

Ethical Considerations in Missions Partnerships

Introduction...

In obedience to the command of Christ to love our neighbours, many of our churches and organisations have a deep commitment to support those living overseas who are oppressed by injustice and poverty.

This commitment can be expressed in many different forms, from prayer and encouragement to financial or in-kind assistance. Regardless of the particular form, our support of disadvantaged community always occurs within a partnership – either with the local church, the local community or an organisation working with the community.

Whilst we only ever establish partnerships when we believe that they will result in good, evidence shows that many don't do the extensive research necessary to confirm this belief. Today in our globalised world, where it is possible for us to partner with just about anyone, anywhere, it is essential that we do our assessment before supporting a particular project or organisation.

Recognising inequality as the basis of human poverty...

Human poverty is much more than living below an arbitrary economic line. It is experienced as multidimensional deprivation that spans across **physical, economic, psychological and social** domains. Poverty deprives people of their basic needs and rights such as food security, clean water, adequate shelter, education, basic health care and security. More significantly the voices of the poor tell us that poverty deprives people of their dignity, self-worth and voice. It deprives people of their positive freedoms, meaningful choices and control over their own lives. It is defined as a state of being powerless.

This is what poverty does, how it is defined and how it is experienced. But what are its causes? As with all things, for an issue to be solved rather than just band-aided, the solutions must be directed towards the root causes and not the symptoms. ***So what issues must we address to tackle poverty through our missions initiatives?***

Inequality is basically a false and unbiblical hierarchy of human worth most commonly based on social classifications such as race, caste, gender, socio economic status, education and ability/disability. When this inequality informs our societies and world's systems and structures, they become sites of partiality and injustice that favour the powerful over the powerless, and the result is poverty.

Inequality in its various forms is the root cause of human poverty. Unless our missions partnerships and initiatives are reflect this root cause, they are unlikely to result in a positive impact or change in people's lives and may even inadvertently undermine or cause harm.

You have a decision to make...

When a missions pastor or missions coordinator is presented with an opportunity to partner with an overseas church, organisation or individual and their ministry or development activities, they are called upon to make a decision. How do you decide whether a particular missions or development activity is ethical, whether it is the good and right thing to do?

- Is this good and right?
- Could this actually (inadvertently) undermine our objectives or even cause harm?
- Under what circumstances might it be the good or right thing?
- Under what circumstances might this not be the good and right thing?

This is where it would be helpful to have an **ethical framework** that would allow you to make this decision. We want an ethical framework where the goals, motives and principles are all aligned:

right goal + right motives + right principles = "what is good and right"

We **do not** want to make a decision based on the "**ends justify most means**" or "**love and do what you consider is good**" or a **legalistic approach** to deciding what is right.

We make assumptions as a means of filtering through a large quantity of data to simplify a situation down to what we deem to be the most relevant information necessary to make a decision. If we wait until we have 100% of the information, we will never make a decision. However, jumping to a conclusion too quickly can oversimplify a complex situation and lead to making a decision that is not good or right.

We need a framework to help us with making a decision, that will steer us away from oversimplifying and help us to make ethical decisions. There are some assumptions that we can make which will open up our thinking and encourage us to question and explore in more depth.

The complex context of missions...

- A **community is a complex context**, made up of a complex web of relationships between multiple stakeholders. These relationships include power disparity, different interests, viewpoints, expectations and motives.
- We need to recognise that injustice and inequality is likely embedded into this complex context and that **our involvement** may inadvertently exacerbate injustices or inequality.
- Recognise that the community is a system, a complex system, and that you can either work within that existing system or create a parallel system, which actually removes you out of the community that you were trying to transform.
- **Engaging cross-culturally is complex**, with different cultures, worldviews, beliefs, environmental and economic factors to take into consideration which may not be readily apparent to either party.
- The underlying purpose in missions is **change or transformation** – we feel compelled to act because we recognise a problem that requires a solution, a situation that needs to be changed for the better or simply room for improvement. Without a change driver, it would be merely maintenance.
- Any **change within a community is a complex matter** and any activity carried out for the purpose of community transformation is carried out within a complex context. There is no such thing as an isolated activity.

When we make assumptions that oversimplify a complex context, we may inadvertently make decisions that are not good or right.

To engage within a complex system, we need to ***move from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence***. When we initially approach a complex context:

- Often someone else is navigating the complexity on our behalf. When we don't recognise this or we don't realise what is actually going on we are an ***unconscious incompetent***.
- Usually partway through we become aware that things are more complex than we had assumed and we become a ***conscious incompetent***.
- We make a decision to slow down, take time to learn, understand and navigate the complexity so that over time we can become a ***conscious competent***.
- Long-term missionaries often develop ***unconscious competence*** over a long time and then may subsequently struggle to communicate that complexity to newcomers, forgetting they are starting out as either conscious or unconscious incompetent.

Laying an ethical foundation...

Our ACCI Biblical Basis for Missions & Development provide a good foundation for deriving a set of basic core principles that are ethical (good and right).

- Creation shows humankind in right relationship with each other, with right self-image and in right relationship with the rest of creation. These right relationships are all held in perfect harmony through an undefiled primary relationship and intimacy with God.
- Through the fall we see how all of these relationships became sin affected and broken (Gen 3:11-24). The result of this disharmony was the emergence of human poverty, which is experienced as spiritual, physical, emotional/ psychological and social poverty. Humanity's distorted image of themselves, and subsequent fractured relationships with each other, has led to inequality and injustice, which are the basis of all social disorders including material poverty.
- God is good and God is love, He is good and loving and what He does is good and loving.
- Mission and Development are therefore avenues through which we can engage in God's redemptive plan and Christ's mission of reconciliation.
- The holistic transformation that reconciliation encompasses, leads us to address of all forms of human poverty.
- It requires that we strive to reinstate God's justice in all personal and corporate relationships, recognising the equality of all humanity, and commit to respect, uphold and protect the rights of others through fulfilling our responsibilities to each other.
- It further requires that we engage in empowering relationships, which reflect the recognition of our equality and follow the model of Christ who empowered and engaged people in his mission of reconciliation.
- We seek to further follow the model of Christ who came incarnate to communicate within cultures and socio-economic frameworks and thus allow those frameworks to be transformed from within. This is further recognition of our equality as we recognise the equal value and validity of each culture and language to express and reflect the values of justice, equality, and holistic reconciliation.
- Our commitment to missions and development and to the principles of love, justice, equality, empowerment and human rights, is the outworking of the two great commandments to 'Love the Lord your God', and 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

Our **core principles** are based upon God's redemptive plan and Christ's mission of reconciliation of the four broken relationships:

1. **Reconciliation with God's truth**
2. **Reinstating justice and equality** – to address both structural justice and social responsibility
3. **Empowering** – to become self-determining and self-mobilising
4. **Resourcing** – to address their own material deficits

We deem these core principles to be ethical because they contain right goals, right motives as well as right principles. When a missions partnership and missions initiative incorporates these core principles, then we can have confidence that we are operating from a firm ethical foundation.

Ethical considerations framework...

By working through a structured assessment process, we can work to ensure that those we partner with are operating legally, have financial integrity, align with our core principles and are having a positive impact in the communities they work in.

It is also necessary for us to look at our own motives, understanding and capacity as we engage with organisations, churches, communities and individual in these developing countries. We need to recognise that when we desire to have a positive impact in a complex situation, that we cannot ignore the complex context and we need to bring more than merely good intentions.

At ACCI Relief, we go through an assessment process before forming any new Strategic Partnership. It is important to note that every assessment check will have a unique set of circumstances and that these cannot be fully captured by these guidelines.

The purpose of these guidelines is not to promote the idea that you can only partner with those who come out with a perfect assessment check. Instead, the purpose of these guidelines is to equip you with a tool that helps you build a sound understanding of an organisation and their activities, so that you can make a well-informed decision about whether or not to establish a partnership with them and what activities to support with you time, effort and finances.

We hope that you find this Guide & Checklist a useful tool in establishing healthy partnerships that see significant, positive and sustainable outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. If you have any questions about carrying out your own assessment check, how to interpret the information you have collected or what to do once it is complete, you are welcome to contact our ACCI Missions & Relief staff on (+61) 3 8516 9600 or info@acci.org.au.

Ethical Considerations in Missions Partnerships Assessment Framework

1. Step back and unpack the complex context

Assume complex

Don't assume simple cause and effect

When we acknowledge that a situation is complex, we are more inclined to slow down and expect that we may not have all the answers. Unpacking the complex context involves consulting widely, asking lots of questions, active listening, making and challenging our assumptions. It also involves alternating between zooming out to map the big picture and zooming in to explore details.

- Drill down to the root cause of issues affecting the community
- Identify the various stakeholders and the complex web of relationships they create
- Locate community assets and strengths (not just needs and weaknesses)
- Explore the cross cultural issues and the different worldviews and beliefs involved

It will be impossible to assess good and right if you do not understand the complex context

2. Apply the core principles

Assume structural injustice and inequality exist

Don't assume resource deficit is the root cause

Apply the core principles to the complex context. There will be cross-over between the different principles, for example, access to capital is likely to fall under both structural justice and resourcing. The core principles can be equally applied to a development activity or to a church ministry activity.

1. **Reconciliation with God's truth** – evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, church planting and community action
2. **Reinstating justice and equality** – to address both structural justice and social responsibility
 - a. Structural justice – fair structures and systems and adequate social safety nets
 - b. Social responsibility – resource sharing and tempering self interest
 - c. Cross cutting issues – climate, gender, disability and marginalised people
3. **Empowering** – to become self-determining and self-mobilising through increasing participation, capacity building and decision making
4. **Resourcing** – to address their own material deficits through access to capital, fair share of resources and resource stewardship

It is helpful to apply the core principles under two separate filters:

- **Negative filter: don't do or allow harm/wrong** - The negative filter targets actions which are actively/directly or passively/indirectly causing harm or undermining justice and equality. We want a missions partnership or initiative that does not contain any negative elements and which counters the negative elements identified in the complex context.
- **Positive filter: do, support or advocate for good/right** - The positive filter targets actions which both actively/directly or passively/indirectly do good. We want a missions partnership or initiative that is actively engaged in doing good.

The presence of the core principles in missions forms an ethical basis for engaging in missions

3. Critically assess motive and capacity

Assume mixed motives and limited capacity

Don't assume good intentions are sufficient

Critically assess our own involvement and motives

You want to honestly self-assess your involvement because you do not want to inadvertently cause harm, undermine others or contribute to a harmful situation. Consider:

- What is your own level of competency in this situation?
- What are your motives for getting involved in this project?
[e.g. would like an activity that works with short-term teams, where you can report back to the church within 3-12 months, an activity you can visit, something that works with for a building team, that has a budget of up to \$5,000, or which your church can fund annually over the next 5 years]
- How do you prevent your various motives from becoming part of the problem?
- Recognising that you become part of this complex context (you do not sit in isolation), what is the impact of your involvement?

Critically assess your implementing partners involvement and motives

It is necessary to assess the implementing partner as well as other stakeholders involvement and motives in this partnership or activity. Making assumptions that everyone is well intentioned and in agreement ignores the inherent relational complexity. Consider:

- Who is the key implementing partner and what skills or competencies do they have in relation to this activity?
- Have you or someone qualified carried out a due diligence assessment on the implementing partner? Were any concerns identified?
[Consider using ACCI Organisational Due Diligence Checklist, ACCI missionary or partner, other reputable missions organisations]
- What are their motives and how will they benefit, either directly or indirectly, from this project activity?
[financially, increased status, security, family/friends, greater autonomy from local structures, less accountability to local structures]
- What training, controls, systems or structures are in place, or could be put into place, to prevent any negative consequences or outcomes from any issues or concerns identified (competency, due diligence or motives)? Can these concerns be adequately addressed?
- What are the competencies and motives of the other stakeholders?
- Does the project activity or design reflect the complexity of the different relationship and cultural dynamics (including natural partnerships and potential conflicts)?
- How can any necessary changes that have been identified for the implementing partner or stakeholders be reflected in the goal?

Realistic assessment of the motives and capacity of all stakeholders (including ourselves) will improve collaboration and reduce the potential for conflict and misunderstandings

4. Reframe the goal based on 'change'

Assume change will be the result of addressing multiple factors

Don't assume a single activity can result in ongoing change (cause and effect logic)

The goal is more than an activity or collection of activities, it is the purpose, positive change, impact or transformation that you are believing will happen. The goal should incorporate:

- Core purpose of change or transformation being sought
- Specifically identify the target community or groups
- Addressing the root causes of issues
- Capturing agreed motives
- Application of the core principles
- Realistic timeframe for change
- Validation through wide consultation and collaboration

Embedding the right principles and right motives within the goal itself will create an ethical alignment (and avoid creating ethical dilemmas)

5. Design activities for the achievement of the 'change' goal

Assume it takes intentional design of activities to create alignment with achieving the goal

Don't assume aligning activities with the goal is simple

Temporary change is easy to achieve, but may leave the intended beneficiaries worse off in the long-term. At this point it is essential to ensure that we design activities that tie back to the the long-term sustainable change goal. When we only plan for activities that have a financial cost, we often miss planning for critical elements that will involve just as much work and effort and which may have a disproportional impact on the plans ability to achieve the goal.

Design activities that:

- Move towards the goal
- Uphold the core principles
- Maintain right motives (for all stakeholders)
- Build local capacities
- Incorporate clear accountability and responsibilities
- Manage risks and barriers to progress
- Hold to a timeframe

These activities should reflect a complete implementation plan that should now align with our ethical goal

6. Build in feedback loops

Assume that your understanding is incomplete that there is always room for improvement
Don't assume you will get it right first time

Build in the healthy perspective that continual learning, regular evaluation and self-reflection are good and will improve your ability to see a positive change occur over time.

1. Reassess and continue to research the complex context
2. Reflect on the application of the core principles
3. Reassess motives and capacity
4. Review the 'change' goal
5. Redesign the activities

New insights will come out of our learning and understanding and the positive impacts of the 'change' goal will also generate new opportunities and possibilities