Christian faith-based development: 
A case study of World Vision Foundation of Thailand in Karen hill tribe communities

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Abstract

There is a need to understand how faith-based development organisations (FBDOs) express their religious identity, values and beliefs in development practice. Using the World Vision Foundation of Thailand (WVFT) as a case study, this paper examines the extent to which Christian values, beliefs and identity shape the international organisation’s understanding of its development programme with Karen hill-tribe communities in Mae Sariang, northern Thailand.

This paper analyses World Vision’s concepts of ‘transformational development’ (TD), ‘Christian Witness’ and church partnerships in practice, where development is not only the improvement of material well-being of the poor, but also their experience with God and spiritual development. These concepts are key aspects of the organisation’s mission. The extent of these efforts in influencing the development programmes and organisational culture at WVFT is examined.

Data collection is from both primary and secondary sources. An actor-oriented ethnographic approach is employed to understand the construction of knowledge relating to the religious beliefs of WVFT staff vis-à-vis that of the organization, the patterns of behaviour of WVFT staff, and relationships between WVFT staff and community members. Secondary sources like theological documents which guide WVFT’s values and beliefs, and programme documents were studied.

As an international FBDO, with roots in the American Protestant Christian movement to respond to social issues, World Vision has been seeking to align its Christian identity and mission globally and to maintain a balance between keeping its Christian values and pursuing development goals. At the same time, Thailand presents a unique context to study the national entity of World Vision as it is a Buddhist nation where understandings about development, including that of Christian FBDOs, are influenced by Buddhist beliefs.

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This paper concludes that due to reasons of sensitivity in the Thai context, adaptations and interpretations of development by field workers, WVFT’s Christian values, beliefs and identity has been reproduced as variations of international guidelines with the co-existence of the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’. Furthermore, the extent to which they are demonstrated at the field level is limited. Considerations should hence be made on the steps that can be taken to bring about better integration and translation of faith into development practice by taking into account the contexts. In addition, integration should be carried in ways that not only reflect the faith-based identity of the organisation, but also bring about positive change, both physically and spiritually, to the intended beneficiaries.

Keywords: faith-based development organisation (FBDO), religious values and beliefs, Transformational Development, World Vision Thailand, Karen hill tribe

Introduction

There is a need to understand how faith-based development organisations (FBDOs) express their religious identity, values and beliefs in development practice. International FBDOs like World Vision have in place development concepts which are guided by their religious values and beliefs. Due to the varying contexts in which these organisations work, such understandings have been re-interpreted and contextualised at the national and field levels, resulting in variances in development practice. Using World Vision Foundation of Thailand (WVFT) as a case study, this paper analyses the extent to which Christian values, beliefs and identity shape an international FBDO’s understanding of its mission and development programme at the field level within Karen hill-tribe communities in Mae Sariang, northern Thailand.

Thailand presents a unique context to study Christian faith-based development as it is a Buddhist nation where understandings about development, including that of Christian FBDOs, are influenced by Buddhist beliefs. Faith-based development in Thailand was traditionally carried out through Buddhist monks and temples which were seen as centres of communities to provide for the needy. Since the middle of the 19 century, Catholic and Protestant Christian missionaries arrived in Thailand with the aim of spreading their faiths and this was carried out through the meeting of social needs. WVFT’s identity as a Christian organisation presents itself to the intended beneficiaries and partners as carrying the goal of proselytism, which is not an accurate reflection of the organisation’s mission. In this context, Christian FBDOs have to navigate these

1 In this paper, the term ‘WVFT’ will be used to refer to the entity of World Vision International (‘WVI’) that is in Thailand; WVI is used to refer to the collective corporate body on the international level; and ‘World Vision’ is used to refer to the organization generally.
sensitivities while maintaining their Christian values and identity.

The review of the existing literature revealed that there is a need for 1) more in-depth research on the role of religion in the field of development (Bradley 2009; Clarke 2006; Deneulin and Rakodi 2010; Hoover 2010; Marshall 2011; Rennick 2013), and 2) more knowledge about community-based FBDOs in Thailand, especially in terms of how they demonstrate their values, beliefs and ethics in development practice (Ashley 2008; McCaskill and Kampe 1997; Pongsapich and Kataleeradabhan 1997; Shigetomi, Tejapira, and Thongyou 2004; Horstmann 2011; Platz 2003). This paper engages with outstanding studies that have been done on World Vision in Christian contexts of South Africa and Zimbabwe (Bornstein 2001a; Bornstein 2001b; Bornstein 2005; de Wet 2013) and aims to contribute knowledge about World Vision’s efforts to integrate religion and development in the context of a predominantly Buddhist and Asian country.

This paper uses the concept of ‘FBDO’ to describe WVFT – an FBDO is understood to be motivated and guided by spiritual sources and their religious values and beliefs in their work involving development issues. At the same time, FBDOs are differentiated from secular development organizations by their concern with the spiritual well-being of the community members – while secular development organizations aim to raise the quality of life of their intended beneficiaries, they are “not specifically concerned with the non-physical nature of the individual” (Berger 2003, 35). This paper analyzes World Vision’s development term of ‘transformational development’ (TD) and the related concepts of ‘Christian Witness’ and church partnerships in understanding the extent that Christian values and beliefs influence development programmes of World Vision in Thailand (refer to Figure 1).
**Research Methodology**

In gathering the data for this paper, qualitative field research was the key methodology used, due to the ethnographic nature of the research which involves the study of people, their relationships with each other, their cultures and religious beliefs. Participatory observations were carried out as an intern from March to November 2014 at both World Vision’s Asia and Pacific Regional Office and WVFT, through attendance at regular staff devotions, work meetings and staff trainings. When in the field programme of WVFT (also known as ‘Area Development Programme’ or ADP), in Mae Sariang, northern Thailand, both participatory
and non-participatory observations were carried out. This study also uses observations that were made at another WVFT ADP during an informal day-long visit.

In-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with four key informants from Mae Sariang ADP of WVFT and the World Vision South Asia-Pacific Regional Director for Faith and Development, 13 key informants and 18 households from the two selected Karen hill-tribe villages (Ban Pamak and Ban Mae Kanai, in Mae Sariang ADP) where WVFT works.

On top of data collection through primary sources, this study also analyzes secondary data, including World Vision’s documents relating to values, mission and identity, history, theology, and programme design and implementation. Community baseline studies carried out by WVFT were obtained to understand if there were attempts to understand the perceptions, value and belief systems of community members before its development intervention. In addition, photographs and planning documents relating to development activities (for example, children’s camps) in the research area were analysed.

Translators, both outside and within WVFT, were engaged to translate the interviews with speakers of Thai and Sgaw Karen (a dialect widely spoken by the WVFT ADP staff and community members in the selected field sites at Mae Sariang). To verify the accuracy of the interview responses, information gained from the informants was constantly triangulated throughout the period of the fieldwork.

Setting the Context – World Vision and Its Work in Thailand

World Vision International (WVI) has its roots in an American evangelist, Bob Pierce, who in 1950, responded to the needs of the children orphaned by the Korean War. Since its founding by a single missionary, WVI has morphed into one of the largest development organisations in the world and it was largely influenced by the ‘new evangelicalism’ Protestant Christian movement in America which took place during the 1940s to 1980s, which had an emphasis on social concerns (Bornstein 2005).

In the mid-1970s, after its realisation that its traditional evangelical identity was unsustainable, the organisation shifted from its missionary outlook to focus on more contemporary social issues of world poverty, relief and humanitarian aid. It was during this time that World Vision endorsed the United Nations’ definitions of human rights and targets for social improvements (Whaites 1999). In an effort to make the organisation more effective globally, a Declaration of Internationalisation was made and took effect from 31 May 1978. This Declaration essentially separated the organisation from its US-centric past with the creation of a partnership secretariat and a governing body which constituted the organisation’s constituents. The Declaration was also a response to pressures from non-Western field staff that expressed that the US office had “paternalistic and controlling tendencies” (King 2012, 933). The Declaration had an awkward mix of Christian and development jargon, in an effort to keep the church language but still express aims similar to humanitarian agencies. It was the first
document that placed greater emphasis on aid than evangelism.

Towards the end of the 1980s, signs of the organisation’s shift away from its evangelical core beliefs began to be apparent and there was a diversity of views on the meaning and the implications of its evangelical beliefs on its work. This brought about an unwieldy understanding of the organisation’s philosophy and identity. The World Vision President at that time made a decision to draft the Core Values, Mission Statement and Covenant of Partnership to align the identity, purpose and inter-office relationships (Whaites 1999). In the documents, the ethos of ‘following’ Jesus Christ through ‘Christian Witness’ was emphasised over the relatively aggressive message of Christian evangelism. Proselytism, where aid is disbursed with the coercion of religious conversion, was prohibited and instead, the focus was to demonstrate Christian concern in a culturally-sensitive manner. These documents remain relevant up to today. With this set of new documents, World Vision has been able to maintain a balance in keeping its Christian values and pursuing development goals.

Today, World Vision carries the identity of an international Christian non-profit organisation which focuses on relief, development and advocacy. Globally, WVI is explicit about its Christian identity. The development organisation is child-focused and uses a holistic approach in working with the world’s most vulnerable children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Currently, WVI works in almost 100 countries and has about 50,000 staff and volunteers worldwide (World Vision International 2014). With this historical backdrop of World Vision on an international level, there can be better understanding on the extent of influence on Thailand office’s organisational ethos and structure. The tensions that exist between secular development and traditional Christian missions are not only in existence at the global level, but also in the Thai context.

In Thailand, World Vision started its work in 1972, working with orphans in Udon Thani Province. Subsequently, child support centres were set up in the Northern and Northeastern Province. In 1974, the organisation was registered and focused on the well-being of children, humanitarian emergency relief and Indochinese refugees at the Thai border. From 1980, WVFT changed its direction to community-based development, with focus on children and their families. Currently, WVFT works in 70 projects in 42 provinces of Thailand, with 94,627 sponsored children (World Vision International 2014). WVFT staffs are distributed at the national and field levels – there are 826 staffs, of which 253 are office staff (including those based at the National Office) and 573 field staff (most of whom are working in the ADPs). More than half of the WVFT staffs are Christians.

Community-based development interventions relating to education, food security, water access, health and economic livelihood are rolled out over a period of about 10 to 15 years, in phases of 5 years each. Currently, WVFT is introducing the Development Programme Approach (DPA) from WVI to ADPs which are new and undergoing redesigning after 5 years of implementation. In this new initiative, each ADP (usually a district as defined in Thailand) would
be subdivided into sub-districts, each taken charge by a field staff who is known as the Development Facilitator (DF). The DF is responsible for the implementation of the development interventions within the sub-district that is under his/her charge.

Mae Sariang ADP was set up in the year 2010 and is targeted to complete its child-focused development programme by the year 2024. At the time of the research, the ADP was finalising its plans for the second phase of the programme, by going through a programme redesigning process, which can be attributed to the recent re-envisioning of the TD direction by WVI (de Wet 2013).

All staffs in Mae Sariang ADP are Christian or Catholic of Karen ethnicity, except one who is a Buddhist of Thai ethnicity.

‘Transformational Development’ in Practice of WVFT
Understanding of ‘Transformational Development’ (TD)

A common development conceptual term used in WVI is ‘Transformational Development’ (TD) which is defined as “a process and actions through which children, families and communities move towards fullness of life with dignity, justice, peace, and hope, as the Bible describes the Kingdom of God” (World Vision International 2002). This term is commonly used within WVI instead of the traditional ‘development’ to avoid 1) associations with past meanings, some of which are not positive. It also conjures up connotations of changes in the material world; and 2) ideas that it is about westernisation or modernisation which may not necessarily be good for the intended beneficiaries (Myers 2006).

The notion of integrating both physical and spiritual development is relatively new among Christians – a few decades ago, development work was seen to be separate from the concern of Christians, who put more attention on missionary work to bring about the conversion of people into the Christian faith. Development work was regarded to be out of step with traditional theological understanding. However, as the uneasy relationship between the two became more apparent, Christians began to see the need to have a response to the social issues of poverty and hunger. Today, even missions organizations have adapted principles of development (King 2012) and Christian development organizations are seeing the need to approach social issues in a holistic manner by addressing all areas of human needs.

The concept of TD emphasises that the work of World Vision is beyond the improvement of material well-being, and that it is concerned with relationship-building with the poor and their experience with God and their spiritual transformation, where community members feel fully human and know that they are made in the image of God (Myers 2006). De Wet (2013) observes that TD is “framed by core Christian beliefs, particularly the biblical narrative of the Kingdom of God and its attendant themes of individual salvation, transformation and connection to God, and redemption” and “incorporates developmental insights and
practice alongside the mobilisation of religious resources”. This development concept aligns with WVI’s mission statement (refer to Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Mission statement of WVI

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God.

We pursue this mission through integrated, holistic commitment to:

1) Transformational Development that is community-based and sustainable, focused especially on the needs of children.

2) Emergency Relief that assists people afflicted by conflict or disaster.

3) Promotion of Justice that seeks to change unjust structures affecting the poor among whom we work.

4) Partnerships with churches to contribute to spiritual and social transformation.

5) Public Awareness that leads to informed understanding, giving, involvement and prayer.

6) Witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word and sign that encourages people to respond to the Gospel.

Extracted from World Vision International 2014

TD is an area which contributes to the fulfilling of the mission statement, along with ‘Christian Witness’ and ‘church partnerships’. TD offers an expanded perspective with regards to helping the poor – it is not only about God’s concern for the oppressed or Jesus’ teachings and responses to the poor as put forward by theologians like Baggett (2005), but a larger biblical story involving the God’s Creation, the Fall of Man, God’s redemption through Jesus Christ and the church’s continuing role until the end of history. The Kingdom of God perspective provides the framework in which poverty is understood and consequently, the Christian response – it recognises that the current world is dysfunctional because of broken structural and interpersonal relationships, with the result of poverty (both material and non-material), loss of dignity, loss of opportunities and loss of ability to achieve their God-given potential (Myers 2006;
Christian 2011). In order for the impoverished to achieve fullness of life, churches and Christians have a role to respond to their physical, social and spiritual needs (Myers 2006). Myers puts forward that work which is pro-life and enhances the quality of life points towards the Kingdom of God. The emulation of Jesus Christ provides guidance in meeting the needs of material and spiritual aspects of the poor. TD takes a holistic approach by not only targeting the development of children, but the larger context in which they are situated in.

As the use of TD is an attempt to integrate both Christian and secular development discourses towards helping the poor, the understanding of TD has had an influence on the use of contemporary development techniques and modus operandi of World Vision. Specifically, there are TD-related documents for design, monitoring and evaluation (DME), policies on Witness to Jesus Christ, partnership with churches and technical interventions that address development issues. The concept of TD, which is motivated by Christian values and beliefs, has an impact on how development processes (for example, the Development Programme Approach or DPA) are organised and how development programmes are implemented. This allows the principles of TD to be demonstrated in the field where World Vision’s role is to provide technical support, oversight and funding for programme implementation at the community level. When translated into development practice, World Vision uses contemporary development techniques like Design, Monitoring and Evaluation (DME) and Logical Framework (Log Frame), with development outcomes and measurable indicators, to achieve development goals. There are also TD indicators, which are a set of programme indicators to measure the quality of life in communities. While it can be seen that the operations of World Vision are not distinctively different from secular development agencies, the underlying mission and concept of TD which drive these operational strategies are informed by the organisation’s Christian values and beliefs.

Expressing the Christian Faith in TD-Related Programme Documents

The DPA which is used in Mae Sariang ADP’s redesigning process, encompasses principles from TD involving the integration of World Vision’s work and building of staff capacity to engage local partners. As part of the DPA, there is ‘The Critical Path’ process (see Figure 3) which involves eight simple questions that are asked at various stages of the programming process to evaluate the current situation of local communities and improve World Vision’s work with local partners which is seen to be able to contribute towards the well-being of children.
Figure 3 Steps in ‘The Critical Path’, part of the DPA

In the guide on ‘The Critical Path’, which was developed at the international level, the presence of God is acknowledged and sought in discerning God’s involvement in the community. This is done through prayers and biblical reflections as staff listen to children, partners and communities. At the international level, WVI developed a spiritual discernment resource guide for field staff to use during devotions, prayers and reflections as they move through ‘The Critical Path’. When the ADP programme manager at Mae Sariang was asked whether he saw the component of ‘God’s presence’ in ‘The Critical Path’ diagram, he was not able to recall it. However, he could very confidently articulate how he personally saw the involvement of God in the process. For example, for Step 3’s “What is already being done?”, he recognised the need to look back and thank God for the blessings that He had given; and for Step 6’s “Who will contribute what?”, he saw that as something biblical, similar to how the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ allocated work amongst themselves. The confidence that the programme manager displayed was due to the fact that he has had many years of experience in community development work and he did his self-study to make sense of his work using texts from the Bible.

From this, it can be seen that the understanding of development work from a biblical perspective is largely left to the interpretation and initiative of each individual staff. While there are resources available like the spiritual discernment resource guide to help staff discern the Christian basis of development work, there are limitations in terms of their 1) access (because the resources developed at the global level are in English and not widely understood by Thai field staff as it has yet to be translated into Thai); and 2) extent of use (because these resources are only for voluntary use and there are already many technical aspects in the DPA to pay attention to, hence understanding the spiritual aspect of the development approaches is not high on the priority of field staff).
Field Levels Activities in Achieving TD-Related Goals Towards Child Well-Being

In achieving the goal of children having the fullness of life as part of TD, one of the development aspirations of World Vision is “Girls and boys experience love of God and their neighbours.” At Mae Sariang ADP, the development aspiration is fulfilled through activities like children’s moral and ethics camp and school-based Christmas celebrations. During the children’s camps, child participants (both Buddhists and Christians) are asked to close their eyes and bow their heads in a prayer position before meals to give thanks for the food. The prayers also asked God for protection over the children during the camp. This act of praying led by WVFT staff is carried out to help all child participants appreciate the importance of being thankful for blessings, and in the case of the children’s camp, for the provision of food. In addition, it is aimed at helping Christian children experience the love of God, by recognising God’s involvement in the activities. During the children’s camp, participants are grouped to discuss and present their hope for the future.

During the Christmas celebrations, the character of Jesus during his childhood days is talked about as a role model for the child participants, where “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man” (Bible verse from the Book of Luke, chapter 2, verse 52). Through the Christmas celebrations, it is hoped that children can also understand the love of God, as displayed when He sent Jesus into the world to care for those in need.

Due to the sensitive context of presenting a Christian identity in Thailand where the donor and partner base is predominantly Buddhist, the development aspiration has been adapted by WVFT to mean “Children to have good morals and generosity to others” in Thai (Thai text: “มีคุณธรรมและเอื้ออาทรต่อคนรอบข้าง”), where the reference to God has been removed. As a result, staff of WVFT cannot fully appreciate the aspiration to introduce appropriate development activities which contribute to the spiritual development of children. During the process of drafting the Log Frame for the second phase of development at Mae Sariang ADP, the problems brought up by staff which impede the meeting of the child well-being aspiration were all relating to low morality of children and the low social support of their families, schools and communities, without any reference to spiritual state of the children. Furthermore, the ADP team at Mae Sariang are focused on correcting so-called bad moral behaviour which relates to the failure of the child to fulfil his/her duties in the family (for example, not helping with the household chores, and disrespect for elders) and school (for example, poor attention in school, and dropping out of school). While such efforts can contribute to values formation of children, it is perhaps a lopsided effort to fully contribute to the child well-being aspiration. The loss of meaning because of translation is a lost opportunity for Christian staff at WVFT to appreciate the spiritual motivation behind this aspiration, and carry out development programmes that align with the international direction. Hence, while there is an initiative at WVFT to align its national policies to the international direction of focusing on the spiritual development of children as a cross-
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cutting theme to contribute to the child well-being aspiration, it is still at an infancy stage with much consideration needed for its definition and contextualisation.

While there are efforts at the global and regional level to attempt to integrate the values of the Christian faith into development work in World Vision, it is perhaps a long process, as can be seen in Thailand where TD is a relatively new concept and certain spiritual concepts have been watered down as a result of translation and sensitivity in the Thai context.

‘Christian Witness’ of WVFT Staff

Understanding ‘Christian Witness’

‘Christian Witness’ defines the identity of the organization and its staff. Myers (2006) adopts the term ‘Christian Witness’, which has an extended meaning from ‘evangelism’ (usually understood to be a loaded word which brings to mind the verbal proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ). ‘Christian Witness’ not only includes the declaration of the gospel by words, but also life and deed. In such a proclamation of Christ through how they lead their lives through love of God, Christian development workers are believed to inevitably provoke the question to which the gospel is the answer and this is with the hope that non-Christians in the community will understand the Christian faith or eventually come to accept Christianity as their personal faith. ‘Christian Witness’ is hence an extension of ‘transformational development’ where through the work of the Christian development practitioner, the poor are restored to reach fullness of life through spiritual transformation. During an interview by Bornstein (2005) with the Director of Sponsorship Ministry and Funding at World Vision United States, the latter discussed World Vision’s understanding of introducing Christianity to the communities and the organisation’s potential to introduce God’s presence through ‘Christian Witness’ –

“We are planting the seed..., but ultimately God is responsible for bringing it up. You see you can bring scripture even into everyday life; that’s the whole essence of integrated Christian development... Even where you are not necessarily buying a Bible for somebody but ... buying seeds, you are introducing God, and saying how God can be involved in that situation.”

To depict the same concept, Bornstein (2005) coined the term ‘lifestyle evangelism’, where evangelism involves “living a life in the manner of Christ, and providing an example for non-believers” (Bornstein 2005, 50) by building relationships with, and loving, the people, through their Christian lifestyle. I would use ‘Christian Witness’ in this paper for clarity in usage of term and because it is more widely used.

The Separation of Evangelism from Development Work

In discussing ‘Christian Witness’, it is necessary to consider the tensions that arise when development is associated with evangelism or proselytization. There is the general sense in the development field that evangelism adulterates development work and should be kept separate. In other words, the spreading of religious opinions should be delinked from humanitarian action (Fountain 2015). This is a result of
modernisation which edges out religion from the public sphere into the private sphere, resulting in the secularisation of development work. With the rise of capitalism which emphasises the accumulation of material capital, cultural values correspondingly became secularised, with more focus on the material world and less so on the spiritual realm (Bocock 1996). Secularisation is hence socially constructed, perpetuated by human imagination and its translation into action (Barnett and Stein 2012). Along with capitalism, rationality that came with modern science also resulted in secularisation in many areas of life (Weber 1970, cited in Bocock 1996,171). This has impacted the conception of development, which primarily focuses on using science and technology to address the issues of the poor.

In addition, Fountain (2015) also propounds that there is an ‘amnesia’ which demarcates humanitarianism from evangelism, often forgetting that “contemporary Western development is a direct descendant of Christian proselytising impulses, dispositions, practices and organisational forms” (Fountain 2015, 12).

Furthermore, evangelism is seen to be problematic in Thailand because conversion to Christianity threatens statehood and conceptions of community which are primarily based on Buddhism, which is used as a means to unify the nation and perpetuate the Thai identity. Hence, it is important to critically evaluate this separation and not deem evangelism as an essentially religious act, but as “intentional moral practices of transformative interventions aimed at reworking the social practices of others” (Fountain 2015, 22), similar to development projects which are value-laden and have roots in certain traditions. In this paper, I consider the separation as perceived by the WVFT field staff when they carry out development projects in Mae Sariang.

In a Christian development organization which places importance on its Christian identity and uses biblical values to transform the communities that they work with, Christian field staffs are seen to have a special position in the communities to bring about TD.

However, introducing spiritual elements into development can be a touchy issue in light of modernization which secularizes the interpretation of many dimensions of life, including understandings about how development should be carried out (Barnett and Stein 2012; Deneulin and Rakodi 2010). This is evident in the work of the Mae Sariang ADP team, which seeks to carry out its work in a way that follows closely the methods of contemporary and modernized development practitioners. Furthermore, WVFT works in a context where Christian organizations are perceived to be primarily involved in the conversion of people to Christianity (there is hence apprehension among communities towards Christians), especially in hill-tribe areas of northern Thailand where there is a long history of missionization. While World Vision does not take advantage of the vulnerability of the community members to pressure them towards conversion to Christianity, should any of them indicate a desire to do so, staff of World Vision can identify an individual (for example, a Christian from the local church) who can support the community member in his/her decision, taking into account the potential contextual sensitivity. From this
position of World Vision, it can be seen that the organisation would choose not to be directly involved in the conversion of the intended beneficiaries that they work with, to avoid any potential complications in long-term relationships within the communities.

The separation of the Christian faith from development work is apparent in Mae Sariang ADP. Christian beliefs and practices are very much kept within the ADP team and at times, Christians in the communities. The Christian ADP staffs who were interviewed mentioned that they are happy and comfortable in the work environment due to the fact that they are able to express their faith freely with their colleagues, for example, by participating in staff devotions, worship and prayers. They were also able to talk about God in the work setting. They were also of opinion that sharing the same faith helped them in carrying out their work, much like brothers and sisters working together.

“Perhaps the topic on faith is kept to the private realm among the staff in the organisation. In the organisation, what matters more is the fulfilment of the technical programming expectations and not so much on how dependent you are on God. This is further supported by what was observed at the training sessions where there were morning devotions and prayers, but during the rest of the day, there were not many references to God.”

While the Christian faith is freely expressed with the ADP team, it can be seen that there is restraint when they work with the intended beneficiaries, due to their understanding that there should somewhat be a separation between their Christian belief and their work with the villagers. One of the field staff understands her work as not preaching about God like a missionary, but to show God in and through her work (for example, by showing love to the people), i.e. to be a ‘Christian Witness’ in the mild sense of the term. She sees the priority to be the development of the people. In the same way, another field staff sees his role to not evangelize to avoid potential disputes, but to only encourage the spiritual growth of Christians.

During the children camps where children are asked to go into the prayer position, the WVFT field staff explained that the intention was not to convert the religions of the children and the act of praying and giving thanks to God in public is the staff’s way of asserting the organisation’s Christian identity and to show the reliance of the field staff on God in their work. The act of prayer has only been demonstrated in child-oriented activities and not in other community activities like the installation of water tanks and the distribution of school materials due to the presence of adults from other religions which made it inappropriate for prayers to be initiated, as explained by the programme manager of Mae Sariang ADP. It appears that the staff would be bolder in expressing their Christian faith with children who are perceived to be more open to receiving the acts of prayers.

This conservative understanding and practice of ‘Christian Witness’ by the WVFT staff at Mae Sariang ADP is different from what was observed during a short informal visit to another ADP in Thailand where the program manager being very explicit about her faith to a community health volunteer who is Buddhist –
she shared about her miraculous quick recovery of her toe after a bad fall and gave thanks to God for healing her. It was surprising to see her boldness in expressing her faith, without fear of being accused of trying to proselytize. During the visit, she also shared on how she contributed to bringing a community member to conversion to Christianity a few years ago. This behaviour of the ADP programme manager is ‘Christian Witness’ taken to the extreme since she was unconstrained by her professional identity, but instead in her interaction with community members, she is actively involved in the proclamation of Christ not only through words, but also living her natural self as a Christian who is passionate to share about her Christian faith.

The characteristic of Mae Sariang ADP field staff of making few references to God, especially when relating to community members, supports Berger’s (2003) claim of Christian FBDOs, compared to those which are of non-Western origin, which are focused on the inner spiritual advancement of individuals. However, this characteristic differs across ADPs within WVFT, as exhibited in the case of the other ADP as discussed above.

**Awareness of WVFT’s Christian Identity in Karen Hill Tribe Communities**

Out of the 18 households which were interviewed, 12 (66.67%) are aware that WVFT is a Christian organisation, of which 8 found out through conversations with the WVFT staff (it appears that to know a person’s religious belief was a common conversation topic among the Karen hill-tribe people). Most respondents are not able to tell that the WVFT staffs are Christians based on their behaviours. However, this is not indicative of the level of ‘Christian Witness’ among field staff, as most of the villagers only meet the WVFT staff between 2 to 5 times a year at Ban Mae Kanai (possibly due to the fact that the village is more inaccessible compared to Ban Pamak, where the villagers meet the WVFT staff about 12 times a year), which results in far fewer opportunities to observe the demonstration of Christian values and beliefs through life and deed. Perhaps ‘witnessing’ can come not only from the lives of the ADP staff, but also through the material items, like school notebooks and water tanks, where the World Vision logo is imprinted. Some villagers commented that there are hints of Christian identity in WVFT – the organisation’s Thai name, *Supanimit*, is Christian sounding; the organisation logo looks like a Christian cross; and the write-up of WVFT in the school notebooks uses Christian terms.

It appears that ‘Christian Witness’ among the field staff at Mae Sariang is minimal and the demonstration of Christian values and beliefs are only kept within the ADP team and towards Christians in the communities. WVFT staffs are left to judge how they should demonstrate their faith as staff representatives of the FBDO. ‘Christian Witness’ is not through the lives of the Christian field staff, but done primarily through the distribution of material goods that carry the World Vision logo and corresponding Christian message. At the same time, this demonstrates the Christian value of giving.
**Extent of Church Partnership**

“WV (World Vision) especially recognises and affirms the essential role of churches in contributing to the well-being of children within families and communities. This commitment to work with churches is part of WV’s Christian commitment, grounded in the biblical call to serve the poorest and most vulnerable. WV seeks to build on the strengths and initiatives that churches already have and work with them in mutually beneficial collaboration for the sustained well-being of children.” (World Vision International 2011b)

It is clear from the above statement that churches are seen as strategic partners for World Vision to fulfil its development mission. World Vision also recognises that partnership with churches is a core part of its identity, regardless of denominations (including Catholics, despite World Vision’s evangelical Protestant roots), as part of fulfilling the work in the Kingdom of God, by bringing about fullness of life with characteristics of dignity, justice, peace, and hope. Hence, churches are seen to be key in bringing about community transformation due to their potential in operationalizing the restoration to fullness of life and spiritual development of community members (de Wet 2013).

While World Vision in the TD and DPA recognise the importance of partnering with as many community groups as possible to build up the empowerment and sustainability of the communities that they work with, special priority is placed on partnering with, and building up the capacity of the local churches to contribute to the transformation of communities where they are in. World Vision highly values church partnerships due to their potential to bring about the development goal of bringing fullness of life to the children, families and communities that the FBDO works with.

However, this may not necessarily be reflected at the field level. In both Ban Pamak and Ban Mae Kanai, church partnerships with WVFT were almost non-existent. When asked if there was a possibility for WVFT to work more closely with the local Catholic Church in developing the community, the village Catholic leader at Ban Pamak responded that WVFT has already agreed to give them money for the refurbishment of their church building. Upon further probing, he mentioned that perhaps WVFT could directly disburse funds to the villagers when purchasing livestock. From this, it can be seen that partnership with WVFT on a deeper and sustainable level is not in the conscious of the local church at Ban Pamak.

On the other hand, although the Protestant Baptist church in Ban Mae Kanai has no existing relationship with WVFT, the pastor-in-charge appeared ready to be involved in community development, on the premise that WVFT is clear about their goal of working in the village. He highlighted that God’s presence can enter in the village through many ways, including through WVFT. Implicit in this statement is the idea of sharing Christianity and in turn, increasing the number of Christian believers in the village.

Currently, WVFT at the national level attributes the low level of church engagement to the corresponding low capacity of field staff to do so and is aiming to increase the capacity of...
staff to engage local churches in the ADP, which is also part of the strategy of the DPA process. Furthermore, field staffs do not have an adequate understanding of TD to appreciate the value of engaging churches in the communities that they work in. While the WVFT national office has earmarked the equipping of field staff to involve churches in the development process and the ADP team has indicated plans to increase the engagement of churches, it is yet unknown how this would be done, especially in a context where work that is overtly Christian would rather be avoided by the ADP field staff, as discussed in the previous section.

Faith-Based Organisational Culture of WVFT

The culture of a faith-based organisation is a reflection of Christian values and beliefs, based on working culture, staff policies, activities that staff do on a regular basis, and the priority that is given for such activities. Furthermore, they can serve to reinforce the Christian identity of the organisation.

To maintain the integrity of the Christian identity and ‘Christian Witness’ in development work, it is an international policy that World Vision offices employ field staff locally who are Christians. The rationale of employing local staff is so as to relate with World Vision’s intended beneficiaries, in terms of culture, language and communication style, and to encourage development from ‘within’ rather than present the organisation as Western and foreign. The prerequisite for staff to be Christians is characteristic of FBDOs which mobilise workers who are motivated by their faith and belief that they are doing the work of God (Thaut 2009). Through interviews with, and observations of, the Christian staff at Mae Sariang ADP, it is apparent that they are committed Christians. Of the three Christian staff interviewed, two of them believe that God has called them to work at WVFT and constantly make references to the influence of God in their work in Mae Sariang. Fern, the Development Facilitator of Mae Hoh sub-district, shared that when she was a child, her teacher asked about her ambition and her innocent reply was that she wanted to work with children. Fern remembered her response to her teacher and has since been focused on seeking vocations related to child development. She believes that her child-like response was a calling from God. Similarly, Bom, the Development Facilitator of Mae Sariang sub-district, sees the importance of partnering with God in his work, he shared:

“I cannot do things by myself, unless God gives me the strength. We need to ask help from God by praying. We not only meet with parents, children and the villagers, or leaders, we also meet with high-ranking people, so this kind of things I cannot do it unless God is there. So I need to pray. God has to give me the knowledge and strength.”

However, in places where qualified local Christians cannot be hired, exceptions can be made and due processes put in place by WVI have to be followed to allow this to happen. This can be seen in the Mae Sariang ADP where there is one non-Christian staff, Aom, who is Buddhist, due to the fact that Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country and it is relatively challenging to employ competent Christian staff in the development field. While it may seemingly be challenging for
the Christian identity of WVFT to be maintained due to the presence of non-Christian staff. Ajit Hazra, the South Asia-Pacific Regional Director for Faith and Development at WVI explains the organisation’s perspective:

“As a Christian organisation, we have certain values that all staff both Christian and staffs of different faith need to understand and agree with. You don’t have to be a Christian, but these are the values and perspectives that each person has to understand because this guides how we work with people. Some of these perspectives are not specifically Christian … but also inclusive of other faith traditions. Inclusive not in the sense, ‘okay, we all have the same common beliefs’ … [and] asking those not of the Christian faith to participate in Christian rituals, but we are asking each staff to understand our Christian motivation and perspective in the work we do, whether you are Christian or not … Our mission says that we … follow our Lord Jesus Christ. So when we say we follow, how do we follow? We follow not in terms of going to church, but we follow in terms of how Jesus worked with the people and the Christian perspectives on, such as, giving dignity, advocacy, caring for the poor and working with the communities.”

Hence, in order to overcome the different religious beliefs which can be potentially divisive, World Vision will choose to find common grounds for the purpose of development and serving the poor.

As a Christian FBDO, field staffs are individually appraised based on the extent to which they follow the example of Jesus, involving the attributes of love, justice, humility, and servant leadership when they engage with community members and partners. At World Vision, being a Christian staff involves “a constant translation between the expectations of the institution, defined according to codified Christian principles that directed the work of the NGO, and the religious expectations of its employees” (Bornstein 2005, 61). As discussed earlier under ‘Christian Witness’, while staff appear to be left to evaluate some parts of the work of WVFT vis-à-vis their own faith, dialectically, they are also evaluated based on their performance. This is exemplified in the case of Mae Sariang ADP where the programme manager, Dee, is expected to evaluate his staff based on the values of Jesus – he observes whether they use what they have learnt in church to share at the Monday morning devotions and whether they display characteristics of responsibility, love, care and unity. With a non-Christian in the team, it would seemingly be difficult for Aom to be appraised according to the above requirements due to her different religious belief. However, Dee interprets this as a non-issue – Aom is not expected to know the Bible; as long as she shows love and care for others, he sees it as a reflection of God in her life. At the end of it, Dee indicates more importance for the ADP staff members to perform in their work and their ability to meet their work responsibilities, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The ADP staff team gathers for devotions every Monday morning and staffs rotate duties to lead worship and share devotion messages based on Christian values. The Monday morning devotions are sacralised as religious activities for the team as everyone is expected to set aside time on Monday mornings for God and are not allowed
to arrange work meetings. Despite Aom having a different religious belief, Dee does not exclude her from this involvement and expects everyone in the team to have shared responsibility and be involved as a corporate body in staff devotions. Aom was a former WVFT sponsored child and subsequently a volunteer before becoming a staff member. Hence, she is familiar with the organisational culture, and does not take issue with being involved in religious devotions which are not of her own religious belief. While there appears to be a potential disjuncture between World Vision’s expectations of its staff based on Christian values and the religious beliefs of non-Christian staff, which could be divisive to the corporate body, it appears that the only non-Christian staff in Mae Sariang ADP has been integrated into Christian environment despite her being the only non-Christian (and non-Karen) in the team. While the act of having morning devotions is being sacralised, it is done so for the whole ADP team, regardless of religious beliefs. This act of regular devotion meetings is therefore not a fully spiritual Christian act, but one that is made ‘sacred’ within the organisational structure of creating opportunities for staff bonding. In other words, a seemingly religious gathering with reference to the spiritual realm is now being interpreted to serve an organisational purpose – a co-existence of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’.

Another characteristic of a Christian organizational culture in the Mae Sariang ADP staff team is their commitment to pray, for example, before each work task, as a way to recognise the role of God in their work. This commitment which was shared by the ADP field staff, was also observed by a Christian villager at Ban Mae Kanai who is the cook of the local nursery school (and whose children are sponsored by WVFT, Household No. 15) – once when she was in the ADP office to collect the money to purchase the ingredients for the meals, she saw that the staff gathered to pray before going to the villages to carry out their work. As discussed earlier on prayers by WVFT staff during children activities, such an act of prayer is also being made ‘sacred’ as a way to affirm the team’s affiliation with the larger organisation’s Christian beliefs and identity.

**Conclusion**

Using WVFT as a case study, this paper has sought to analyse the extent to which Christian values, beliefs and identity of an international FBDO have shaped the understanding of its national office’s mission and development programme, in particular, its work in hilltribe communities of Mae Sariang, Thailand.

The operationalisation of WVI’s faith-based components of TD, ‘Christian Witness’ and church partnership in the Thai context have reproduced variations of the international directions. While there are instances where the development programme and organisational culture of WVFT reflects Christian values, beliefs and identity, these Western faith-based concepts of development have been adapted and re-interpreted in an Asian context, especially one which is predominantly and views Christianity as somewhat threatening. Buddhist values that are prevalent in Thailand have steered the development approach towards a focus on education, moral and ethics, and responsibilities.
of the child, instead of the fuller organisational mission of bringing about the spiritual nurture of children through their experience of God. At the same time, ‘Christian Witness’ which is part of the organisational mission is mellowed down due to the Buddhist backdrop and history of evangelism in the nation – a culturally-sensitive move to achieve conventional development goals (which is after all the priority of a development organisation), but at the same time, a shortfall in terms of how WVI defines its mission and desired outcomes in relation to its intended beneficiaries.

In addition, there is the co-existence of the ‘secular’ and religious’ where faith-based values and beliefs are differentiated from modernistic development techniques as a result of a response to the current context in the development field. While WVFT is explicitly an FBDO, its modus operandi in relation to community members is not distinctively different from secular organisations, but at the same time, references to their religious values, beliefs and identity are still evident in the organisation.

While it is commendable that WVFT takes a holistic approach in looking beyond the material well-being of its intended beneficiaries to address their spiritual development based on the principles of TD, the extent to which it is demonstrated at the field level is limited in the context of Thailand. Christian values and beliefs at World Vision have stretched to the national level in the Thailand office but they are minimal at the field level. Considerations should hence be made on the steps that can be taken to bring about better integration and translation of faith into development practice by taking into account the contexts. In addition, integration should be carried in ways that not only reflect the faith-based identity of the organisation, but also bring about positive change, both physically and spiritually, to the intended beneficiaries.
References


