brought up and where they were recruited (Hovland 2007). When perceived expectations, or commissions (Salamon et al 1991), from this influential group of stakeholders seem inconsistent with realities in the field, missionaries may find themselves skewed towards ‘upward’ accountability (to mission people), rather than ‘downward’ accountability (to the community). To put it more simply, when facing expectations that don’t seem to add up, people begin to rank the relative importance of those expectations. In NLM’s case, there seemed to be a continuous ranking process going on between the perceived missions of doing evangelism and doing development work.

Another aspect of this, is that within a mission organisation evangelisation is perceived as something genuinely good. In other words, in terms of evangelism there is little need for practitioners to consider ‘downward’ accountability. If this attitude is reflected in the ‘second organisational purpose’ - development work - the result may be harmful practices (Lewis 2001). An organisation, whether it is faith-based or secular, that assumes that inevitably it is bringing something ‘genuinely good’ at all times, may easily forget to assure the quality of its work.

In summary, where there is a dichotomy of purpose and when an evangelical organisation sees itself as a ‘well-doer’, it is likely that it will choose ‘upward’ over ‘downward’ accountability and, as a result, risk compromising its performance in the field.



3.1 Tensions Between Field and Home Environment

If there is not a common understanding of purpose between head office and field, this may, unless resolved, over time widen the 'stretch' between field and home cultures (Hovland 2007), which in turn may reinforce already existing tensions in the organisation (Suzuki 1998).

3.2 Tensions Within the Field

As, in this case, staff are recruited from both within or from outside the 'home environment', an unresolved understanding of purpose may cause 'home debates' to be exported to the field, where they may cause internal tensions among staff members.

3.3 International-Local Tensions

The research indicated certain differences of understanding between international missionaries and national field workers. The national staff seemed to be sheltered from a range of debates and tensions prevalent in Norway and among missionaries. On the other hand, there were indications that some national field workers questioned the professional preparedness of newly arrived missionaries.

3.4 The Position of Organisational Learning

Based on the above paragraph, one question arising is: Does an organisation with 'dual' purposes put as much effort into preparing their staff for the perceived 'secondary purpose' – in this case development – as they might, if development is the only organisational purpose? Edwards (2002) suggests that often learning is regarded as a luxury in activist environments, and this is perhaps even more so, if the organisation struggles with the ranking of two separate understandings of purpose.



4. Conclusion

It is not uncommon for FBOs to be hybrids, combining the secular and the spiritual; engaging in both development and evangelising mission activities. However, unless this inherent tension is well-managed, it can result in the FBO pursuing dual purposes and a fragmented approach in its development thinking and practices. This, in turn, may cause risks of compromising performance and impact.

Working out how to put faith into development practice is not as straightforward as it might first appear, even for an agency from one single denomination. How much harder it must be for agencies that bring together a plethora of denominations or those where faith-basis is much less intense and more diverse.

It may be that from a development practice point of view, the shared faith basis of the 'hybrid' FBO can be both its greatest asset, as well as its greatest stumbling block.

Different interpretations of faith particularly with respect to integral mission – working through words and deeds - is a cause of some of the divisions within faith based organisations. For the FBO, a clearer 'theology of development' is likely to be the antidote. Being a theologically based organisation, the differing understandings of mission and development are likely to require a theological solution. Increasing efforts in shaping a common understanding of development within the organisation, based in the already existing, commonly shared faith basis of staff and supporters, is a good starting point for this type of organisation.

From an organisational theory point of view, this type of organisation holds a considerable asset in terms of an already existing common world view and ideology. However, operationalising faith into common views and practices is challenging. Common views should not only be understood and implemented in the field and the head office, but also throughout the broader organisational environment. The organisation needs to be aware of the tension between dual understandings of purpose, and should target this issue particularly in its systems of organisational learning.

Addressing tensions of purpose can lead to internal conflict and a more inward focus. Attempting to resolve the differences in understanding about development work and evangelism, is likely to increase the tension levels in the field, and also between headquarters and field. This more inward focus may detract from the achievement of the mission in the short term. The development-evangelisation tension may also reinforce a perceived cultural distance between field and home environment, which is also somewhat unfavourable.

Taking the path of clarifying an FBO's identity and principles is important in order to be able to properly communicate these to



the wider environment in which the FBO operates. But such a process, in which faith identity possibly becomes more explicit in development activities, may simply replace internal tensions with outer tensions, for example, with donors and supporters. Combining faith and development work is not uncontroversial (James 2009), and confrontations may occur both with outside actors, and within the organisation itself.

FBOs have to work surprisingly hard to create a coherent identity with a single purpose. As evidenced from the research introduced here, it is not as natural as one might think. But if an FBO is able to clearly define its organisational purposes, principles and practices in line with its beliefs, it is likely to have some clear advantages in being able to resolve fragmentation in the field. This will help to improve performance and decrease internal tension levels, leading, it is hoped, to more impact in changing lives.



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