

Making space to breathe – balance and identity in a faith-based international development agency

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Faith-based international development agencies provide a significant proportion of the contribution by non-government organisations, both local and international, to overseas development assistance. They range from large, multi-national organisations to small grassroots community groups, and include agencies grounded in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other faiths. One Australian agency undertook a yearlong cooperative inquiry into the way in which its historic focus on Christian mission was influenced by, and influenced, its contemporary identity as an international development agency. The agency, founded in 1850 as the national mission agency of the Anglican Church, has evolved from its original, evangelical enterprise to a holistic understanding of its goal to serve all people regardless of religious affiliation, through the provision of water security, education, health, and other essential services. The reflective project provided an opportunity for the organisation to explore ways of honouring its traditional identity and affiliations while at the same time affirming its identity and participation within the non-sectarian international development sector. Over the course of twelve months, three inquiry cycles were conducted by the researcher – a volunteer within the organisation – and the senior management of the agency. The inquiry cycles consisted of phases of reflection, action, and immersion in an inquiry question agreed by the participants. The learning process was enhanced through group reflection and discussion; interviews and engagement with overseas partner organisations, volunteers and staff members; historic and contemporary document analysis; and reflexive writing which then formed the basis for further inquiry questions and discussion. Organisational structures and their resulting tensions were explored and negotiated. The result of the project was a new, collective understanding of the ways in which the agency's traditional and contemporary identities and accountabilities were grounded in a shared value base while finely balancing the tensions between sometimes competing approaches to partnership with overseas communities. The project ultimately led to restructuring and redefining the ways in which the organisation's activities were conducted. Praxis was enhanced through this organisational learning process, which continues several years after the project's completion.