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Addressing dependency with faith and hope: the Eagles Relief and Development Programme of the Living Waters church in Malawi

Rick James

The evolution and achievements of the Eagles Relief and Development Programme in Malawi are inspired and influenced by Christian values. The strength of Eagles comes from its integration of religious teaching and values with the way it works and from its decision to work through the local congregations, despite the challenges that such integration entails. The Eagles Programme challenges the stereotype of Pentecostal churches as being preoccupied with providing charity and welfare rather than justice for the poor. This case study shows how combining an explicitly Christian approach with recognised good development practice can lead to sustainable impact in a profoundly challenging context.

Lutter contre la dépendance par la foi et l'espoir : l'Eagles Relief and Development Programme of the Living Waters au Malawi

L'évolution et les réussites de l'Eagles Relief and Development Programme au Malawi s'inspirent de valeurs chrétiennes et sont influencées par elles. La force de ce programme réside dans son intégration de l'enseignement et des valeurs religieuses dans sa manière de travailler et de sa décision d'œuvrer à travers les congrégations locales de l'institution religieuse à laquelle il est associé, la Living Waters Church, malgré les difficultés que pose cette intégration. Le programme Eagles met en question le stéréotype concernant les Églises pentecôtistes comme s'intéressant davantage à la charité et à l'assistance qu'à la justice pour les pauvres. Cette étude de cas montre comment, en conjuguant une approche explicitement chrétienne et de bonnes pratiques de développement reconnues, il est possible d'obtenir un impact durable dans un contexte des plus difficiles.

Abordando a dependência com fé e esperança: a Eagles Relief e o Programa de Desenvolvimento da igreja Living Waters em Malauí

A evolução e as conquistas da Eagles Relief e do Programa de Desenvolvimento em Malauí são inspiradas e influenciadas por valores cristãos. A força da Eagles vem de sua integração de ensinamentos e valores religiosos com a maneira como ela atua e de sua decisão de trabalhar através das congregações locais da instituição religiosa com a qual ela é associada, a igreja Living Waters, apesar dos desafios que tal integração proporciona. O Programa da Eagles desafia o estereótipo de igrejas Pentecostais como a preocupação em fornecer assistência

humanitária e bem-estar em vez de justiça para os pobres. Este estudo de caso mostra como combinando uma abordagem explicitamente cristã com práticas de desenvolvimento reconhecidas como adequadas pode levar a um impacto sustentável em um contexto profundamente desafiador.

Enfrentando la dependencia con fe y esperanza: el Programa Águilas de Ayuda y Desarrollo de la iglesia Aguas Vivas de Malawi

Los valores cristianos han sido fundamentales para la evolución y los logros del Programa Águilas de Ayuda y Desarrollo en Malawi. La vitalidad del Programa Águilas se debe a la integración de las enseñanzas y los valores religiosos en su forma de trabajar y también a su decisión de trabajar a través de las congregaciones locales de la iglesia Aguas Vivas, a pesar de los retos que la integración conlleva. El Programa Águilas cuestiona la idea aceptada comúnmente de que las iglesias pentecostales se ocupan más de la caridad y del bienestar que de la justicia para los pobres. Este estudio de caso demuestra cómo se puede integrar un enfoque explícitamente cristiano en un reconocido programa de desarrollo para lograr un impacto sostenible en un contexto difícil.

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Rights

Introduction

Pentecostal churches are not usually renowned for their social development work. Instead, some have a reputation for being too ‘heavenly minded to be of much earthly use’ (as the saying goes). Those that do get involved in helping the poor frequently take a welfare-oriented approach.¹ Eagles Relief and Development Programme in Malawi (an independent trust under the auspices of the Living Waters church), however, challenges this stereotype. In the ten years since Eagles started, its staff of ten people have mobilised and equipped more than 110 local congregations across Malawi with the vision, skills, and attitudes to start social development initiatives in their communities. They have also catalysed ground-breaking advocacy work with landowners, cotton-buyers, and sugar companies, as well as local and national government. The Programme’s approach is explicitly based on Christian teaching, working with local congregations, and lessons from recent local development practice. The Programme integrates an intentionally faith-oriented approach with recognised good practice in community development. This approach has challenged the dependency mind-set and brought tangible change to some of the poorest communities in Malawi. In this case study, the origins of the organisation, the ways in which it mobilised support from the wider church with which it is associated, how it has learned from its own experience and some evidence of its impact are described, before identifying the key principles derived from Christian teaching that underpin its approach. Before concluding, some of the challenges it continues to face are outlined.²

The start-up

When the food crisis of 2002 hit Malawi, it was already one of the poorest countries in the world. Of the 12 million population, 85 per cent were dependent on agriculture for survival; more than 14 per cent of adults were HIV positive; life expectancy was just 38 years; and the death of one or both parents had left more than one million orphans (James 2006; Kates and Leggoe 2005). Living Waters, an indigenous Pentecostal church, set up by Stanley

Ndovie in 1985 (in 2002 with more than 400 congregations and approximately 50,000 members) wanted to respond to the food crisis, but was not sure how. A UK church donated money, so the church leader started by asking one of his pastors to purchase and distribute food. While this was a positive intention, key members of the church who had development experience advised that this was an expensive and short-term response that other agencies were better placed to perform. These individuals were asked by the church leader to form a steering committee. The committee was comprised of people with specific expertise in agriculture, development, finance, and law, as well as three motivated pastors from the church. It helped the church to form a trust, legally separate from the church, but with church members and leaders in governance positions. This group guided 'Eagles' in its inception and later became its official Board of Governance.

The group began by intentionally seeking to learn from others. Two of the steering group were able to attend a short seminar on disaster mitigation with NGOs from across sub-Saharan Africa, in 2002. They also observed how others were responding to the food crisis in Malawi. While visiting one food distribution by a large international NGO, one young Living Waters pastor asked a widow waiting in the queue what she would do next after receiving the food. She replied: *'I'll just go home and wait until the food hand-out comes next month'*. He was deeply disturbed by her answer.

As a result, the steering committee dreamt of an alternative bottom-up approach to change that did not depend on outside aid. They envisaged mobilising churches and communities to work together to address their identified priorities, access their rights and bring about holistic change. They believed that the 400-plus Living Waters congregations throughout Malawi were a vital resource for helping communities physically, spiritually, environmentally, emotionally, and materially.

Mobilising church leaders

The group called more than 150 leaders of the Living Waters church to two-day workshops in each of Malawi's three regions in 2002 and 2003. The seminars focused on the biblical basis for working with poor people and on helping leaders generate ideas of how their churches could respond to the crisis, *even if they had no external funds or resources*. The seminars highlighted how much the Bible emphasises responding to the needs of the poor (with 327 verses on poverty and justice, compared to just 42 on preaching, six on missions, and three on evangelism). The events were also highly practical and applied. Pastors learned how to carry out simple needs assessments. They then developed simple action plans of what they would do when they got back home: how they would share their learning with the leaders and members of their churches, and then how they could respond to needs in their own communities. The aim was for the pastors and subsequently their congregations to understand their responsibility to care for the poor, to start to be role models of good food security practices, and to become change agents in their own communities.

Over the years Eagles has continued to organise short seminars for local church leaders to reinforce these messages. It has also provided follow-up training in more technical areas such as food security and HIV/AIDS.

Eagles employs two church mobilisation coordinators whose role is to provide ongoing encouragement, advice, ideas, and moral support to the churches that have initiated social work in their communities. They visit as many of the congregations as their resources allow.

Eagles has also developed a curriculum for a module entitled ‘God’s Heart for the Poor’ for the Bible School in Blantyre, where pastors are trained (see Box 1). Eagles staff train more than 50 pastors each year, covering both biblical principles and good development practice. The impact of this work is sometimes remarkable.

Box 1: Topics in ‘God’s heart for the Poor’

Who are the poor? Why are people poor? The church mandate for the poor Principles of development Justice and Human rights Participation for long-term change Defeating dependency Practice of participation Needs assessment Planning and action Monitoring and evaluation Strategies for addressing Food Security Strategies for addressing HIV
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For example, in 2006, one pastor telephoned Eagles a couple of months after graduating, saying

Can you help? You taught us on the course that we should always start by talking with the local leadership. So I spoke to the group village headman, introduced myself as a new pastor wanting to help in social development work in the village I was based in. He said that I could not just work in one village, but had to work in all 120 villages that he was headman for. I negotiated, but still he has invited 108 village chiefs to meet with me next week. What do I do?

With support from Eagles, the young pastor helped the chiefs to prioritise their problems and design a realistic response. They decided to set up 21 community-based childcare centres where people from all the villages could leave their under-five children each day. The purpose was to enable mothers to work in the fields unencumbered, provide the children with at least one solid meal a day, and help to start the children’s pre-school education process. The communities themselves provided all the volunteer teachers, food, and venues. In 2012, 27 of these childcare centres are operating, without any external support. Similar cooperation between churches and local leaders has given rise to other community development initiatives. For example one community has launched a village savings and loans scheme, started a community woodlot, and encouraged the use of fuel-efficient stoves.³

Learning from own practice

As well as working on mobilising the churches nationally, Eagles chose to focus more intensively on one of the worst-affected areas of the country, the district of Chikwawa, in the

southern part of the country (where 98 per cent of people had no food in 2002). Drawing on participatory learning and action methods, Eagles staff from the Chikwawa programme (with the village headmen) brought together all the adults in the communities to analyse their problems, define the root causes and work out what they could do, even without external funds. Each community group initially prioritised one activity. Some villages decided to develop community gardens where they could grow more diversified and drought-resistant crops, such as cassava and sweet potato, and where they could learn to multiply seed; others decided to start by planting a woodlot to address problems of flooding and soil fertility. Eagles has found itself promoting the use of conservation farming approaches to deal with the impact of climate change in such vulnerable areas (FAO 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). The activities in one village in Chikwawa district are described in Box 2.

Box 2: Transformation

Seven years ago in Fombe village, there was no food left at all; children were severely malnourished and people were scavenging for roots to eat. People had given up hope of having a better life, resorting to excessive beer drinking instead. People were adept at giving false information to visitors with the aim of soliciting hand-outs. Fraud, corruption and theft (even of food relief) was rife. But after some years of work from Eagles staff, the village now has a community vision and plan. A community committee inspires and coordinates development initiatives. Villagers are growing a range of crops and are rearing guinea fowl and goats. Harvests have improved dramatically. They have set up a child-care centre and a support club for people with HIV. Much of this has been done without external support, but where such support has been needed they have successfully lobbied for support from various Government departments. As Chief Fombe says: 'Now as village headman, I can be at peace. If it weren't for this support, we would have died.' (Eagles 2009)

In all its work Eagles has strongly emphasised networking with others, especially local government and other church agencies. In every initiative, it seeks to ensure equitable access to and control of resources by both men and women, constantly challenging gender stereotypes.

Impacts

From small beginnings, Eagles is now working on their social action programmes with more than 110 church congregations throughout the country. These activities reach more than 4,000 direct beneficiaries with orphan-care, home-based care for the sick, HIV awareness groups, community-based childcare, skills development, business development, and improving food security. Much of the activity is relatively small-scale, but it is almost entirely self-sustaining. In Chikwawa, Eagles has worked with 26 villages, reaching more than 25,000 people directly or indirectly.

There have been examples of significant success in advocacy (Eagles n.d.). One example from another village in Chikwawa district is described in Box 3.

Box 3: Speaking out

In 2004, a group of pastors from eight different denominations around Nedi village near Chikwawa town got together to work on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. They identified the most needy people in their communities, repairing their houses and supporting them with food and other items. When local leaders were bribed by an international sugar company to force farmers to grow sugar rather than traditional crops, the farmers went to the pastors' group to complain.

Based on what they had learned from Eagles training, the pastor helped villagers to organise and form a committee, which called meetings with the village headmen, traditional authorities and the District Commissioner. Despite numerous set-backs and even death threats, they finally succeeded in preventing the company from proceeding. One farmer said: *"The pastors helped us to fight all the way and now we have our rights back"*. Another commented: *"If it were not for these pastors, we would have lost our fields"*.

But that was just the start. Over the last five years, the group has successfully pressed for better prices to be paid to farmers for their cotton, raising prices from MK15 (US\$0.10) per kg to MK90 (US\$0.60) per kg. They also persuaded the World Food Programme to pay villagers for their contribution to food for work programmes. Further, they have persuaded the District Commissioner to pay the monthly allowances the district administration had been given to support orphans and vulnerable children. In 2012 the group is battling with the government to fulfil its commitment to install community irrigation systems and also to provide the promised pesticides necessary to shift from cultivating tobacco to farming cotton.

In Chikwawa, Eagles has helped to set up community-based advocacy committees comprised of church and local leaders from surrounding villages. The committee members have been making people more aware of their rights and have facilitated interface meetings with duty bearers at the local level. For example, as noted in Box 3, when people were unable to sell their cotton at a reasonable price, they met cotton buyers, government officials, and the local MP. Soon afterward, the government announced that it would start buying cotton at a decent price. As the Minister of Natural Resources, Energy and Environment said:

I am very grateful to EAGLES for this initiative. How I wish in every community, EAGLES would facilitate such type of committees so that meaningful development can be achieved. I believe this committee will provide checks and balances on how we are working as Government and even NGOs.

The committees have also engaged with livestock owners and initiated a process to devise functional by-laws to prevent livestock infesting irrigation plots planted with maize.

Underlying religious principles, values, and teaching

An explicitly Christian approach is at the heart of the way in which Eagles has implemented its development work. The Director and staff members describe this in terms of six key values and principles:⁴

1. Their **motivation to respond** to the needs of the poor.

Eagles believes that faith without works is dead. It does not feel church members can sit by and watch those around them suffering without trying to help. The organisation's staff and supporters take the command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' very seriously. They see responding to those in need as an act of worship to God and something by which God will judge them and regard their service as the true religion, fulfilling the injunction to look after widows and orphans that the Bible talks about in the book of James. A commitment to justice therefore pervades how the organisation works (see also Pew Forum 2006: 30).

2. Taking a **holistic approach to development**, what some call 'integral mission'.

Eagles believes that God is interested in the whole person: their material, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. The staff also believe that God is very concerned with stewardship of the environment. They believe that these needs are interrelated, with people's spiritual lives affecting their physical lives and vice versa, and so solutions to their problems must also be interrelated. In Eagles' theory of change, the lack of a relationship with God or faith in God is one of the eight priority causes of poverty. It is believed that people are better able to develop materially and emotionally if they are able to love themselves, to give and receive love from others, and if they feel loved by God. Faith in God is considered to be important in giving people the hope and courage to overcome fear and a sense of dependence.

Eagles staff believe that every human being has the wisdom, ability, and strength to learn and change. Their role is therefore to help people to see that they have the necessary local knowledge and to inspire them to use their abilities and strengths to address the challenges they face.

3. **Taking responsibility and overcoming dependence by contributing what little they have** is at the heart of Eagles' staff members' understanding of their Christian faith.

In training churches and communities, Eagles staff use numerous examples, such as one from the Old Testament when the prophet Elijah was sent to a very poor Shunamite widow for support. Elijah is said to have asked the widow what she had, to which she responded 'nothing'. He asked her again, and she said 'a little oil'. God is reported to have then used this small contribution to perform a miracle, enabling the widow to set up a small business selling oil. In the New Testament, Jesus himself, when confronted by 5,000 hungry people, told his disciples to first ask those present to contribute what little they had, transforming the five loaves and two fishes offered by a boy into food for all 5,000. Eagles believes that the basis for all action should be the principle: start with what you have and trust God to provide.

4. Eagles believes in the importance of following **good development practice**.

At the heart of the organisation's approach is participatory analysis, participatory envisioning, and participatory monitoring and learning. It believes in the value of creating support groups and peer-to-peer learning, investing in providing technical hands-on training. It is insistent on involving men and women together, to address issues of gender inequality, and also emphasises the need to collaborate with government development initiatives wherever possible.

5. A belief in **God's ongoing active engagement** in the world today underpins the way in which Eagles works.

While unashamedly drawing on the best knowledge and practice available, Eagles believes that development will not come from human effort alone. The Christian faith of its staff leads them to believe that God's power is also needed to transform human mind-sets and behaviour. So the organisation makes space for God to direct, guide, and empower its activity. Spiritual activities are consciously integrated and applied in its regular organisational life, with staff regularly reflecting and praying together both in and out of office hours, and then acting based on the responses to their prayers that they believe they heard. I had personal experience of these practices when doing some consultancy work for the organisation, as described in Box 4.

Box 4: Strategic planning the Eagles way

When Eagles asked me to facilitate a one-day strategy process, I thought that the organisation was not investing enough time. However, the staff were adamant that one day was all they had available, so I agreed. Then a couple of days before the event, they rang to tell me that in practice, the exercise was going to be completed in an afternoon, as they were spending the morning praying together about the future direction of Eagles. Again, I had no choice but to accept. I was amazed by what happened during that afternoon. A clear prioritised strategy, involving major and difficult decisions, emerged in just three hours. A process I had thought would take at least three days to complete had been finished in only three hours.

6. The **central role of the local church** is at the heart of Eagles' religious beliefs and also its approach to development.

Right from the outset, because the Living Waters church had over 400 congregations spread across the whole country, Eagles realised that working through local congregations would give great potential for outreach. If these congregations could begin to understand how important it is to help the poor and vulnerable, address issues of gender inequity and jealousy, and learn the skills to catalyse community responses, then the potential for impact was seen to be enormous. Another core part of Eagles' approach was that development is not just about working with the Living Waters churches, but needs an inclusive approach involving collaborating with, influencing, and learning from other denominations, other NGOs, and government agencies.

Ongoing challenges

Eagles has faced and continues to face many challenges.⁵ It is reported that it has not been easy to break the prevailing dependency mind-set that much of the church in Malawi had absorbed. At the time it was set up, people believed, and many still do, that for things to change, external help and resources are needed. Some pastors, being very poor themselves, felt that they should be the first beneficiaries of any initiatives. Others did not see ministry to the poor as important and some saw it as a challenge to other ministries. Some were said to have become jealous of Eagles' success, while others saw the Programme as a potential way of resourcing other church ministries or as a source of power. Moreover, in the religiously and socially conservative context of Malawi, many were unhappy about Eagles talking openly about using condoms to prevent the transmission of the HIV virus (Eagles 2011).

Eagles addresses these issues on a number of levels. It has developed a Social Action Policy, signed by the national church leadership (including the founder, Pastor Ndovie), which gives the organisation a clear mandate. It has invested considerable time in helping church leaders

to understand the organisation's approach and showing them impacts on the ground. Eagles has found that it must walk a tightrope, fully involving leaders of the central church in the programme – its vision, implementation and impact – but at the same time, separating the management of finances and strategy from official church structures. It has developed clear policies and systems to ensure that resources are used transparently. These have reportedly helped to keep a clear focus on meeting the needs of the poor and protect resources from being diverted to other church programmes, especially where local financial systems were weak and pastors had limited understanding of their importance.

Eagles has also found that, despite their rhetoric, international NGOs⁶ have difficulty funding what they regard as a truly more empowering approach. International NGO systems, Eagles suggests, fit more easily with funding projects with tangible inputs, predetermined timescales, and predictable results. In contrast, Eagles' approach involves a small number of salaried facilitators to help churches run their own sustainable programmes. Many funders are reluctant, however, to fund salaries, travel, and administrative costs, which they describe as core costs, and have difficulty justifying funding a 'project' that cannot confidently predict or control exactly how many people will be helped, by how much, and in what ways. Eagles' approach to development is more organic and community-led than most donor log-frames will tolerate.

Conclusion

Eagles Relief and Development Programme is a clear example of how a development organisation uses its religious beliefs to determine how it works in the field. The religious faith of its founders, staff, and supporters has explicitly and intentionally informed and inspired its particular approach to development. It does not neatly and conveniently separate the spiritual and material elements of development, instead integrating faith with development action. The organisation's core strength is believed to come from this integration of development work with Christian religious teaching and values.

Another key element of its success comes from working through and being a part of the religious institution itself. The Eagles experience illustrates the potential of working through local religious institutions, with their extensive grassroots reach. Such institutions can catalyse sustainable development in the remotest and poorest regions. However, this story also shows that, in order to reap the benefits of working through local congregations, any support organisation has to grapple with inherent and ongoing institutional challenges. Authentically integrating faith and development is not an easy option. But it is an option that offers the possibility of truly sustainable development.

Notes

1. Personal communication with staff from mission councils in Scandinavia.
2. The case study draws on reports and documents produced by Eagles, a visit by the author in March 2012, and discussions with the Director and staff members.
3. Field visit by author March 2012.
4. Personal communications with the Director and staff of Eagles in 2012.
5. As described in reports to donors and personal communications with staff and board members.
6. Tearfund (UK and Netherlands) has managed to overcome some of these donor constraints, influenced by Eagles' vision of mobilising 100,000 local churches to respond to people's material and spiritual needs. Tearfund, for example, has been pioneering a Church and Community Mobilisation Programme globally, using Eagles' experience extensively in its materials.

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The author

Dr Rick James is a Principal Consultant with INTRAC. He has trained, consulted, researched and written extensively on NGO capacity building and organisational change issues. He spent ten years with INTRAC in Malawi, where he trained a team of Malawian OD practitioners, provided capacity building support to Malawian NGO support organisations, undertook research into leadership change issues, and consulted for international NGOs on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of capacity building. <rjames@intrac.org>