Pursuing partnership: World Vision and the ideology of development—a case study

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This paper examines the role of ideology in underpinning the operations of major development movements. As a confessional NGO, World Vision (WV) presents a useful case study; and this article examines the influence on this NGO of the interaction between ideology and wider development trends. It is argued that from roots in a specific cultural expression of Christianity—which enabled a highly focused and homogeneous ethos—WV’s ideology has been transformed by growth and diversification into a fusion of mainstream Christianity and the pursuit of the concept of partnership; a process which underlines the role of development and geo-political forces constantly to challenge NGOs’ self-image and strategic directions.

Introduction

The last 40 years have witnessed a proliferation of development NGOs, of which a few have become major international institutions. The underlying philosophies of these organisations are, however, often lumped together under the catch-all label of humanitarianism. Indeed, NGOs such as Oxfam, Care, Save the Children Fund (SCF), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Plan International (Plan), and World Vision (WV) would all claim that the reality of humanitarian need is essential to their motivations. They might add to this the anger caused by global economic injustice. Over time, these motivations have combined with the emergence of industry-wide development principles—participation, community-ownership, sustainability etc.—to create a loose and evolving set of shared beliefs about the role and objectives of development.

The fact that development NGOs share certain principles or ideologies masks considerable divergence in approach and policies. Some NGOs specialise in relief or development, are operational or non-operational, or have taken further the core principles outlined above. Within this group of large, transnational movements, a smaller set (including Caritas and Lutheran World Foundation) has an additional component within its ideological underpinnings—some form of religious basis. Few other charity sectors exhibit the continuing presence of so many religiously based organisations as does overseas development, with anything up to one-quarter of Northern and international NGOs being ‘Christian’. In the UK alone, four of the largest twelve overseas NGOs are faith-based to some degree.
Despite this, there has been little discussion on the impact on methodologies, organisation, and approach resulting from some form of basis in faith. WV is the largest of this set of Christian agencies—and is typical in having its origins in missionary work, roots that have gradually been superseded by less overtly religious activities in the field of development. WV is, however, more unusual in the degree to which its work has been the subject of external study. The wealth of opinions, views, and commentary on WV make it an ideal subject for a case study on the impact of a basis in faith on development ideology. This paper will, therefore, explore how far such a basis has affected WV’s organisational evolution and development ideology. This will enable comparative assessments of the degree to which a basis in faith creates unique ideological forces that are unlikely to be paralleled within secular NGOs.

‘Ideology’ is taken here to be those core beliefs which provide unity of purpose within almost any effective organisation. Alan Thomas of The Open University has made an interesting attempt to apply Mintzberg’s management theory to NGOs, arguing that internal ideological forces promote cooperation and cohesion just as internal politics create division. It is thus entirely appropriate to consider religion as a provider of ideological unity—indeed a highly homogeneous religious perspective can provide a particularly powerful motivating force. It would, therefore, not be surprising for faith-based NGOs during their early missionary phases to exhibit high levels of ideological unity. Indeed, we shall argue that it was from evangelical roots and beliefs that WV originally drew its aims and objectives; they were the ideological glue binding the organisation together. Thomas’ own description of WV suggested that it is ‘tied together by a common commitment to an evangelical form of Christianity.’

Indeed WV has described itself as being founded from the prayers of the US evangelical pastor, Bob Pierce. His words ‘Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God’ became the movement’s raison d’être. The implications of such a strong ideological agenda for a humanitarian agency’s interactions with the poor, its own donors, and the wider development constituency, are potentially great. WV has itself been subject to much criticism and suspicion as a result of its Christian position. This paper argues that NGOs’ ideologies evolve to different degrees and at different speeds; but just as operational methodology is challenged by the achievements or failures of innovators, so ideology is shaped by wider development thinking and by the hard knocks of history. As an internal commentator, the author will seek not to judge WV’s historical actions, but rather to assess its role in shaping organisational and ideological development.

WV originated in a conservative US Christian agenda, yet by the early 1990s it had come to embrace a mainstream Christian perspective in which Roman Catholics and both Orthodox and Protestant Christians co-exist in a broad inter-denominationalism. This process of change has combined three forces, each of which would have an equally powerful effect on any large NGO—the need to react to external events, the evolution of industry-wide thinking, and the peculiar cultural legacy of the organisation’s founding principles, come together to create both the similarities and differences among large NGO movements.

The process of change within WV has perhaps pushed it to decentralise more rapidly than other NGOs—although several agencies are now choosing a similar approach. Change has also led it to try to come to terms with its original ideology in ways which enable it to engage more fully in the wider NGO world: a process which has created a partnership of development NGOs that is Christian, but free from church sectarianism; an agency which is large, but whose Southern partners wield enormous influence within its corporate structures; an NGO which has moved from political conservatism to being criticised by the Christian
right for its advocacy work and partnership with Marxist regimes; an organisation which has become global, with some 17 industrialised-country partners and over 80 in the South.

**Missionaries fighting Marxism**

WV was founded as a result of the Korean war, the first significant conflict between the largely US-led West and the then unified Communist bloc. It was the suffering caused by the war which ignited the compassion of Bob Pierce. But there is also little doubt that he personally saw the spread of Christianity as part of the battle to prevent the realisation of the ‘domino theory’ which was then haunting the collective US psyche. In 1958, Pierce wrote of his fears of the spread of Communism in a US Christian magazine:

*The Communists are further ahead of us in evangelising the world than they are in science. All over the world the Russians are outreaching us, out sacrificing us, outworking us, outplanning us, out propagandising us and outdying us in order to gain their ends.*

Pierce saw WV as part of the process of redressing this perceived imbalance, providing funding to a variety of established missionary endeavours. He therefore used WV’s growing organisational structures not only to fund orphanages and schools but also to run large conferences for Christian pastors in South-East Asia. This missionary ethos was enshrined within WV’s first Memorandum and Articles of Association which stated that:

*The primary business in which the corporation intends, initially, to engage is to conduct Christian religious and missionary services to assist in improving and ameliorating the moral and social conditions of humanity, to provide services to God’s people which will enable them to accomplish more quickly and efficiently the Great Commission of advancing the Kingdom of God on earth.*

There was throughout WV’s early period an unchallengeable and clear commitment to evangelism as the overarching aim of operational activities. Pierce was determined to ‘win souls for Christ’ and, by extension, deny converts to Communism. In this, WV exemplified the twin but distinct principles of evangelicalism and evangelism. Derived from the same Greek root, the former entails a commitment to the Bible as authoritative, if not unquestionable. The latter is the process of spreading Christianity, usually through missionary work undertaken by committed individuals. However, evangelicals do not necessarily undertake evangelism, and many Christians who evangelise are not evangelical.

In the 1950s, these two principles were fused in a powerful philosophy of Christian social action and energetic evangelism. Aid and missionary work were both seen as intrinsic to WV’s expanding country programmes. The first two activities in India were the opening of a medical clinic in Calcutta and the purchase of a large tent for evangelistic crusades. Initially, this work was frequently undertaken in conjunction with Billy Graham’s ‘Youth for Christ’ organisation to which WV supplied financial and logistical support. In 1957, WV made its first move to fundraise outside the USA by opening a Canadian office to assist with supporting some 9,000 orphans, and a growing range of activities across Asia and then in Africa.

The steady growth of WV reflected the high level of ideological commitment possible in such a homogeneous agency that was substantially the product of one man, Bob Pierce. Decision-making power was concentrated in his hands and this enabled the degree of flexibility which helped WV maintain its profile within its constituency. Pierce was unusual among US missionary leaders for promoting the idea of national leadership in overseas...
programmes and for promoting the concept of partnership with local churches. His worldview was, however, conservatively Biblical, uninfluenced by the aspirations for accelerated development being articulated in many newly independent states. The homogeneity of that worldview within WV created a unity of purpose as the agency projected itself into the human tragedies in the South-East Asia of the 1960s.

Vietnam and the new worldview

As WV greeted the 1960s, the earlier flexible management style was retained. In his account of its development, ex-World Vision International (WVI) president Graeme Irvine concluded that:

*Anyone looking at World Vision would see an organisation that was action-orientated, centred around Bob Pierce himself, strongly evangelical, innovative and progressive. As with most things, there was another side to the coin. These apparent strengths had corresponding weaknesses: instability, dependent on the idea and personality of one person, narrow relationships and limited international perspective.* (Irvine 1996:22)

The increasing difficulties caused by retaining a structure dominated by Pierce would eventually lead to his departure in 1967. Organisational change, however, did not entail a rethink of the extensive commitment to humanitarian work resulting from the Vietnam conflict. As this spread to Cambodia and Laos, the available resources mushroomed and WV became a significant presence in each country. In the 1960s, few agencies had fully addressed the ethical and contextual issues arising from operations in areas of conflict. In Biafra, aid agencies were to be accused of prolonging war by up to two years as a result of their relief interventions. In Vietnam, assumptions were made by WV staff which rested largely on expatriates’ view of the conflict. The legitimacy of the conflict and the role of US troops were not questioned by WV as they were by many European observers and eventually by the US public. World Vision thus laid itself open to accusations of complicity in military strategies such as villageisation and the ‘hearts and minds’ campaigns waged by South Vietnam and its US backers.

With hindsight, the lack of an outcry by humanitarian workers in the midst of the large-scale use of chemical weapons or of ‘Operation Phoenix’, seems remarkable. At the time, however, the idealism of young US (and some Australian and European) evangelical aid workers did not create a natural environment for anti-war protest (Nichols 1988:104). Indeed, the location of the WV office near to the US Embassy in Saigon was later to fuel charges that the agency was more than ready to act as a tool of US policy. An academic review of US Christian NGOs and their relations with the US government during this period includes a study of WV’s work in controversial conditions on the Lao–Thai border just after the war, in an attempt to examine NGO thinking. Its conclusions largely absolve the NGOs concerned of intentionally seeking to further US policies in the region. Indeed, despite internal confusion, WV had sought to maintain a neutral stance. Nichols points to a reality in which aid workers exhibited a marked degree of naivety. NGOs working there were in a largely new situation: there was no precedent for their role, or for their relationship with the US military and the three US-backed regimes (ibid., Chapter 9).

The negative impact of WV’s perceived impartiality was one of several factors arising from the Vietnam experience to press the agency towards organisational reform, and with it, new ideological directions. Internally, there was heightened awareness of the agency’s US image, adding to existing concerns from other funders about international structures. However, the impact of external criticism seemed then somewhat marginal to many WV
fundraising and field staff. Their minds were instead largely preoccupied by WV’s near collapse in the wake of the fall of Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh.

Despite welcome media coverage of efforts to airlift Cambodian babies in the last days of the war, WV faced an organisational crisis caused by the loss of its long-term work and the potential loss of the associated funding. The need to find new children to sponsor was to lead to the hasty creation of new programmes that were ultimately to prove problematic. A major influx of children for sponsorship arose from the wholesale take-over of another NGO’s work in Latin America, but the mismatch in organisational styles would take time to resolve.

Internationalisation and ideological change

The agency was able to survive both its operational crisis in the mid-1970s, and also the increasing criticism of its naivety during the Vietnam War, partly as a result of its traditional flexibility, best exhibited through innovative, but media-friendly, relief work. These activities—for example, Operation SeaSweep, in which a chartered ship was used to search the Pacific and South China Sea for Vietnamese boat-people—became a new focus for fundraising.

Mere survival was, however, not sufficient to placate growing internal questioning of WV’s role and its need for reform. By the mid-1970s, WV had large fundraising offices in Canada and Australia, and mature operational programmes in several countries, but overall management control still rested with the US parent office. Its president, Stan Mooneyham, was aware of increasing calls for a more democratic and accountable operational system. Equally, the experience of Vietnam had driven home lessons on the danger of internal domination by a single culture and national perspective.

Mooneyham, a fallible visionary, was not unsympathetic to these issues. His own perspective was grounded in a more solid appreciation than that of his predecessor of the realities of development and the global, geo-political context. His speeches and articles sought to convey the scale of world poverty and endorsed UN definitions of both human rights and targets for social improvements. As early as 1975, he was cautioning the US public that the world held no black and white certainties, arguing instead that traditional evangelical categorisations were unsustainable. He initiated a significant change in how WV saw and presented itself. By the mid-1970s, the language of missionary work was waning as WV staff were increasingly described as ‘relief’ or ‘aid’ workers, formalising a shift in self-definition that had already been taking place over several years on the ground.

Changes of language were matched by new concepts of WV’s role. In 1974, the combined Boards of World Vision established a new area of ‘Ministry’, to be known as Development. The intention was that ‘[i]n contrast to World Vision’s relief ministry, development was to address the causes of poverty and find ways of effectively helping people to help themselves’. Putting this approach into practice included a restructuring of operations to enable a move away from simply funding Christian mission organisations and towards developing WV’s own programmes and projects, and so becoming an operational development NGO. Thus WV in Bangladesh, which had traditionally funded the work of the Australian Baptists Missionary Society, began a series of operational child sponsorship projects supervised by a new office in Dhaka.

The process was given further form with Mooneyham’s initiative to deal with the criticism from non-US WV offices by establishing a committee to look at internationalisation (Irvine 1996:78–83). It included representatives from WV’s offices in Canada and Australia in
addition to national representatives from the more established operational programmes such as Thailand and India. Its 1976 report stated that:

The emphasis was not on creating an international partnership, this existed. The emphasis was on how to make it more effective. At heart however, internationalisation is more than process or structure, it is an attitude. Structure is no substitute for spirit.

The result was WV’s Declaration of Internationalisation which became effective on 31 May 1978. This committed WV to break from its US-centric past through creating a new partnership secretariat and implementing body, World Vision International (WVI), to be governed collectively by the agency’s constituents through a Triennial Council and Board.

The Declaration is an ungainly mixture of Christian and development jargon; the language of the church is retained but is used to express aims that are no longer those of traditional missionaries but similar to those of any aid agency. It forms a bridge in WV’s evolution. It is the first major document which gives greater weight to aid rather than to evangelism, and is also the first to capture the idea of a diverse and autonomous international partnership. With the process of internationalisation, then, a new binding concept had emerged to maintain WV’s unity: that of partnership. Even in 1976, internal voices were calling for this to be taken to its logical conclusion with strict equality between North and South. Irvine recalled that one Board Member

... urged that recipient nations be fully part of the partnership. He recognised that our initial structure was international only in Western terms. Over the years greater balance has evolved, and continues to evolve. (Irvine 1996:82)

The realisation that partnership could be taken further was to gain ground and in time be accepted as a goal to be pursued with zeal.

Internationalisation under fire

At the end of the 1970s, WV faced the test of translating internationalisation into a practical mechanism for development while the new operational body, WVI, was challenged by a legacy of problems in the existing programmes.

One such problem related to WV’s work in South-East Asia. The agency had entered Cambodia following the US-backed coup by General Lon Nol, partly motivated by the long-standing personal commitment to the country of Stan Mooneyham (Irvine 1996:41). By 1975, the programme was caught up in the imminent collapse of the regime under pressure from Khmer Rouge forces. It is now estimated that although WV’s expatriate staff were safely evacuated in 1975, over 100 local staff died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia suffered four years of brutal repression before the Vietnamese army finally drove the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979. Within weeks of the installation of a Vietnam-backed regime, WV became one of the first major Western aid agencies to return to Cambodia, committing itself to re-opening the National Paediatric Hospital and to developing the fledgling government’s capacity to provide healthcare.

Cambodia was to become WV’s first experience in providing significant assistance to a Marxist regime and thus marked a clear split from US policy interests. Throughout the 1980s, WV was to ignore the international isolation of Cambodia, spending millions of dollars there each year, and becoming increasingly vocal on the need to recognise the Cambodian government and end all assistance to the resurgent Khmer Rouge. Commitment to Cambodia was a question of keeping faith with a deeply impoverished and traumatised people, a product perhaps more of WV’s Christian values than of any assessment of the global political
environment. Even so, it showed that these underlying values could bring the agency into conflict with wider Western policies and interests.

WV then grew more willing to reject Western policy in other regions, such as funding work in Sandinista-governed Nicaragua. Such actions represented a break with a traditionally cautious approach to challenging the views of WV’s funding constituency, putting at risk its conservative, evangelical middle-America credentials. A long-running programme in support of Palestinian human and civil rights was the object of significant criticism from within this constituency, but by the late 1980s WV had already decided in principle to sacrifice support in order to pursue legitimate justice goals.

Turf wars

World Vision’s rapid growth in the late 1970s had given it the financial basis from which to consider expansion. But this global spread, and the diversification it spurred, was to prove the greatest single factor in making some form of further ideological change inevitable. The agency had already begun to encourage long-standing offices in the newly industrialising countries of South-East Asia to develop their own fundraising work. In 1979, new WV offices opened in the UK and Germany, soon followed by smaller off-shoots in The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, and Switzerland. Expansion into Europe naturally resulted in the introduction of new ideological perspectives, sharpened by a sometimes more hostile environment than that faced by established offices in Canada, Australia, and the US.

The agency sought to reassure existing European charities that it would focus on creating new donors rather than siphoning off resources from long-established NGOs such as Oxfam and SCF. Further assurances were given to some Christian NGOs, with WV-UK for instance making a 15-year commitment not to fundraise in churches. Such measures gave the new offices substantially different characteristics. For example, WV-UK developed a largely secular support base, and which continued to focus on development education rather than church-based fundraising long after the 15-year agreement had expired.

Nevertheless, there was a strong adverse reaction to the arrival of a new ‘competitor’, particularly in the UK. Established NGOs linked to church establishments became the fiercest critics and raised the now outdated spectre of a right-wing, fundamentalist Christian group, bent on using cheap emotionalism to grab a large share of UK fundraising. Many of WV’s recent crises were used as arguments to bar it from aid agency coalitions. It can only be assumed that for these NGOs, the prospect of a denominationally broad and increasingly politically progressive new Christian agency was unappealing. Benthall suggests that snobbery was a factor:

The root of the problem is that WV, while holding to what they call a ‘traditional’ protestant view of the church, works willingly with all those who call themselves Christians. In Britain the biggest single denominational grouping among their staff is the Anglican church and in the USA 20 per cent of their staff are Catholic. Yet WV prefers to bypass church hierarchies: only one of the 19 members of the WV Board of Directors is ordained,¹⁰ and not a single member of the UK Board. By contrast, the longer established Christian agencies are directly controlled by the various churches .... These Christian agencies would appear sometimes to wish that World Vision would go away, and they are in general slightly more antagonistic than are the secular agencies, forgetting perhaps that WV’s constitution as a religious ministry outside the established churches is comparable to that of the Salvation Army, which is not generally regarded as a threat. (Benthall 1993:163)
Criticism by these mainly non-operational agencies became unsustainable as other charities gained experience of working with WV. As WV staff attended more inter-agency meetings, the idea that they represented a stereotyped Christian perspective also became harder for critics to maintain. Unlike other Christian development agencies, WV-UK never had a policy of employing only evangelicals, embracing a broad range of Christian opinions. All the same, such criticism gave the European offices a sense of having a unique stake in the image and identity of the partnership as a whole, which led to a disproportionate level of activism in organisational and ideological debates.

**Reconciling ideological change and diversity**

The creation of new autonomous funding entities contributed to changing the nature and composition of the international WV partnership. WVI rapidly learned that establishing new fundraising bodies—effectively new parts of its own governing structure—was vastly different to setting up subordinate field offices:

*World Vision UK is a new and relatively small office in the World Vision partnership (compared to Australia, Canada and the United States) but it has quickly established itself as a vital participant in public policy discussions both within the World Vision partnership and in the UK. (Commins 1997).*

Behind this rapid progress was occasionally intense divergence as the European WVs sought to press on the wider partnership their wish for WV to be more in the European NGO mould. This expansion had brought in development professionals schooled in the ideological basis of both methodology and ethics prevalent in Europe. It had also introduced a sudden injection of staff from the more political churches, including those adhering to the long tradition of left-of-centre Christianity. World Vision’s own reports point to instances of dramatic conflict as the new mix of cultural and ideological perspectives found some form of balance.11

The partnership’s continued cohesion was perhaps made more tenable by the ongoing drift of WV-US, the largest fundraising entity, towards the Christian mainstream and away from a narrow evangelical position. As WV became more nuanced politically, it was inevitable that it would come under criticism. An early sign of dissent came with the establishment of rival conservative-evangelical agencies by former employees.

As already mentioned, WV’s policy positions on Palestinian human rights drew fierce opposition from extreme US evangelicals, who consider a strong Israeli state to be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Closer links with mainstream institutions such as the World Council of Churches, including occasional partnership on advocacy, reflected the development of operational programmes based on ecumenical partnerships with local churches.12

So where does this leave the original—highly homogeneous—ideological underpinnings of the world’s largest voluntary-funded NGO? It is clear that WV’s evangelical position is no longer so homogeneous. Internationally, it has become diverse and complex, and moved substantially toward a more politically engaged evangelical approach. The theologian Nigel Wright has suggested that the evangelical community worldwide has become so diverse that seven separate categories of views can be discerned: fundamentalist, conservative, new, justice and peace, charismatic, ecumenical, and radical. The latter is a group which Wright (1996) believes has emerged from the conservative evangelical stable. Radical evangelicals have a continuing affinity with the conservatives in their attachment to biblical principles, but this is overlaid with a commitment to social justice and a willingness to cooperate across doctrinal divides. Wright believes that radical evangelicals work most comfortably with the traditionally liberal wing of evangelicalism: justice and peace, and ecumenical evangelicals.

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His analysis offers an interesting parallel to WV’s conceptual journey. The agency was originally closer to conservative evangelicalism than to fundamentalism, and its organisational development, particularly its concern for action on the causes of poverty, has perhaps made the radical evangelical label more accurate than any other.

Operational methodology and partnership: creating a new strand of ideology?

In 1984, the WV Board made a radical break from the past by appointing the partnership’s first non-US president. Houston, a Scot, joined an NGO which now operated in over 80 countries with a budget of some US$150 million. Although relief and government funding were important, the core of WV’s funding continued to be for Child Sponsorship projects, through which individual donors made monthly contributions towards a community’s development activities. The Houston period saw dramatic steps forward in the use of new methodologies to ensure the developmental quality of these programmes.

The transformation of WV into a relief and development agency was producing pressures for increasingly innovative and community-owned methods of working. Child sponsorship was moving away from institutional partners such as orphanages to communities forming their own committees to start up projects, using WV funding for income-generation, health, and educational activities. This shift was to bear fruit through activities such as the Urban Advance Initiative launched in 1987—a highly political approach to local problems in which WV abandoned traditional resource-centred strategies in order to assist transient urban slum populations. Communities were encouraged to form representative groups which could lobby authorities for improved amenities and to establish cooperatives. These ‘empowering’ principles were to be replicated in cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as in inner cities in the USA, Australia, and the UK.

Houston oversaw not only the entrenchment of WV’s community development approach but also its response to large-scale famine in the Horn of Africa. Houston visited Ethiopia early in the 1984–86 crisis. During the two years that followed, WV shifted huge volumes of foodstuffs and other relief supplies, trying to cope both with the logistical problems caused by the scale of the famine and the explosion in public concern that swamped fund-raising offices. As the famine receded, WV’s policy in Ethiopia was to become indicative of the approach taken by an NGO seeking to transfer initiative to the South. Prior to the famine, a small national programme was managed by local staff. The famine crisis overwhelmed these foundations with the influx of expatriate relief specialists trying to supply feeding centres that were catering for vast numbers. As the crisis abated, WV quickly acted to remove its foreign personnel. Under local leadership, WV-Ethiopia now faced the challenge of implementing one of the largest and most heavily funded programmes in the partnership.

The Ethiopia experience substantially affected WV as an international agency—its income had risen to some US$250 million by 1986 and its efforts to publicise the famine had also raised its profile. These changes in WV’s size and structure were matched by a radically different view of its approach to development. It would be surprising if a transformation of this magnitude did not give rise to questions about its underlying strategy and vision.

Southern leadership and global advocacy

The internationalisation process was one of decentralisation and federalisation. The reality of an increasingly diverse partnership of autonomous Northern offices had been made more complex by the growing numbers of Southern partners that had also achieved considerable
autonomy. WV had promoted the principle that all Southern offices should aim to become fully national, having local legal registration and local Boards with management control over operational staff. This process created strong, almost indigenous, local NGOs and brought with it new problems, such as the inability to remove local management which was considered inefficient, or directly to enforce central policy.

The new WVI president, Graeme Irvine, was an Australian who was a committed advocate of partnership as the agency’s guiding organisational principle having issued a paper on WV’s international structures which emphasised the need for a participatory, flexible, and decentralised approach. The 18-person WVI board to which the president reported now comprised 12 nationalities, with the partnership’s largest single office, WV-US, entitled to no more than four seats. Irvine recognised that:

\[\textit{In an organisation of the size, diversity and geographical dispersion of World Vision, a high degree of decentralisation is essential. This requires that decisions are made as close to the point of operation as possible within a well understood framework of policy, values and objectives.}^{13}\]

The post-1989 period saw the further decentralisation of partnership power, while WV’s overall work in the fields of advocacy and government relations was consolidated. An initial step was to intensify the agency’s call for an end to the isolation of Cambodia, followed quickly by new initiatives on the issue of landmines,\(^ {14}\) gender, and child rights. To assist in this, Irvine appointed Stephen Commins, a professor at UCLA and writer on structural adjustment issues, as Policy Adviser. This contributed to a spate of new thinking as WV looked at its relationships with institutions such as the World Bank.

Rebuilding ideological foundations

By the close of the 1980s, WV had undergone a dramatic 15-year period of transformation. A largely non-operational, evangelical, US-run charity had become an international and diverse partnership focused on operational relief and development activities. These changes had entailed a shift away from the homogeneous set of evangelical core beliefs which had contributed to WV’s early drive and momentum. It now contained an unwieldy diversity of views on the meaning and implications of evangelical beliefs, and indeed many staff had been drawn from outside the evangelical fold. It was inevitable that this would create the seeds of potential confusion and even a crisis of both self-definition and organisational philosophy.

The vast majority of WV staff were still Christian and all key documents still expressed a commitment to Christian values, but the ability of Christianity to act as a glue binding a diverse organisation together was hampered by the failure to articulate what this less homogeneous Christian ideology should mean. Irvine thus sought to translate WV’s Christian philosophy into a new ideological framework. Three documents were drafted to provide an agreed basis of identity, purpose, and inter-office relationships—Core Values, Mission Statement, and a Covenant of Partnership—to be agreed through a process involving all 40 national Boards.

The new Mission Statement now listed relief, development, and justice as key mission areas. The ethos of ‘following’ Christ rather than promoting an aggressive brand of Christianity was also emphasised by reference to ‘Christian Witness’ rather than evangelism. This change in the relationship between WV and its evangelistic roots became a considerable source of discussion as various members pushed for more or less emphasis on evangelistic activity. Officially, the partnership stood by an apparently hard-line policy on evangelism,\(^ {15}\)
the assertive wording of which led WV to find scholarly clarification, making clear that its concept was non-aggressive in character. As a result, a Christian Witness Commission was formed with staff from Northern and Southern offices which eventually produced a new ‘Christian Witness Policy’ espousing a more introspective and culturally-sensitive desire to demonstrate and articulate Christian concern. The Commission also confirmed WV’s existing ban on the use of aid for proselytism (i.e. making the receipt of aid conditional on religious conversion by using coercion or inducements).

The conceptual and policy change during this period was so remarkable that some commentators still find it almost inconceivable. Commenting on WV’s 1995 statement on economic growth, David Sogge (1996:146) wrote that it suggested:

… that even agencies steeped in the politics of the religious right and the Cold War can reach the point—at least in their rhetoric—of smashing their icons and rejecting old orthodoxies.

Sogge had, however, largely missed the point. The old orthodoxies had been tenable only in the context of the highly homogeneous agency of the 1950s and 1960s. The diversity and evolution of WV had forced it to outgrow old assumptions, and new policies had become just one expression of this process. Indeed, the reform of WV’s unifying beliefs extended considerably beyond its rhetoric both to its own constitutional documents and to its operational codes for relief and development practices in the South. In 1993, New Memoranda and Articles of Association finally broke with the original wording of those drafted under Pierce’s instruction.

Initiatives such as the Christian Witness Commission, the new Mission Statement, and the raft of new policies and advocacy positions were frequently a response to internal tensions within the partnership. The sheer size of WV in the early 1990s—100 entities with varying degrees of autonomy and over 6,000 full-time staff—created the potential for time-consuming and damaging internal tensions. By then, WV’s claim to uphold the idea of partnership was creating internal pressures for further revision of corporate governance structures, not dissimilar to the forces which had provoked the original reforms at the end of the 1970s. The WVI Board sought to meet these challenges head-on through a ‘Partnership Task Force’ charged with mapping a new future for the partnership.

**Partnership: a new ideology?**

The principle of partnership had conferred a unique attribute on the WV NGO family. In addition to being the only member of the club of the largest Christian transnational, it was also arguably the one to have offered its constituents, North and South, the greatest autonomy. WV’s struggle for self-definition had resulted in partnership becoming not simply a working-out of a Christian ethos, but also a source of self-definition in its own right. Indeed, the phrase ‘World Vision Partnership’ had long been the overriding internal description (Irvine 1996:85). The concept of partnership as the operational translation of Christian principles was to gain a momentum of its own, and the exact implications of partnership for organisational development had become a constant issue for the movement.

If partnership was taking on an ideological as well as an organisational role, albeit subsidiary to that of Christianity, then the Task Force was established to give the theory real form. It was designed to be representative of WV’s Council, Board, national entities and management. Its report called for a radical deepening by WV of its existing attempt to create equal relationships between Northern and Southern members and recommended that the WV Partnership should consist of equal members conforming to a common set of criteria.
The structure of WV entered a transition towards this new constitutional arrangement, due to be completed in September 1998 when it was expected that 46 WV entities would be full members, 29 from the South. Even in transition, WV represented a stark contrast to the centralised approach favoured by many comparable NGOs. Ian Smillie (1995:206) remarks that:

World Vision has probably devolved more than other transnationals. Head office staff number fell dramatically from almost 500 in 1989 to 150 in 1994.¹⁹ The organisation is responsible to an 86-person council, elected from advisory councils and boards elsewhere, and is more or less equally divided in make-up between north and south. The Board is made up of representatives from World Vision operations worldwide. Roughly half of the Southern operations, including Thailand, India, Kenya, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, have been recognised in a category which includes provision for a local advisory council or Board of Directors, and eligibility for representatives to serve on the international Council and Board.

The role of partnership within WV’s philosophical make-up enables its overarching Christian ideology to be complemented by a seemingly tangible goal. The modern WV has underlined the ability of the principle of partnership to stimulate considerable unity of purpose.

Conclusion

As WV has sought to learn from its pre-1978 history, it might be argued that the original philosophy of evangelicalism has been replaced with an ideology of partnership. Clearly, during the process by which WV switched to an emphasis on relief and development work, rather than evangelism, the wider ideological preoccupation of the development business also had a significant impact. Like other development NGOs, WV became focused in the 1980s and 1990s on the role of participation, community ownership, and sustainability. Coupled with a history of sometimes explosive growth, considerable diversification, and periodic controversy, it is not surprising that WV’s evolution would dislocate its underlying ideological basis. Charles Elliott captured the tension by talking of a:

... difficult transition from a compassionate concern for the victims of war and poverty to a well informed, strategic and often frustrating engagement with the fundamental causes of conflict and impoverishment. This shift has challenged World Vision to its roots, in both a metaphorical and literal sense. (Foreword to Irvine 1996:2)

In the case of WV, it was perhaps the idea of empowerment, a development vogue in the 1980s, which connected naturally to its own long-standing principles of partnership, to create a new momentum for change. It is splitting fine hairs to decide whether this was a radical departure from the old WV or a seamless progression from the tendency towards Southern leadership in local development which had featured even in Pierce’s early work. Partnership had already become a concept of organisational development which was firmly ingrained in WV’s culture even before 1978. For most of those within WV, then, it is probably fair to say that the rise of the ideology of partnership is viewed as a natural out-growth of a Christian ethos rather than as a replacement for the NGO’s early evangelical ideology.

The Christian basis of WV has itself clearly changed as the partnership has sought to embrace a broader view of the Christian community. Despite this, WV has avoided the route followed by other Christian NGOs of largely secularising its professional staffing and structures. The result has, therefore, been a more diverse, but still unquestionably Christian, agency. The tensions between the reality of managing a professional development agency

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¹⁹ Footnotes are not available in the text.
working to traditional ‘industry’ technical standards while remaining true to Christian values was perhaps best illustrated in WV’s own Partnership Task Force Report, which states:

In our survey we asked both staff and entity directors what metaphor they would use to describe how WVI works day-to-day. Some felt we resembled a multinational corporation, others a federation, a strategic alliance, even a loose affiliation. However, when asked what metaphor should describe our working relationship the overwhelming consensus was that of the Body [St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 12]. Using the body of Christ to picture the structure of our work and relationships—where each member of the body is important and valuable, functioning according to their role and gifts as given by God.20

In reality, the new organisational philosophies of broad Christian values and pursuit of the ideal of partnership sit neatly together. The former may lack the energy of the early evangelical zealots, an energy which was crucial to early growth and unity, but this is compensated by the impetus provided by the latter. In translating its Christian values into an organisational structure—partnership—WV has given itself a new cause. Equally, its attempt to apply these values to issues of justice and advocacy has challenged its relationships and forced a reappraisal of its positions.

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Notes

2 ibid.:9.
4 Articles of Incorporation of World Vision Incorporated, filed with the State of California, 22 September 1950.
5 Significant distance exists between the liberal and conservative extremes of evangelicalism, but evangelical beliefs are usually seen as distinguished by a belief in the doctrine of the trinity; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his role in human salvation; the need for personal acceptance of the person and work of Jesus Christ; the Bible alone as the final arbiter of faith and practice; and the need for Christians to communicate their faith to others.
6 World Vision reports from the early ‘Vietnam period’ stress the significance of the war in fundraising and relief terms, a time when many of WV’s overseas projects were undertaken on a non-operational basis by local church partners. See World Vision International Annual Reports, 1 October 1966 to 30 September 1967.
10 In fact there were four ordained Board members at the time.
12 A well-known example of WV’s cooperation with a range of denominational groups is its Lebanon programme (Bennett in Bennett et al. 1995).
17 The stylistic and substantive differences between the original ‘Policy and Evangelism’ and the later ‘Policy on Witness to Jesus Christ’ typifies the more thoughtful policy style of World Vision in the Irvine/Hirsch period. See As We Walk Together, Key Document of the World Vision Partnership, WVI, Monrovia, California 1996:29.
19 Staff in the International Office of WVI in fact never exceeded 250.

References


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