
Importance of Role and Agency of Fieldworkers in Transformational Development Work by Christian NGOs

Jaisankar Sarma

This article makes the case for the agency and the role of fieldworkers as critical considerations in community development projects of NGOs and in transformational development work undertaken by Christian NGOs. For the latter, the role and agency of fieldworkers become even more important, as inner transformation and transformation of relationships require fieldworkers' investment through relationships in people and not simply interventions in program population. The article explores the concepts of agency, personhood, social changes, and what they mean for the transformational development work of Christian NGOs. The paper argues that institutional donor-funded programs that give prominence to external interventions, but pay lip service to actor-oriented approaches, create tensions for frontline workers and instrumentalizes them. The paper closes with recommendations for Christian NGOs in helping to reconcile fieldworkers' agency and their role in transformational development, even as NGOs work with institutional donor funding in development projects.

Critical Role of NGO Fieldworkers in Development

The pivotal role of the fieldworker at the interface of NGOs and communities has been recognized for a long time (e.g. Taylor and Jenkins, 1989, Tilakaratna, 1985). This role has been characterized in many ways: facilitator, change agent, gatekeeper, technical knowledge resource, and relational broker. Fieldworkers have also been challenged as 'modernizing disruptors' of tradition and culture, and agents of foreign interests. The importance of fieldworkers in NGOs doing development work cannot be over-emphasized. They are the ones at the frontlines, representing organizational vision, mission, and values to communities, and planning and implementing programs on behalf of NGOs. Over a period of time, the cumulative daily interactions of fieldworkers with community members and local partners shape NGO Development projects. Fieldworkers provide the interface between the NGO and people, interpreting projects to communities, as well as community realities and perspectives to NGOs. By virtue of their presence in communities and the intermediary role they play, fieldworkers do not exist as passive instruments, but have the opportunity to actively shape the content and quality of community engagement in programming processes. Project designs or plans, when they are developed, reflect the intentions

of what the NGO would like to accomplish sometime in the future, but it is the fieldworkers who implement project designs in the reality of any given moment – in contexts that are more complex and dynamic than what can be portrayed in neatly packaged design documents.

The fieldworker role is especially critical in the transformational development work of Christian faith-based NGOs, as noted by Bryant Myers...

Ultimately, the effectiveness of transformational development comes down, not to theory, principles, or tools, but to people. Transformation is about transforming relationships, and relationships are transformed by people. Techniques and programs only fulfill their promise when holistic practitioners use them with the right attitude, the right mindset, and professionalism. When development promoters have made the theory and values of transformational development their own, when they live them out in the real world of development practice, then good things can happen (Myers, 2011, 219).

There are many theological approaches towards understanding poverty and transformational development within a Christian worldview, but this paper makes use of a conceptual framework proposed by Myers (2011). According to Myers, poverty is understood as the result of broken relationships and

transformational development as its antidote, is about restoration of relationships with God, self, others, and the environment (Myers, 2011, 144, Christian, 1999, 72). Based on such an understanding, development projects provide the platform to facilitate transformational changes in the identity, vocation, relationships, competency, attitudes, and values of individuals and groups of people that increasingly reflect the Kingdom of God. In such a process, the agency and role of fieldworkers in working with people assume great importance when Christian NGOs undertake development projects.

Agency of Individuals and Social Change

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) says, "to be a human being is to be a purposive agent," where agency is defined as follows:

Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place, which is why agency implies power.... within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, social actors possess 'knowledgeability' and 'capability'. They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them and to a degree monitor their own actions and how others react to them... (Giddens, 1984, 9).

According to Giddens, knowledgeability and capability to take purposeful actions define agency of an individual. Knowledgeability involves understanding the roles and rules of the social structure around the actors. Capability involves changing those rules towards a purpose. Within this framework, agents are cognitive and reflective actors. How actors interact with roles and rules over time leads to changes.

To be an agent is to be able to deploy a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power (Giddens, 1984, 14).

Giddens argues for inclusion of individual motivation and action in considering social change processes. The individual is located within a time and space, but will be able to cause social changes even though it may not be fully predictable at the outset. The social structure changes human beings, but human beings also change the social structure (1984, 27-28). Agency is expressed in social relations and can only be effective through them if it must make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs. The ability to influence others depends essentially on the actions of a sequence

of agents, each of whom provides interpretations in accordance with his or her own agenda or perspective. Understanding development as a social change process and not merely as time and space bound projects has significant implications for development NGOs - the agency of fieldworkers and that of other actors, their relationships, and network patterns become critical considerations in thinking about and planning for development.

Personhood and Transformational Development

Bible verses from Genesis 1:26, 27 declare God creating human beings in his image and likeness and have been understood and explained in a variety of ways (Grenz, 2007). In the biblical narrative, God grants power and agency to human beings with freedom to relate and communicate with others and even resist God. Human beings have great significance because they bear the image of God and have irrevocable dignity and worth that is conferred or bestowed on them by God (Kilner, 2015, 250-251). Understanding human beings as created in the image of God means that they are co-creators with God, with the power to observe, reason, and act on the common good (Myers, 2011, 61). Human beings are actors with a purpose and are given gifts and tasks for the wellbeing of others, which means for Christian faith-based NGOs, human agency and vocation become the basic foundation for doing development work; program plans and financial resources are only tools. This understanding of agency and vocation applies both to community members and fieldworkers who work with them on a daily basis.

From the perspective of the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15). If Christian NGOs could consider Jesus as a 'development actor' who was sent by his father to carry out a mission in the world, did he have the freedom to carry out the mandate given to him? Or was he just someone who slavishly carried out detailed instructions from above? How much freedom did he have? The Bible says that the divine Son of God willingly became a genuine human person. He chose to stand in solidarity with the poor and the needy. He preached good news to the poor and comforted those who mourned. The gospels, which narrate Jesus' words and actions in this world, reflect his agency and relationship with his father through the Spirit (So and Hardy, 2006, 11-12). In other words, there was no dissonance between Jesus' words, his actions, his identity and his relationship with the Father.

Christian development workers need to have such an 'incarnational spirituality' modeled after Jesus Christ. Incarnational spirituality understands that God's Spirit lives in his children and Christian fieldworkers are part of the presence of God in communities. It

requires fieldworkers to live out their Christian values among the poor, seeing them as being made in the image of God and thus expecting community members to be the primary actors in their own development (Myers, 2011, 232). Incarnational spirituality enables us to see the world from the perspective of the Kingdom of God and is not confined to an intellectual understanding derived from mere socioeconomic and political analysis of the situation. It draws us near to the poor in order to listen, understand and relate before trying to find solutions. It implies accompanying the poor on their journey rather than planning and implementing programs. Myers says that the most important thing a Christian development worker can do is to be present with God and the poor - to be open and willing, not controlling, but letting things unfold. Understood this way, the investment of the agency of development workers in the lives of the poor is much more important than implementation of well-planned programs and projects in promoting transformational development (ibid., 2011, 233).

The idea of transformational development links inner change and personal transformation as part of development work and attributes the work of God's Spirit to inner transformation (Mitchell, 2014, 96). The connection between inner transformation and development is seen as the two-fold goals of transformational development; a) changed people who are restoring their identity as children of God and recovering their vocation as productive stewards of God's creation and b) changed relationships that are just and peaceful (Myers, 2011, 190-202). Transformational development breaks down the divisions between physical, social, and spiritual aspects of life and sees them as a coherent whole (Wilson, 2011, 103). Transformational development is always focused on persons and developing personhood and it happens through the actions of communities and community institutions (Sugden, 2003, 72-73). In summary, transformational development calls Christian faith-based development organizations to a) view individuals and communities as interconnected and whole, b) link inner transformation or radical changes in values, attitudes, and worldviews with external changes or progress, and c) consider the agency of the development worker and community members both as resources and as end goals of development.

Agency of Fieldworkers in Different Approaches to Development

Community development approaches influenced by Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* recognize the agency of the fieldworker as fundamental to transformational change. Freire states that oppressed people should develop critical consciousness of their situation through dialogical action and learn to think for

themselves through a grassroots pedagogical process facilitated by a grassroots educator. Freire relates critical consciousness and the resulting synthesis of thought and action as a way to reclaim humanity, to become humanized (ibid., 1970, 47-49). For example, a program on participatory organizations for the rural poor in Sri Lanka reflects this Freirean thinking and states that:

...The role of the animator (community facilitator, change agent, catalyst or activist as variously called) is seen as a central factor in the generation of self-reliant grassroots initiatives. The essence of this role is a catalytic one of stimulating the rural poor to a systematic reflection of the causal factors in their poverty and deprivation and of assisting them to realise their self-reliant potentials through their own organized efforts (Tilakaratna, 1985, i).

What these approaches suggest is that the agency of the fieldworker is essential for the local ownership of social changes and its sustainability. Scholars who give importance to actor-oriented approaches to development emphasize essential qualities required for the fieldworkers.

Myers, for example, states that if transformational development is about transforming relationships, then fieldworkers on the ground should have the right set of attitude, mind-set, and professionalism. They need to live out the principles of transformational development. He goes on to list several essential qualities required in field practitioners (Myers, 2011, 221-226).

Fowler (1997, 84) identifies key character traits such as patience, listening, learning from communities, respectfulness, empathy, perseverance, diplomacy, etc., all of which are crucial for effective fieldworkers. Communication and negotiation skills are vital and so are the abilities to diagnose and analyze a situation. Effective fieldworkers require a deep understanding of the communities they work with.

In addition, it is important to 'be nice' to people and show courtesy, respect, patience, generosity, and sensitivity in working with communities (Chambers, 1997, 233). Ultimately, personal beliefs and values should guide fieldworkers in how they choose to respond to the constraints they face in their organizational work environment and community social contexts. Chambers in his aptly titled article on 'The Primacy of the Personal' writes:

This is the fact that individual personal choice of what to do and how to do it mediates every action and every change. Policy, practice, and performance are all outcomes of personal actions. What is done or not done depends on

what people choose to do and not to do.... (1996, 246)

Chambers observes that every person has some room to maneuver, create space for others, form alliances with others, and thereby has the vision and the courage to make changes (1996, 247). This requires fieldworkers to make a personal commitment and resolve, over and above the structure within which they work, and so as to disempower themselves, to hand over the baton to the poor, devolve discretion, encourage the initiatives of others, and promote genuine forms of community participation (Chambers, 1997, 237).

Donor-funded Projects and NGO Fieldworkers

Set against such an understanding of agency and personhood of individuals in development approaches, especially in the concept of transformational development, models of development used by official development agencies of donor governments are mostly based on deterministic, linear, and external views of social change. The tendency to view development as a discrete set of interventions within a specific time-space setting leads to a problem-solving approach and promotes the idea that the problems are best solved by dividing up what is complex and integrated by nature into specific sectors or academic disciplines (Clay, 1985, 184). There has been progression of understanding of development approaches, such as described by Korten in his seminal work, *Getting to the 21st Century*, through four types or levels of development responses: a) relief and welfare, b) small-scale, self-reliant local development, c) sustainable system development and d) people's movements (1990). Yet much development practice by NGOs is based on the understanding that development happens primarily through externally originated interventions, planned as time-bound projects based on linear and logical planning to problem solving and project cycle management, with an instrumentalist view of fieldworkers.

For example, accountability for NGO performance is a key area in which donor preferences and requirements often conflict with, or differ from, community realities, needs, and preferences, as well as with the whole idea of transformational development. Official aid is replete with terms such as "measurable outcomes," "managing for results," "evidence-based practices," and "value for money." The Paris Declaration of Aid Effectiveness (OECD, n.d.) and Accra Agenda for Action (OECD, n.d.) are good representations of donor expectations for performance and results, which were developed on the basis of certain principles for promoting effectiveness in

development aid. This discourse on management for results is translated into practice through logframes, indicators, targets, baselines, reports, performance reviews, randomized control trials, and evaluations, which Eyben calls "artifacts of results and evidence" (2013, 6-8). This donor imperative for results is pervasive throughout the NGO sector including Christian NGOs and it is usually the responsibility of the fieldworkers to gather data and provide reports bearing evidences for results for any donor-funded projects (Eyben 2012, 2). Scholars and practitioners have long been aware of the limitations of using planning and monitoring tools such as logframes, indicators and targets in setting goals and measuring them (e.g. Eyben, 2010, Myers, 2011, Mosse, et al. 1998, Korten, 1980). Nevertheless, they continue to be used because they are deeply institutionalized in aid organizations and they are used even when certain types of donors, such as child sponsors, may not be asking for them to be used. Then, like yeast, this desire for planned results and quantitative measures spreads through the organization into senior leadership who want to manage the development process from above, often pushing for more alignment and data to prove effectiveness and impact.

Part of the problem with this upward accountability to donors is that it relies exclusively on quantification for measurement as quantitative results are seen as more objective and professionally respectable than qualitative results. Donors favor certain types of knowledge and skills over and above traditional knowledge of local communities or fieldworkers who would not typically possess competency in quantitative analysis (Eyben, 2012, 1, Chambers, 1997, 38). Quantitative targets measure people as individual entities, whose lives are shaped by actions of others (Eyben et al., 2015, 832). Quantitative targets reinforce established narratives around a simple and clear causal chain on how to solve development problems and tell uncomplicated stories to senior leaders and donors (Ramalingam, 2013, 34). While numbers may tell some aspects of changes that result from development projects, they do not tell the whole story of transformational development or the efforts it takes to achieve it.

Fieldworker Tensions in Transformational Development Projects

When we position the fieldworkers at the interface between the NGO organizational context and community reality and compare models of development of official development agencies and the concept of transformational development, the following picture emerges. It is a picture where fieldworkers are caught in the conflict or crossfire of development discourses.

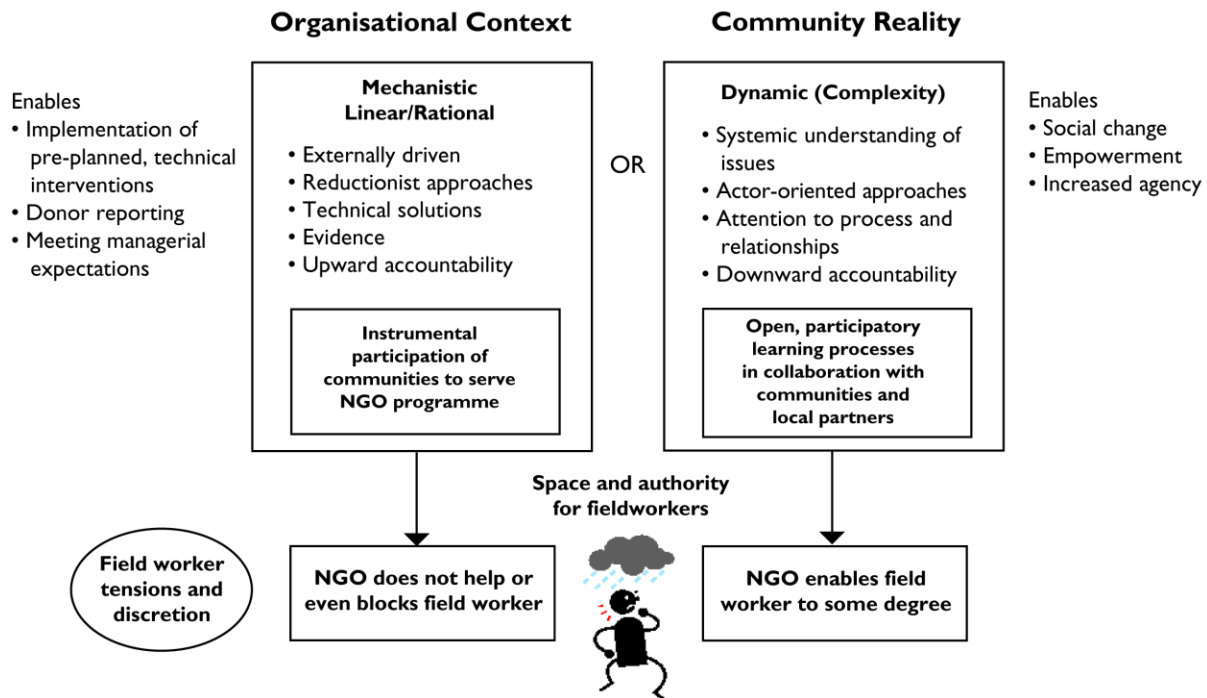


Diagram 1: Fieldworker Tensions

The NGO organizational context emphasizes planning for predictable outcomes and the management design to deliver planned results with clear lines of accountability to the donors. Transformational development, which pictures development as rooted in community reality, leads to participatory approaches that are open-ended and locally relevant, with a strong emphasis on learning. While in the participatory approach there might be clarity on the issues to be addressed and some of the directions to be taken, development outcomes are not pre-determined, nor are the exact strategies to achieve them. NGOs and their donors simultaneously use the approaches, tools, and techniques without acknowledging or reconciling the tensions that exist between them in terms of conceptual underpinnings and practical implications (Wallace et al. 2007, 31). Expectations for both a participatory approach in working with the poor and the delivery of pre-determined results based on a managerial approach co-exist in NGOs and, to a large extent, achieving these competing goals falls on the shoulders of frontline workers. They are left on their own to manage the tensions that exist between these two discourses. Yet the tension to deliver pre-determined results, while also ensuring participation of people, creates moral or ethical dilemmas for fieldworkers. For Christian NGOs, participation is linked to their

understanding of transformational development, while management systems and structures are important to meet donor funding requirements and organizational control over activities.

Eyben calls the rational approach and managing development for results “substantialism,” which sees development in specific entities such as results, sectors, outcomes, outputs, etc. and the people-centered approach that sees development in terms of processes, patterns, relationships, etc. as “relationalism” (2010, 380-394). Being a relationist is not only about focusing on people, but also about a keen interest in processes more than results. Her argument is that many staff, especially those in the field, while officially subscribing to the substantialist worldview, function as “closet relationists,” and by doing so unwittingly make the substantialist view of development viable and to appear effective (ibid., 394). Yet the relationist approach of the fieldworkers, “below the tip of the iceberg,” could be problematic for being neither transparent nor accountable to others, while at the same time being effective by making the substantialist approach to development viable and producing results. Ramalingam mentions that this tendency to simultaneously operate at these two different levels, one at the level of development discourse that is officially subscribed to and another one in terms of relational processes, is

reinforced by the co-existence of parallel cultures in aid organizations (2013, 86).

This problem of two different cultures and two different ways of acting might be even more acute in Christian NGOs that subscribe to transformational development, for they may not be able to explicitly integrate spiritual and faith aspects into their development work due to restrictions that come with donor-funding. This tendency to operate at two levels can have implications for frontline workers who have a strong commitment to participatory, faith-based, approaches to development. They may end up working long hours of unpaid overtime work due to the need to engage in relational processes that are not articulated or recognized in the managerial approach in order to make it viable.

While the concept of transformational development influences how Christian NGOs understand and articulate their approach to work in communities, much remains to be done even at a conceptual level on the implications of transformational development for NGO organizational development and management practices. Like their secular counterparts, Christian NGOs also make prodigious use of management processes, metrics, and tools for organizational development purposes that enable them to meet the donor expectations.

Suggestions for Way Forward

Here are some suggestions that may help Christian faith-based NGOs reconcile their understanding of transformational development, based on participatory ideals that leverage the agency and vocation of fieldworkers, and with donor-funded programs defined by clear accountability for results and use of other managerial tools.

Invest in the agency of fieldworkers

Ideally, fieldworkers in Christian NGOs derive their primary motivation and a perceived sense of calling from their faith in God to serve the poor. A strong and consistent relationship between their identity as children of God and their vocation to serve the poor provides the fieldworkers a basis for their engagement with communities and work among the poor. Formal corporate spiritual practices, such as staff devotions, family retreats, and prayer times organized by Christian NGOs, as well as personal spiritual practices and peer support mechanisms, can help fieldworkers nurture their identity as children of God, view their work as ministry, and sustain the ideal notions of their responsibilities for development work.

Emphasize mutual transformation

Transformation by its very nature is mutual. As fieldworkers work with the poor and learn from them,

they are on their own journey of transformation as their identity and sense of calling get further refined and strengthened. Managers and senior leaders, as they support fieldworkers, share in this journey of transformation. Our relationships with donors over time should lead to changes in values, giving patterns, and lifestyles that are consistent with Christ's concern for the poor. Transformational development assumes that the transformation of donors is fundamental and a pre-requisite to overcoming poverty in sustainable ways.

Proper use of artifacts of evidence and results

From an organizational perspective, setting strategic goals, use of evidence-based practices, logframes, monitoring and evaluation systems, and scale up are all about working in a highly intentional and effective manner. Christian NGOs do need to use rigorous planning and accountability for results in donor-funded programs as they work within the larger context of aid organizations. These artifacts of results and evidence are useful to bring clarity to planning processes and provide guidance to implementation and monitoring of plans. Even so, in using these artifacts, emphasis should be on competency of users who know when and how to use them. These artifacts should be seen as tools and resources, not as ends in themselves. For example, indicators and targets are set up in order for program staff and local partners to learn about implementation, reflect, make adjustments, and take timely corrective actions in response to changing contexts, or when originally planned activities and targets are deemed unrealistic during the course of implementation. But when these measures are used to show that falling short of set targets is a performance failure of fieldworkers, then these artifacts prevent open dialogue, adaptation, learning, and growth.

Use of descriptive analyses to communicate transformational changes

Requiring fieldworkers to report only on quantitatively measurable indicators dissuades them from engaging in work that is equally important, but not easily measurable. It also deters them from focusing on the people they serve. Yes, donors need accountability, but the need for donor reporting and particular ways of understanding accountability should not be allowed to distort fieldworkers' engagement with communities and how development work is practiced in communities. It should be the other way around, with fieldworkers encouraged to facilitate participatory and transformational development processes and then to capture and report on consequent changes, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures, including descriptive analysis. Outcome mapping and the most significant change stories are some examples of such alternative monitoring tools. The need for senior

leaders to aggregate and summarize changes at the corporate level should not drive the whole approach to monitoring and evaluation.

Inclusive framework for strategy and program designs

In many international NGOs, policies, strategies, and designs are developed to speak to the interests and concerns of donors and other senior stakeholders. Participation of fieldworkers, if it even exists, is often tokenistic. Christian NGOs should therefore develop a framework and processes to develop their strategy, policies, program designs, and systems that intentionally include fieldworkers. Such an inclusive framework and processes can help reduce the gap between policy and practice and transform the process of their development as an exercise in contributing to organizational development. Principles of transformational development in communities need to become principles for organizational development. Actor-oriented approaches and agency of fieldworkers need to become part of the strategy and program design rather than merely instruments to implement them.

Organizational processes that provide space for fieldworkers

Another helpful measure is to ensure that human resource processes, policies, and performance management systems affirm the discretionary roles of fieldworkers and are responsive to their needs and contexts. This requires organizational space for their voices to be heard, including supervisory discretion to allow fieldworker discretion. Performance management needs to take into consideration the congruence of fieldworkers' values, commitment to the organizational mission, and contributions to intangible aspects of development, such as community participation and the quality of relationships with community members, in addition to meeting tangible performance targets for program implementation.

Knowledge management and organizational learning

Christian NGOs can intentionally invest in organizational culture that values learning from community members and frontline workers, and that promotes downward accountability. They should put the emphasis on learning by staff members and volunteers, alongside knowledge management, which usually commoditizes knowledge and values certain types of 'universal' knowledge over local and particular knowledge. Knowledge management also gives a false impression that learning cycles can be shortened for people, with a speedy scale-up of evidence-based practices. In development work, technical interventions based on 'universal' knowledge should be applied alongside "contextual" knowledge in order for them to be effective. This requires an enabling institutional

environment that includes a clear policy framework, leadership commitment, flexible funding, supportive systems and procedures, integrated and field-based training, and creative management, supported by an organizational culture in which people are encouraged to take risks.

Relational proximity and not just technical rationality

Good relationships are critical to the success of organizations and development projects, but 'relationship' tends to be a black box that is not readily amenable to analysis or quantification. Managerial approaches to development tend to relegate relationships as part of 'assumptions' column in project logframes. Relationships among development workers, technical specialists, communities, institutions, and others need to be treated both as "means" and "goals" of development work. Relational approaches, not just technical rationality, must form the basis for NGO organizational development and working with communities and local partners for transformational development. The "relational proximity framework" by Ashcroft et al. is one way of unpacking relationships and better understanding what makes them successful (2016, 32-53). The relational proximity framework applies to nurturing and measuring effective relationships both within the NGO (e.g. between senior leadership and frontline workers; technical specialists and frontline workers) and in relation of fieldworkers to community members (e.g. between frontline workers and vulnerable parts of communities and relationships among different community groups).

Resist the temptation for big budgets

NGOs should resist the temptation to pursue large program budgets and instead work with budgets that are sufficient for staff and operational costs and for the minimum required activities. This can be seen as an opportunity rather than as a constraint. It can allow Christian NGOs and fieldworkers to focus on what is really important, to be externally oriented rather than being busy with implementing pre-planned activities and spending budgets on time. Fieldworkers can thus spend their time engaging in relationship-building, developing networks, and facilitating transformational changes that do not necessarily require a lot of money. Instead, the emphasis is on time, trust-based relationships, mutual respect, and accountability to communities and local partners among the communities that NGOs serve.

Conclusion

This article has described the tensions NGO fieldworkers experience due to policy conflicts, ambiguity, and mismatch of community and organizational expectations. These tensions, significant

in a broad range of NGOs, are amplified yet further in transformational development work funded by institutional donors in Christian NGOs. Fieldworkers exercise discretion to manage these tensions, which are often not visible or recognized by the NGO management. They make use of their personal resourcefulness and invest relationally in communities. Fieldworkers should not be seen as mere instruments to implement well-thought-out plans and program designs developed by experts. Instead, their agency and role should be considered as critical assets to further the transformational development agenda.

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Jaisankar Sarma is a holistic transformational
development practitioner. He has more than thirty-five
years of experience in international development. He
has a PhD in Development Studies from the Oxford
Centre for Mission Studies and the Middlesex
University in the UK.

Author email: Jsarma2@gmail.com
