Christian NGOs and Their Role in Holistic Mission

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That part of Christianity that serves the poor with dedication and without distinction has been a feature that has attracted impartial observers over centuries as well as allowing the church to practice its mandate to a transformational holistic mission. This chapter sets out to understand further how that service to the poor has been developed through Christian non-governmental organisations (CNGOs) in recent years, and how these Christian NGOs have and are playing critical roles both in development and providing exemplary models of holistic mission. Having recognised this, we go on to consider the many issues that face Christian NGOs today as they stand at an interface between secular development agendas and Christian mission. Christian mission asks questions of CNGOs as to whether they are simply picking up the secular development agenda with some kind of religious face; secular development asks – at its extreme – if CNGOs are Trojan horses for proselytism, or perhaps neo-colonialism, or if CNGO work is 'all heart and no head'. Finally we look at how Christian NGOs can face the challenges of the future, looking particularly at how they can maintain Christian identities, and continue to build their legitimacy, capacities and accountability.

Holistic mission itself is discussed carefully in other chapters in this book and elsewhere[1] and so we do not further explore this except some specific aspects necessary to the question. The foundation we build on is that Christians are called to express God's love to all his Creation – physically, socially, and spiritually.

The Identity of CNGOs

Some very early roots in the development of CNGOs occur in early Acts, when the seven were chosen to administer and look after the widows. Roman commentator Tertullian noted the openness of Christians to the poor and marginalised of the day; by the third century after Christ and Marcus Aurelius' time (Bremmer 2007), Christian responses were clearly not just to Christians but also serving plague victims without discrimination. Since then the number

[1] According to the 'Integral Mission Declaration' (which can be found in full at http://www.micahnetwork.org/en/integral-mission/micah-declaration).

of CNGOs has mushroomed. Three recent phases could include, first, the development of health and education programmes that preceded or followed global colonisation, second, a wave after the second world and Korean wars (notably the foundation of probably the largest of the CNGOs, World Vision), and third, another in the 1990s, due to the AIDS epidemic; altogether there are several thousand CNGOs today – International Bulletin of Mission Research (2010) reckoned on 28000 Christian 'service agencies' (not including foreign missions). CNGOs have a remarkably distinguished track record as well as a huge reach, as these several thousand agencies have natural partners in the 5 million church congregations spread across the world, as will be explored below.

A CNGO just like any other NGO, or, in fact, any development agency is concerned with social goals external to itself (compared with a business, that has a goal to make profit for itself). Whilst that is essential to the altruistic nature of serving the poor and is one of the key attractions to other agencies of development, it also means that CNGOs have a perpetual problem of legitimacy because they take this trusteeship, a responsibility for fixing other people's problems, without always having been asked to do so. The question is whether they are intent on creating people and communities "who see themselves as stewards of creation and do not live for themselves but for others; persons who are willing to fulfil their God-given vocation in the world and to receive and to give love; persons who 'hunger and thirst for justice' and who are 'peacemakers' (Mt. 5:6, 9)" (Padilla 2005, 16). Foster (2004) makes a distinction between a community-based organisation (CBO) and an NGO; the CBO is a local organisation different from an NGO in that it does not employ staff. An NGO may typically be responsible to a wider group than either a congregation or CBO; both may receive external funding. In practice, CNGOs take on many sizes and forms: some are focused on training and capacity building for local partners, some are catalysed by mission agencies; others are branches of large international NGOs; some are national or local, set up by a pastor or a group from a church. They range from purely volunteer staff and tiny budgets to having thousands of staff with billion dollar budgets. Their challenges are very different in relation to their degrees of legitimacy, accountability, and technical, financial and people capacity.

Woolnough (2008) helpfully suggests four distinctives of CNGOS, including first, an aim that includes spiritual transformation as well as physical, emotional or economic change; second, partnership with local churches and Christians; third, a recognition that 'our battles are spiritual battles'; and fourth, that in serving the poor, 'we will listen to the poor'. The aim to include spiritual transformation is problematic, for reasons outlined below, which means that many CNGOs are unable to have it as a stated aim of their work, and certainly not as project goals. However, recognizing the Christian understanding of people as having a spiritual nature remains. The potential of partnerships with congregations is a point of interest for secular development agencies, craving the reach of those five million congregations. Listening to the poor certainly

should be a feature of Christian NGOs as they responsibly act on their trusteeship of social goals for those poor. This has been increasingly recognized too in the secular agenda, following Robert Chambers and others' work in recent years, with participation – at the least a nominal listening to the poor – firmly integrated into development policies and practices. Woolnough's third goal, recognizing poverty as being part of a spiritual battle, is again not unique to a Christian understanding of poverty, but a Christian framing will provide distinct tools in addressing that. Thus how a CNGO approaches its work will be distinctive, recognizing the spiritual as well as the material both in its practices as well as its goals; it justifies that CNGOs have a valid and necessary role within holistic mission.

Inappropriate proselytism remains, sadly but realistically, a headline issue for CNGOs, with secular and other religious agencies seeing CNGO work as a means of proselytism and related fears of that. Morally, there are three dangers: first, of discrimination in acts of service; second, of making 'rice Christians' and third the potential of spiritual abuse of vulnerable people. Nearly all CNGOs do not discriminate against people of other faiths meaning that any distribution of resources will not be biased towards Christians or against people of other faiths. On the other hand, some secular organizations are convinced that we continue to 'force vulnerable people' e.g. children to believe in an alien religion against their will. Although some organizations do still push their own agenda, it is increasingly understood and even stipulated in policy and procedures of many CNGOs that coerced conversion is not wanted. It is understood that providing things conditionally does not lead to true acceptance of our values. As such a number of organizations working with children have included in their child protection policy a section on 'spiritual abuse' which is put alongside policy on physical, emotional and sexual abuse. It states that children will not be abused spiritually, meaning that they will be given the choice about being involved in Christian meetings in the organization and if they hold to another religious belief will not be discriminated against if they wish to worship in that way.

However, as may be expected by Christian development, conversion certainly does happen. It usually comes about where there is a relationship of trust, where the person is modelling a way of life that is appealing to the person who is receiving it and they are in a position where they can choose to accept or reject it. Whilst explaining this to observers may be difficult, Christians in CNGOs recognise it as a common phenomenon and it fits our understanding of holistic mission. This in no way gives license to those who tragically exploit positions of trust compared with relationships of trust, and points to the need to be utterly careful in relationships characterised by power asymmetries; it also shows how spiritually the local church, representative of the population, may enjoy a legitimacy in more overtly spiritual or prophetic work in the community than external NGOs, although again, the outsider dare not ignore local, deep power asymmetries that contribute to oppression.

Myers explains the question (more broadly) by suggesting that the critical role of acts of service is to provoke questions. If the practise undertaken in achieving the social or developmental goals of holistic mission is good enough, then there is likely to be a natural response of questioning the motive. At this point the church must be able to answer 'because...'. The signs of the kingdom point to the king. Many times poor and vulnerable will seek to enter into new relationship with that king. It may, of course, not be the community or individual experiencing some kind of transformation that asks the question, and in fact the NGO may never see the question being asked. However, if peace and justice – in their broad senses – are being wrought, these are powerful signs of the kingdom both to earthly and spiritual powers.

To be able to do this kind of work that is Christian at its core but can forego explicitly spiritual goals, CNGOs need to find more fundamental ways of practising their Christianity. James (2004) in a study for the Swedish Mission Council wrote of creating 'space for grace'. He observes that many CNGOs are in fact essentially secular in their working and most importantly, in their beliefs about how change happens. In fact, he argues, what CNGOs need to do is sort out their theology and affirm that God is actually the bringer of 'good change'[2]: this is how they achieve Woolnough's first distinctive of spiritual transformation.

This follows an understanding of spirituality (eg Samuel 1996) that is about recognising Christ's Lordship both over the CNGO itself and the people and community it seeks to serve (which, of course, means that God can bring about 'good change' through agents whether or not they identify themselves with Christian motivation). This spirituality provides meaning, is life-giving, gives connection, and relates to people's internal experiences (James 2004); in Samuel's Christian theological framing, it is eschatological, empowering, redemptive, and reconciling. Each of these ideas could be explored much further, of course; the point here is that a CNGO's understanding of itself can depend upon its spirituality. A clearly articulated spirituality pushes the CNGOs aims and values to allow what James calls 'space for grace': they allow God to act in and through that agency. The goals, that may be thoroughly comprehensible to a secular audience, become servants to a God-centred vision of transformational development.

CNGOs and Good Practice: Legitimacy, Capacity and Accountability

This section looks at some examples of how CNGOs are engaged in good development practice, and considers the development of legitimacy, capacity and accountability that make that more predictable and sustainable. In thinking about accountability, results and practices (or actions) count. Above it was seen

[2] Chambers (1975) suggested this as a practical (if very incomplete) understanding of development.

how the actions of a CNGO create 'space for grace'. Their actions become 'signs' to the people they serve of the gospel.

However, of course, these signs are pointless if they do not work. Sometimes CNGO work has been characterised as 'all head and no heart' and certainly very motivated people serve in CNGOs in the belief that 'doing something is better than doing nothing'. Our experience is that this may not be always be true, and that some CNGOs do struggle with building objective learning into their organisational cultures. Therefore, first we look at the capacities before legitimacy and accountability.

It is perhaps Christian responses to HIV/AIDS and people affected by AIDS that is most widely seen as exemplary (if not uniquely so). The feeling is caught in the non-Christian context of India: "You are our star players. You are doing wonderful service in the fight against AIDS," said Ms Sujata Rao, head of India's National AIDS Control Organisation to a national gathering of the Christian response to AIDS. In Africa, the World Health Organisation in 2007 released a study of Zambia and Lesotho that showed that two-fifths and one-third, respectively, of HIV services were provided by faith-based organisations (FBOs). This supported the UNICEF / Religions for Peace study (Foster 2004) showing the huge and increasing scale of faith-based responses to children affected by AIDS ('orphans and vulnerable children', OVCs) and illustrates the huge pull of 'the church' to donors, for example, the World Bank:

> The role of African faith-based organisations in combating HIV and AIDS is widely recognised as having growing significance but, at the same time, one which is not fully exploited, given the influence and reach of FBOs in African societies. Their impact at the community and household levels and their well-developed on-the-ground networks make them uniquely positioned to influence values and behaviours and to mobilise communities – World Bank 2004.

There are many other examples of the work of CNGOs in holistic mission that stand out. The following illustrate some important trends.

First is work on child protection, in the relatively recent realization that every child must be considered vulnerable to abuse. In the background, a partnership of secular and Christian agencies, the Keeping Child Safe Coalition (KCS), has worked to create appropriate guidance, policies and training to make NGOs as safe as possible for children. Christian agencies such as Tearfund UK, Viva and World Vision have been at the forefront of this process both in terms of creating the material but also in terms of disseminating it through appropriate networks. It may seem strange to reference a mixed coalition here, but as child protection has such wide statutory and other implications, it is impossible and unhelpful for CNGOs to 'go it alone'.

Networks such as Chab Dai in Cambodia then have been able to work with churches and CNGOs and communities in child protection. Chab Dai is a coalition of 45 Christian agencies that enjoys government recognition because it has paid careful attention to ensuring all members have the highest possible standards of child protection, as well as grass-roots reach analogous to that of FBOs and AIDS above.

Second, increasing numbers of Christian organizations who appreciate that strategy, research, evaluation and responsible management of people are integral to good stewardship of the resources God has given to them. Tearfund[3] have made many of these techniques accessible to churches and FBOs and carefully develop them ensuring that they are theologically sound and useful on a practical level through careful piloting. Their publications are widely translated and contextualized.[4]

However, there remain many areas where great improvement needs to be made. One piece of research suggested that women 'rescued' from commercial sexual exploitation were in fact less empowered after their rescues than before, as their practical life choices were in fact reduced (Adams 2009).

This brings us to the next area of consideration, about being accountable for what we do. Results are another contentious area for several reasons. First, is how is it possible to measure spiritual transformation? Second, who are the results for and who is the accountability to? And third, what kind of results can be measured?

Woolnough (2008) explains that in its essence, a CNGO need not care about results too much as it is the practice – obeying the command to love our neighbours – that ultimately counts, both because Christians are called to obedience, and because God works in all sorts of strange and unpredictable ways, over time periods that NGO measurement rarely can consider. One CNGO project illustrate this point. The MST project[5] seeks to challenge and reach out to male clients of prostitutes. It is relational in nature and the 'results' are difficult to quantify because whether someone's heart has been changed by the conversations held, may be only known between him and God. If results were measured by verbal responses then it might be disappointing, but believing that significant things are happening in the spiritual realm is significant makes it worthwhile. It might be helpful to many CNGOs to develop a theology of 'success' that encompasses this.

Another CNGO, Servants to Asia's Urban Poor models another approach helpful to this discussion. They spend considerable time immersed in the community (described as an 'incarnational' approach) and it may take months of prayer and listening before they understand the slum community enough to work with them in finding local solutions for poverty. However, once established, some have become experts advising government and UN agencies in a way that other CNGOs can only envy as they interface directly with poverty in the slums.

However, understanding results still counts. In much development, accountability is nominally about learning and listening, but evaluation as it is practised is frequently about showcasing success and achieving the next grant award in an extremely competitive market place. Most practitioners are wise to this and vigorous debate goes on between the implementers and the marketers

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[3] www.tearfund.org.

[4] For example, Tearfund UK's www.tilz.org.

[5] www.MSTProject.org.

within agencies at all levels. It affects small CBOs and large INGOs, as in the following example.

One Cambodian NGO we know runs excellent programmes, innovative and very responsive, with a dynamic experienced leader who is able to speak very little English. He is inventive and has lots of excellent ideas that are appropriate to the context but he has struggled often to find a suitable funder, even though they could see the great work, because they all required that he write his proposal in English and he was unable to do so. After several years of watching others get funds for unsustainable projects and westerners spending large amounts of money on projects inappropriate to the context, he finally found a donor who allows him to write the proposal in his own language and then get it translated into English. He now will need the same support to write his reports against the plan. This case study illustrates that whilst western donors hold the 'purse strings', finding appropriate local leaders and projects in context may require more creative solutions than are used by most.

The key for CNGOs is to identify the pressures of learning and then seek the greatest possible integrity in identifying and learning from successes and failures, in particular as interpreted by the poor and vulnerable they seek to serve. The practitioners have access to the tools to do this, but the leadership needs to ensure they are used appropriately. It also requires pragmatic responses, such as budgeting time and money for that kind of evaluation, as well as the value-based commitment to let the poor interpret the results of an intervention.

CNGOs and 'Development'

First, it is clear that secular observers see something in Christian holistic mission that is quite remarkable to them. Two British atheists, journalist Matthew Parris and senior politician Roy Hattersley, are unequivocal.

Parris first makes a comment on transformation affecting social and spiritual goals: "Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good."

Hattersley (2005) observed Christian responses to Hurricane Katrina in the south of the United States, and noted that, "it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand" because he saw that good works "are most likely to be performed by people who believe that heaven exists."

Secular development agendas are often big news in a globalised age of terror and poverty. Christians must recognise that despite such instruments as the Millennium Development Goals making it appear as if there is a secular development agenda that is pro-poor, this is of itself is highly contested. A whole post-development school of thought considers the concept of

development to be little but intellectual wreckage, ameliorating the damage to the islands of the rich caused by the surrounding oceans of poverty (Rahnema 1997). Other schools continue to prescribe development agendas that mitigate the worst effects of neo-liberal capitalist growth – this is probably the general position of the World Bank and DAC countries. And others – such as Jeffrey Sach's (2005) influential *The End of Poverty* – return to a material development agenda that assumes the poor are poor because of lack of material infrastructures etc.

There is much helpful insight here – the key is that there is no monolith, but development is a highly contested and dynamic arena into which voices with legitimacy and credibility have much to contribute. Even more important to note is that development, beside that which is done by development agencies, is primarily a process that is always going on: change, creativity and destruction, and growth. Some of this development is beneficial for some people, some is harmful, but very little is beneficial for all. Development agencies do have a task of recognising this and both ameliorating and shaping such change and it provides CNGOs a clear mandate for advocacy into social policy at all levels[6], as well as a rationale for working with CBOs and churches to enhance capacities within communities. In particular, funding streams appear to dry up once certain indications of poverty reduction are achieved, assuming the job is done. Yet we know that although poverty increases vulnerability, sexual exploitation, for example, occurs in even wealthy contexts. We might say that poverty is part of sin but the effects of sin are more far-reaching than simply alleviating poverty and the need for integral mission remains.

Secular development is currently very focused on the notion of 'good governance'. Crudely, good governance is the focus on the behaviours and processes of the institutions of government, from corruption to efficiency. If government can be made accountable and effective, and not corrupt, then development that helps the poor can occur. Good governance is no doubt good for the citizens of a nation, but the prescription for a Scandinavian style state in the heart of Africa rings hollow without obvious next steps: see Karl Popper's 'utopian social engineering'. This is important in aid, because the World Bank and other development agencies make good governance reform a condition of aid.

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[6] Interestingly, Majid Rahnema, an influential post-development writer, implicitly invites Christian inputs, saying, "The end of development should not be seen as an end to the search for new possibilities of change, for a relational world of friendship, or for genuine processes of regeneration able to give birth to new forms of solidarity. It should only mean that the binary, the mechanistic, the reductionist, the inhumane and the ultimately self-destructive approach to change is over. It should represent a call to the 'good people' everywhere to think and work together." M. Rahnema, 'Towards Post-Development: Searching for Signposts, a New Language and New Paradigms', in M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (eds.), *The Post Development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 391.

Much careful thought by CNGOs has been put into the use of other humanitarian tools such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most ratified UN document in history, not signed by only the United States and Somalia. Whilst some have criticized it, this is usually by people who have not read or understood it. Although it does have limitations, after 20 years it continues to provide a very useful bench-mark against which children's rights can be sought by all governments who have signed the document (i.e. most of the world's countries). It also provides a common language between governments, humanitarian and faith based organizations, not to be underestimated in a complex global array of organizations with different agendas. Indeed some organizations such as World Vision and Tearfund have carefully critiqued in with a biblical approach and concluded that it is something that FBOs should seek to use because it provides a great way for Christians to be engaged in and influence those debates.

CNGOs and the Future

Finally, some thoughts on the challenges of the future.

First, the legitimacy of the work of CNGOs will long continue to be a question as they walk careful tightropes: always potentially compromised by their dependence on funding from the rich, largely of the north; and the tie of the social goals to spiritual goals. As a generalisation, institutional funding (i.e. governmental overseas development aid) is increasingly tied to non-discrimination on the grounds of religion. But for CNGOs, Padilla is clear that there remains, "the witness to Jesus Christ as the Lord of all humankind and the whole creation — the witness that gives meaning to our own struggle for justice and peace." Legitimacy comes from that witness in the context of the poor.

Second is balancing 'good development' with a Christian understanding of people as created with dignity, in God's image. On the one hand, good development requires an enhanced focus on advocacy and a renewed focus on holistic mission that is demonstrably both effective and efficient. Christians are to be wise. But on the other hand, the testimonies of Mother Theresa and the many saints that serve humbly those beyond human hope remind us that Christian holistic mission that truly believes in the God-given dignity of the other, may sometimes not be strategic or efficient, and maybe not even effective (by certain measurements). In Christianity, the individual matters. The Millennium Development Goals, eight goals for improving the lives of the world's poor promoted by the United Nations and a primary agenda of international aid and development,[7] are currently valued as being strategic and effective at generating momentum. But, arguably, they create a terrible triage dividing the poor of the world into those worthy of receiving help and those not (MDG 1 is "Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose

[7] Chambers (1975) suggested this as a practical (if very incomplete) understanding of development.

income is less than $1 a day" – for which half of the poor?). A belief that every person is loved by God, be they degraded, destitute or degenerate ('the least of these'?), compels service to them because of who they are, not because of what development goals may be achieved. This pushes CNGOs to be at the forefront of speaking up for the rights of those that cannot speak for themselves and facilitating those who are disempowered to have a voice. It has led many organizations to believe that helping just one vulnerable child or person is of significance to God in a context of hundreds or thousands of similar stories where humanly speaking it seems it is a waste of time.

For CNGOs to survive and succeed in the future, creative ways of untying the knots of holistic mission must be achieved. Whilst the fullness of holistic mission remains to be celebrated, it is critical to remember that CNGOs cannot take responsibility for this fullness. In one sense, only the local church can do that, but even then it is the church across the world that is responsible for obeying the God-given mandate to holistic mission. Therefore this is a call to partnership according to kingdom values. The local church that is of and closest to the poor must take on a principal duty of care to its community. This can then be served by other Christians, churches and CNGOs around the world. Each needs to play its part without taking on an unbiblical responsibility. The questions of accountability and legitimacy can only be addressed if money and size are allowed to be servants, and not masters.

Conclusions

Much more has been said and could be considered in understanding effective Christian development work and its connections to holistic mission – the references included and other chapters in this book being very fruitful sources of questions and ideas. However, we offer these as some tentative proposals that can enable CNGOs to truly maintain a meaningful Christian identity; to partner the poor, the churches and other change-agents in the world, to effectively make signs of the coming kingdom as they serve the poor and vulnerable of the world.

1. The Christian identity of CNGOs comes from 'being Christian' – that is, accepting Christ's Lordship over them, their work and the people they serve and developing a spirituality where Christ is expected to be the author of change, not clever programming nor greater grants.
2. CNGOs must continually work to achieve their legitimacy, accountability and capacity by first, learning to improve their practice; second, by listening actively to the poor and vulnerable whom they claim to serve; and third by explicitly recognising the power asymmetries between donors and poor.
3. The primary role of CNGOs that have valid social or development goals in holistic mission is provoking questions; their work bears witness to Christ and his kingdom, it does not have to explain

Christ. This does not take away from, but complements, the necessity of proclamation of the gospel. Holistic mission requires partnership between congregations, CNGOs, CBOs and values the roles played by government and private sectors.

4. CNGOs recognise that the secular development agenda is dynamic, and so place themselves into the creation of that agenda, in order to influence secular development in kingdom ways that give voice to the voiceless and advocates for their rights.