

DHARMA AND DEVELOPMENT: INTERDEPENDENCIES BETWEEN RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

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To support the focus of the guidelines provided for this conference, this paper will highlight the experiences of one social development organisation that has been working at the grassroots level in Myanmar for the past 9 years.

Metta Development Foundation (Metta) is a not-for-profit social development organisation, dedicated to the least developed areas of Myanmar irrespective of ethnic origin or religious orientation. In Myanmar, the concept of Metta or “loving kindness” is a basic tenet of both the Buddhist and Christian faiths.

This presentation looks at how Metta has capitalized on an extraordinary moment in Myanmar’s development history to assist communities affected by extended periods of civil conflict. It also examines how it aspires to build up trust and self-reliance among all the stakeholders, how it has benefited from its symbiotic relationship with diverse religious institutions, and finally the opportunities and constraints inherent in the current situation.

OVERVIEW

The Metta Development Foundation (Metta) began its initial programmes in the Kachin State in northern Myanmar, but it has subsequently facilitated community-based projects or training and workshops in many other parts of the country, including the Chin, Kayah, Mon, Kayin and Shan States as well as Sagaing, Mandalay and Irrawaddy Divisions. In these endeavours, Metta has not been alone.

Metta community development work is possible only by operating in a widening social context where both governmental and non-governmental organisations, faith based groups and community groups concentrate on addressing social needs in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Myanmar.

To achieve this goal requires careful analysis of present circumstances, backed up by long-term planning and participatory action by the local people themselves in conjunction with grassroots development agencies. The Farmer Field School (FFS) programme will be used to illustrate this.

FFS is well-known throughout Asia as a way of building community strength and confidence using agriculture as the basis. It is one of Metta’s most successful programmes, implemented through local and faith based groups. The involvement of such groups is unique to Metta’s FFS and supports the “need to focus on relationships based on common goals.”¹

METTA’S FFS EXPERIENCE

Since its inception, the cornerstone of Metta’s work has been in the agricultural sector. Over 70 per cent of the population of Myanmar lives in rural areas, and the livelihood of many families depends on farming. Myanmar is also a land of great natural resource potential and general fertility in many areas. However decades of conflict and under-investment meant that into the 1990s there were still many parts of the country where communities lived at subsistence level only, with an estimated per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of just US\$ 300 per annum in 1999, the era Metta came into existence. Self-sufficiency has been a particular challenge in ethnic minority² border areas. In addition there has been a legacy of illicit narcotic cultivation among many impoverished families that came to rely on opium as the principal cash crop during the long years of instability, conflict, and community displacement.

It is in this context that Metta began programmes, its main outreach being through “FFS for Sustainable Agricultural Development”, which was initially set up in the Kachin and Shan states. It was also recognised that poverty alleviation is interwoven with many factors at different levels so that there would be no

¹ Kraybill 1989 Internal/Horizontal Negotiations

² Minority to denote fewer physical numbers, not in any other sense

single answer to determine strategic plans of action for poverty solutions. Broad project objectives were therefore agreed at the outset, combining both innovative and participatory approaches:

- To discover and develop viable alternatives to the growing of opium, to provide increased or similar income to farmers and their families.
- To improve farmers' skill and overall management capacity in crop-based, sustainable and integrated farming systems.
- To facilitate and strengthen community participation in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating community-based initiatives for community development.
- To increase the self-reliance of local partners.
- And finally, to enhance broader awareness of community development.

In achieving these goals, the cultural and educational environment of the Farmer Field Schools is intended to provide rapid learning in a peace-building context. Trainees come from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, reflecting the different nationality groups in different local areas. There is also an emphasis on pragmatism and practice, because farmers, as a societal group, tend to be cautious about initiating new methods until they themselves have seen clear results. In short, they are risk averse, a hesitancy which has been exacerbated in Myanmar by the decades of conflict. But the experience of Metta, to date, has been that farmers studying in groups and observing actual farming situations in the field are adaptable and willing learners, which quickly assuages doubts and builds their confidence. This, in turn, means that they have been able to add new or updated skills which enhance their capacity to manage their farms efficiently and increase productivity when they return home.

Depending on the local context, different agricultural methods have been found appropriate in Metta's project areas. But new methods in such fields as pest control, irrigation, crop selection, fertilisation, harvesting and environmental conservation have all led to greatly increased yields. In lowland areas, for example, there has been a notable improvement in basic food security through enhanced rice production. In upland areas, a wider variety of new crops has enhanced opportunities for cash income. Greater focus on the potential of kitchen gardens, which are widespread in Myanmar, has strengthened health and nutritional standards. And improvements in water conservation and irrigation in rain-fed lands has increased fruit, vegetable and crop production, further adding to the cash income of farmers.

Such training programmes, however, do not exist in a community vacuum. A core aim of Metta programmes is education and the capacity building of local organisations. To achieve this, facilitators for field schools have been trained from different communities in the country, increasing from 32 new facilitators in 2000 to 363 in 2006. These facilitators are then able to set up FFS in their own communities. In achieving these goals, the Farmer Field School works closely with local groups, providing a link in development between such organisations as religious-based groups, ceasefire groups, other local governmental and non-governmental organisations and the Metta Development Foundation.

To date, the uptake in Metta's FFS programme has been fast. Over 600 FFS have been established in both lowland and upland areas during the past six years, while over 10,000 farmers have been trained. Average income on the farmers' fields has also increased by at least 100 %³. Upland FFS farmers' "perennial crops may worth an average value of USD 3,006 per farm at maturity in 5-6 years, twenty times the USD 217 that the average poppy-growing household in Myanmar earned from opium in 2006."⁴

The agricultural benefits have been only one element in the overall development plans. For it has always been intended that the start-up of these programmes should play an equally important role in providing stability and opportunity while building peace for communities that had been among the most impoverished in the country. In this respect, the community-building and bridge-building aspects in long-divided societies have been

³ Detailed information available from Metta Development Foundation

⁴ Mid-term Review, Metta Development Foundation. Upland Project in Sadung and PaO Regions, Karin Eberhardt, November 2006

significant. In Myanmar today, FFS have become a stable feature of everyday life in many different agricultural communities across the country.

In the process, participatory approaches have strengthened local leadership and local groups in achieving sustainable development progress through the use of local resources, which are primarily social capital and natural resources, in conjunction with appropriate financial and technical support from the outside.

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

A Metta perspective

Too often, there has been a tendency by observers in the international community to see Myanmar as a country in the throes of political deadlock or long-standing conflict, without giving due recognition to the realities of the people in the daily struggles for progress and survival. The endeavours of Metta and others during the past decade have demonstrated that there are ways to work at grassroots and community-based levels without compromising principles or positions.

It is encouraging that faith based groups, the backbone of communities during the long years of struggle, have supported this work from the beginning to the present day. As long ago as 1967, His Holiness Pope Paul VI articulated the Church's policy on religion and development when he said:

"In the present day, however, individual and group effort is no longer enough. The world situation requires the concerted effort of everyone, a thorough examination of every facet of the problem – social, economic, cultural and spiritual."⁵

The present Archbishop of Mandalay His Excellency Paul Grawng has said "Church's main task of evangelisation is to make a whole person which involves not only the spiritual dimension but also areas such as education, health and livelihood."⁶ Archbishop Paul sees Metta's work as contributing to this mission through development of people and preservation of the creation.

An example of the latter is the Evergreen Firewood Tree Cultivation project (2002-04), a Metta supported project implemented by four different Christian churches, aiming to provide firewood and income for villagers of Nan Wah in Wai Maw Township, Kachin State. The project attracted interest from many quarters – from other communities, from the Forestry Department and from members of other faith groups including Buddhist monks from Southern Shan State, who travelled to the site to study the process used.

Another religious leader who has long collaborated with Metta, Venerable Sayadaw Kowsalla,⁷ has said: "Religion teaches humans what is good, what is wrong. Therefore, to find social justice in human society religion guides directly or indirectly."

The HIV and AIDS programme is an example of this link between religion and social justice, the essence being that the ordained are seen to be physically with and touching those who are HIV positive, so that community members experience the reality that infection is not spread by normal contact. People living with HIV & AIDS would likely be ostracized without this programme.

When Metta promoted sericulture in PaO region of southern Shan State, the primarily Buddhist community was initially reluctant to become involved because silkworms are living creatures. Ashin Kavithaja, Abbot of the Pachago Monastery, encouraged the practice of sericulture to meet the basic needs of the people. His endorsement has helped Metta to implement this project which will provide income in a short period of time, will not be hampered by lack of transportation facilities and has a ready market at the nearby Inlay Lake silk weaving villages.

⁵ Populorum Progressio 1967, His Holiness Pope Paul VI: The Church and Development

⁶ Email 14 February 2007

⁷ Venerable Sayadaw Kowsalla, Lokattha Cariya Foundation, a GLT alumnus

Karin Eberhardt has described another example of this interrelationship: "Well-organized villages often have a respected monk who supports the project activities and encourages people to attend the FFS. For example, in one village visited the monk had provided electricity for the facilitators' farm from the nearby monastery."⁸

The Grassroots Leadership Training (GLT) for people from Myanmar was established more than 10 years ago. This programme, initially a cooperative effort between Myanmar Baptist Convention, Kachin Baptist Convention and the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), a Thai Buddhist NGO in Thailand, has trained more than 300 Christians and Buddhists, ordained and lay, in community development work, providing field workers, administrative staff and project specialists for many community and faith based organisations in Myanmar, including Metta.

GLT has been strengthened by the diversity of backgrounds of the participants, and alumni of the training form a tightly knit group. The strong friendships developed during GLT training courses bypass the normal divisions of religion and ethnicity and provide a backbone of solidarity and unity in community development work in Myanmar, a further indication of the inter-relationship of religion and development.

POLICIES AND CHALLENGES

A growing body of international opinion affirms that too often, the international community responds to humanitarian challenges in terms of separate "crises" or "emergencies", such as narcotic abuse, HIV/AIDS, refugees, internally displaced persons or such natural disasters as the tsunami.⁹ In this approach, the needs of local people are frequently divided into categories such as

"humanitarian", "emergency", "health", "poverty", "environment" or "drug reduction" and the participation of local people is limited.

Such an approach is ineffective in the Myanmar context where communities must be involved in their own development destiny because building civil society, helping people emerge from the condition of subsistence-living, is not effective with such a programme approach, as "man is truly human only if he is the master of his own actions and the judge of their worth, only if he is the architect of his own progress"¹⁰.

Established faith based groups in Myanmar, whether church or monastery, ordained or lay, assist by helping to identify the altruistic members of their community, by providing space for the people to begin the process of dialogue. Additional support may take the form of accepting office on a project committee or giving a sermon or talk justifying and explaining a position or plan.

Development can be affected by internal and external policy, by natural disasters or events outside the country and none of these can be controlled by the local communities. Some limiting factors however, can be mitigated by outside organisations and their policies. For example, in remote villages, the only building available for a project office may be a church or monastery. If secular donors are unable, because of policy, to fund a kindergarten in a church compound or monastery, a community is placed outside the development process.

Metta, as a national organisation, works in the most remote areas where communities would otherwise be neglected. International development organisations are reluctant to operate in areas which are inaccessible to their non-national resource persons for site visits. Travel constraints for foreign personnel to these areas may be official or caused by lack of regular and proper transportation or communication facilities, or unfavourable weather conditions. A viable alternative approach would be to build up the capacity of their national staff who would not be subject to such travel restrictions. Metta feels that it is imperative that all possible means of assisting these most vulnerable of communities be explored and utilised.

⁸ Mid-term Review. Upland Project in Sadung and PaO Regions. Karin Eberhardt, November 2006

⁹ See e.g., C. Pirotte, B. Husson, F. Grunewald (eds.), *Responding to Emergencies and Fostering Development: The Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

¹⁰ *Popularum Progressio: The Ultimate Purpose* ibid

There has been a window of opportunity to work with the people and for the people for many years now in Myanmar, but it can often be costly and international funds contributed to date have been paltry in comparison to most other countries of equivalent development status. For example, Official Development Assistance to Myanmar was estimated by the United Nations at just US\$ 3 per capita in 2004 as compared with US\$ 50 for Laos and US\$ 35 for Cambodia, US\$ 15 for Nepal and US\$ 7 for Bangladesh.¹¹

In general, the ODA figure is starting to slowly rise¹² but there is still extreme poverty in many areas in Myanmar. Among labourers from Bagan Taun village in Yangon Division, many are struggling to survive on less than half a dollar a day, even while gainfully employed. In Hkin Duyang village in Kachin State, primary school teachers receive an annual salary of less than US\$ 20 which has to be supplemented by a monthly ration of 20 kg of rice and 1.6 kg of salt by a local organisation.

In the face of these situations, unless existing policies are modified, the wide gap between Myanmar and neighbouring countries will increase. The neighbours are progressing with rapid strides while Myanmar moves forward at a much slower pace.

Metta is encouraged by this statement made at an international conference in Porto Alegre in 2006: "The International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development¹³ offers an important opportunity for recognising the rural world's true identity and that of its inhabitants if every concern is centred on the human person, the protection of human dignity and the defence of the fundamental rights. In this way, not only can the rural world's values be safeguarded, avoiding approaches based on greed or on purely economic considerations, but suitable national policies can also be implemented, and international action can achieve the lasting efficacy that it seeks. Technical solutions, however complex and useful, remain ineffective if they lack the necessary reference to the centrality of the human person. It is the person, in an inseparable unity of the spiritual and the material, that must be the source and the goal of every decision and action taken by individual states and international institutions."¹⁴

The initiative of the University of Passau in holding this dialogue, provides an encouraging opportunity to review the current inter-relationship of religion and development policies in Myanmar. It is hoped that in the coming years international governments and development agencies will be encouraged to pay greater attention to finding ways to support the growing number of community based programmes in Myanmar.

¹¹ UNDP Human Development Report 2004

¹² ODA to Myanmar in 2001 was US\$ 1 per capita. UN Country Team, *Myanmar: A Silent Humanitarian Crisis in the Making* (Yangon: 30 June 2001), p.2.

¹³ Technical Note from the Holy See, Porto Alegre, 2006

¹⁴ *ibid*