Moving from vision to practice: making Fullness of Life practical

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Abstract

This paper examines the experience of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) moving from the concept of 'fullness of life' being simply a lofty statement of intent with little connection to the work on the ground, to the point where it is practically embedded in the organization's thinking and is a major driver for its work as a whole. The paper briefly explores the context that UMN works in and how this influenced this journey, the process undertaken in developing practical models for poverty and fullness of life, and then also describes the models themselves. The paper then examines how these models have been used within the organization, and the way in which they impact on its work. The paper ends by drawing out lessons learned from this process and making recommendations for other organizations interested in ensuring that their work on the ground better connects to the biblical concepts of fullness of life and/or *shalom*, enshrined in their vision and mission statements.

Introduction

Many Christian development and mission agencies have the biblical concept of 'fullness of life'[2] or *shalom* in their vision and mission statements, but often these statements remain as vague biblical concepts that they hope their work contributes to in some way. The concepts themselves have little impact on the actual work that they do, and remain as lofty statements of intent with little connection to ground realities.

But is it possible to connect these statements and concepts more closely to the work we do. How can we ensure that they are guiding and influencing our organizations as a whole and are practically applied in the work that we do? What are the cost and benefits of trying to do this, and how does one go about it?

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2 Fulness of life is not only Jesus promise in John 10:10 but also a direct equivalent of the Hebrew concept of 'Shalom'. Therefore although the term fullness of life has been used here the term shalom could equally be used.

These are the questions that this paper seeks to answer, by drawing on the experience of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) as we have wrestled with and used the concept of Fullness of Life over the last 6 years. While this is a work in progress, we believe that we have already learned a great deal that is worth sharing with others.

This paper will first draw out useful lessons from UMN's experience, by exploring the context that we are working in and how this influenced our thinking, the process of developing our understanding of the concept of fullness of life, and the models of the Life of Poverty and Fullness of Life that have been developed and are at the core of this process.

The second part of the paper will critically examine the use of the models developed, as a tool for retrospective analysis of our work to analyse the situation of those that we work with and the nature of their poverty, and to measure impact at the community level.

We will seek to draw conclusions on the key impacts of this process on the organization, lessons that can be learned from this experience, and potential next steps; and make recommendations for others interested in ensuring that the biblical *shalom* and Fullness of Life do not just remain vague concepts at the vision level, but influence and shape all the work that we do.

Organizational Context

The United Mission to Nepal was set up as a joint mission agency in 1954 by a diverse set of mission agencies and church groups, and works only in Nepal. UMN entered the country at the request of the Nepali Government, to work with them to serve the people of Nepal. Restrictions on evangelism were placed on the organization and its expatriate staff, consistent with the laws of the country, which forbade proselytism and conversion. However the organization was allowed to be clear about its Christian identity and the motivation and inspiration for its work.

Over the last 60 years UMN has continued to serve the people of Nepal through health, education, rural and industrial development. From 2003 to 2005 the organization went through a major change process to reflect the changing global and national context, with a shift of emphasis, from designing and implementing its own programs, to working to build the capacity of grassroots organizations. The change of Nepal from a Hindu

kingdom to a secular state in 2006 enabled UMN to work more closely with the Nepali church and to be more explicit about its Christian identity. Subsequent to the change process, the organization went through a process of re-expressing its vision and mission statements, which led to the development and use of the Fullness of Life concept explored in this paper.

Despite the secular status of the country, there continues to be suspicion towards Christian faith-based organizations, and accusations of proselytism, particularly from within Government circles. However those who are familiar with the work of long-standing Christian organizations such as UMN, respect the quality of work we do and the values demonstrated in carrying out that work. Within UMN we have 140 staff, just less than 50% of whom are Christian, while over half of our staff are those of other faiths or none. However all staff are aware of UMN's Christian identity, and as part of the recruitment process are specifically asked how they feel about working for a Christian organization. In general they are sympathetic or even positive towards UMN's faith identity and particularly the values that result from that. Those staff who are not Christians are most commonly from Hindu or Buddhist backgrounds, but vary in their commitment to these belief systems. Increasingly the younger generation have more secular and pluralistic outlooks. Significant wisdom is needed in getting the right balance between emphasising UMN's Christian identity, while not offending or alienating those who do not share that belief system.

Fullness of life: developing an understanding

Through UMN's change process in the early 2000s, the core focus of the organization was re-expressed as 'addressing the root causes of poverty'. While some attempt was made at defining and examining these root causes, no clear conclusion was reached, and there was little understanding of what these root causes were within the organization. The strategic planning process that was initiated in 2009 started with the question "If we exist to address the root causes of poverty, what are they?" A task group of senior staff was set up to answer this question. This group examined models of poverty, including Robert Chambers' 'poverty trap'[1] and Jayakumar Christian's 'poverty as disempowerment'.[2] Helpful summaries and adaptations of these models are given by Bryant Myers in *Walking with the Poor*.[3] Christian's model of disempowerment as 'the web of lies' was felt to

be particularly helpful, given that this was developed in a similar context to Nepal, with the Hindu belief system as predominant in society. However, the task group wanted to develop a model that could be used openly in our context and was acceptable and understandable to all staff, whatever their faith background. While recognising the importance of spirituality and worldview in understanding poverty, for our context we felt that isolating out the 'worldview' and 'spiritual' elements was unhelpful in developing an understandable and acceptable model of poverty. In addition the model seemed to miss out on other key aspects (e.g. environment and conflict) which were felt to be particularly important to the context of our work in Nepal.

The team therefore adapted the model, while retaining a number of its key elements, particularly the idea of poverty as being complex and multidimensional, and having different aspects which interact and reinforce one another. After a number of iterations the poverty model illustrated below was developed.
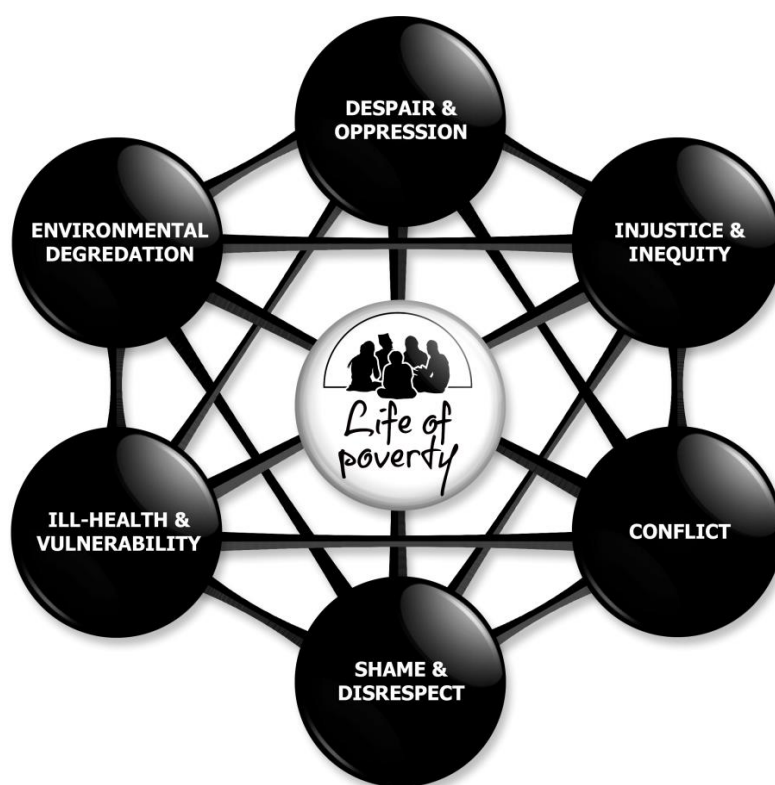

Fig 1.1: Life of Poverty Model

The group felt that this model was very helpful in giving UMN a clear understanding of the root causes of poverty that it was working against. However it was soon recognized that it would be helpful not only to know what we are working against, but also what we are working towards! We therefore inverted the model, expressing the opposite of each aspect of poverty, and turned the colours from black to multi-coloured. We re-named it the Fullness of Life model, recognizing that the biblical concept of fullness of life is the opposite of poverty, and developed definitions for each of its aspects. This is consistent with Myers assertion that Poverty is the absence of *shalom* in all its aspects[4]. The Fullness of Life model is illustrated and explained below.

Fig 1.2 : Fullness of Life Model

1. **Well-Being & Security**: people have the knowledge, skills and resources needed to reach their potential

2. **Environmental Sustainability**: people care for the environment and use its resources responsibly in the present, maintaining them for the future

3. **Hope & Freedom**: people feel hopeful about their future and live free from negative constraints including those from culture and religion. This aspect particularly focuses on the spiritual aspects of life and culture.

4. **Justice & Equity**: people live within and work towards just and equitable communities and systems at local, national and international levels

5. **Peace & Reconciliation**: people experience and work towards peaceful and harmonious relationships within the household, community and nation that respect diversity

6. **Dignity & Respect**: people are treated with dignity and show respect for themselves and others, acknowledging that everyone is made in the image of God

These concepts closely correspond to the biblical concept of '*shalom*' which goes much further than the common understanding of 'peace'. An analysis of the Old Testament prophets vision for the future God intends (e.g. Micah 4:1 – 5; Isaiah 65:17 – 25; Jeremiah 31:2 – 14; Ezekiel 34:11 - 31) incorporate these different aspects of 'shalom' or 'wholeness'.

Having developed this model and used it as a key focus in its strategy[3], the organization went through a process of re-expressing its vision and mission statements. This led to the term 'fullness of life' becoming central to the expressed vision of UMN,[4] and the phrase 'addressing the root causes of poverty' being included in the mission statement. The Fullness of Life model and definitions of its aspects were then incorporated into the highest level

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3 Timing of strategy development was determined by five-year agreements with the government; hence the strategy development process had to come first, followed by a review of vision and mission statements.

4 UMN's vision statement is "Fullness of Life for all in a transformed Nepali society'.

objectives and indicators[5] of the organization (or Ends), against which the executive reports annually to the board.

As we began to use the model, we emphasized that all of the projects that we run should contribute positively to two or three aspects of the model, and 'do no harm' in the others. For example, a livelihoods project might contribute to well-being and security, but should not undermine environmental sustainability. A peace-related project should not work for peace at the cost of justice and equity, and vice versa.

Embedding the understanding of Fullness of Life within the organization

Having developed the model, including input on draft versions by staff as part of the strategic planning process, we worked hard to embed the model into the organization's thinking and practice.

Workshops were held at the team level[6] which explored the Fullness of Life model as well as the concept of transformation—the related key concept in UMN's vision statement. The initial workshops with staff included practical exercises using the model. For example, case stories from our work were provided to each small groups of staff, who identified and discussed the aspects of Fullness of Life that had been enhanced, those that might have been negatively affected, and how the project could be altered to ensure contribution to other aspects of Fullness of Life, or at least the doing of no harm.

These workshops included a practical exploration of the biblical basis of fullness of life. Participants were provided with passages from the Old Testament prophets that look forward to 'the new heavens and the new earth' and were asked to draw a picture of the images that were described in the passage. They then identified the aspects of fullness of life illustrated in the passage and their picture, cut out relevant aspects of the Fullness of Life

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5 UMN adheres to Carver Policy Governance framework. The highest level indicators are known as the 'ENDS' and are the highest level objectives of the organization which flow out of the vision and mission statements.

6 Teams in UMN are both geographical and disciplinary

model, and pasted it on to the picture. The different pictures were then shared between groups.

More recently a similar exercise was carried out over a week's workshop where as an organization, with all our staff involved, we explored the over-arching biblical story in six parts: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, present, and future. Each day, after a brief creative presentation on one part of the story, staff were divided into groups, which drew a picture of the part of the story they had heard and then linked this with both the Life of Poverty and Fullness of Life models, as well as with UMN's core statements of values, vision and mission, by cutting up and pasting elements of these onto the picture. Each group consisted of both Christian and non-Christian staff.

The discussion in the groups was lively and participatory, and the exercise gave all staff the opportunity to see 'God's Big Picture' as a whole. Even Christian staff said: "We've never heard the whole story expressed like this before!" In addition it was clear that some of the misconceptions about the biblical story and Christian faith held by both Christian and non-Christian staff were clarified. At the end of the week each group had a series of pictures that told the biblical story and linked it clearly with UMN's core statements.

While the process of model development could be criticized for not starting with the biblical passages and drawing out a model based on these, we have found that as we have examined the biblical basis for the model it stands up well to the biblical ideal and concept of fullness of life. This approach of starting with our context and then looking at this context through the lens of scripture was appropriate for a mixed-faith staff. Starting off by exploring the biblical concepts of fullness of life or *shalom* is liable to work only for organizations with solely Christian staff.

Extensive use of the model in all aspects of the organization including devotions with staff, annual reports, other communication with staff, and through posters illustrating the model, has ensured that the model has become central to the organization's thinking and identity.

Using the models as practical tools in our work

a. Embedding the tool into our planning and reporting processes

As part of our annual reporting processes, we collect case stories to illustrate the impact of our work. As part of the submission of the stories, we asked

staff to identify the key aspects of Fullness of Life that the case story had contributed to, and to explain this in the story. What we learned from this exercise was that staff viewed many of our projects as contributing to Well-being and Security and to Dignity and Respect. Some of our work also contributed specifically to Justice and Equity, Peace and Reconciliation and Hope and Freedom. Fewer projects contributed to Environmental Sustainability. Graph 1.1 below demonstrates this. Discussion on this highlighted that staff also found it more difficult to identify when a project had contributed towards 'Hope and Freedom' within a community.

At the organizational level, we also reported case stories illustrating the contribution that our work had made to each aspect of Fullness of Life as part of our annual achievement report to the UMN Board. Use of the model in reporting was therefore included at all levels of the organization.
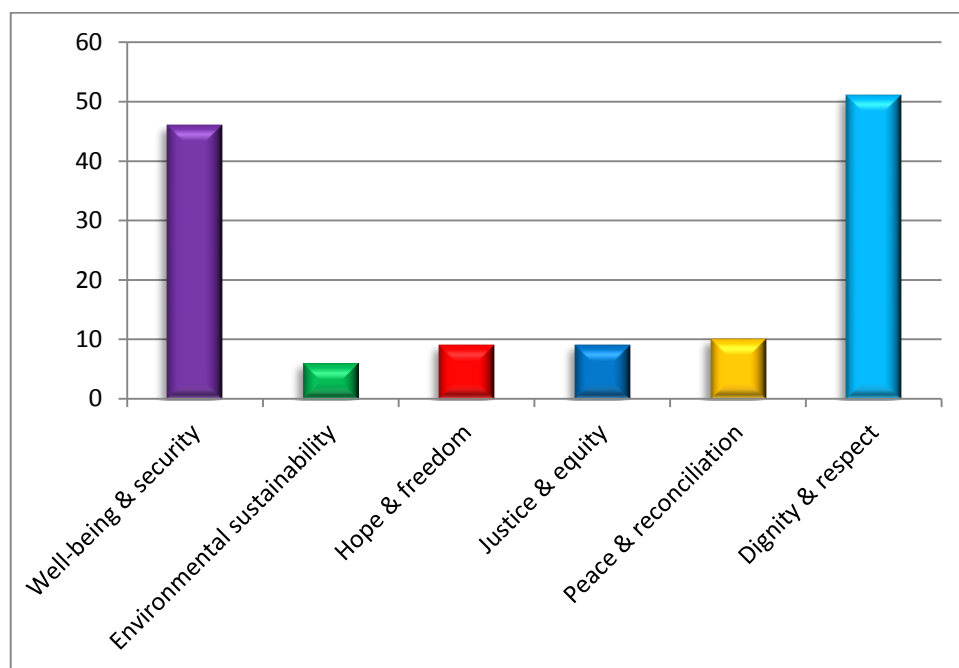
Graph 1.1 Number of stories assigned to each aspect of Fullness of Life out of a total of 89 stories in one six-monthly report. Staff could assign a story to a maximum of 3 FoL aspects.

Having embedded the model and thinking into our reporting processes as we retrospectively examined our work, we then made steps to include this thinking into our planning and design of projects. This included requiring teams to identify which aspects of Fullness of Life new projects would promote at the design stage, and also examine whether they were doing no

harm in the other aspects. Design of projects was thus analysed and amended to ensure a positive contribution to two or three aspects of fullness of life and a 'do no harm' approach in the others.

The broader analysis of what aspects of Fullness of Life were relatively neglected in our work as a whole, was also taken into account in the design and analysis of new projects. One example is that the recognition of the need to work more specifically towards Hope and Freedom has led to some projects being developed that specifically target negative or restrictive cultural practices.

   b. *As a tool to analyse the situation of those that we work with and the nature of their poverty*

We also used the Life of Poverty model as a practical tool to identify and analyse the nature of the poverty of different groups in our working areas. This enabled the design of projects that tackled critical elements of poverty and removed obstacles or barriers that prevented groups moving from a Life of Poverty towards Fullness of Life.

Community members themselves were not involved in this initial analytical process, and involving them would be a good next step. However, analysis was based on the first-hand knowledge and understanding of our staff living in the districts where they work.

The process was as follows:

1. Brainstorm to identify the groups living in poverty in the district (max. 10)

2. For each group, assign a score between 1 and 10 for each of the different aspects of poverty, e.g. for ill-health and vulnerability, assign a score between 1 and 10, for environmental degradation do the same, etc. This is best done by comparing each of the groups across the different aspects. As the aspects are strongly interlinked, care needs to be taken to ensure that one particular aspect is not overly considered (and therefore scored highly) across all aspects of the model. Clear reasons should be given for the score assigned, and these should be a result of thorough discussion.

3. The scores across all 6 aspects of the model for each group are then totalled to give a score out of 60 (10 points per 6 aspects of poverty) and a ranking of poverty across the groups.

The figures and table below gives an example of this exercise for 2 different groups:
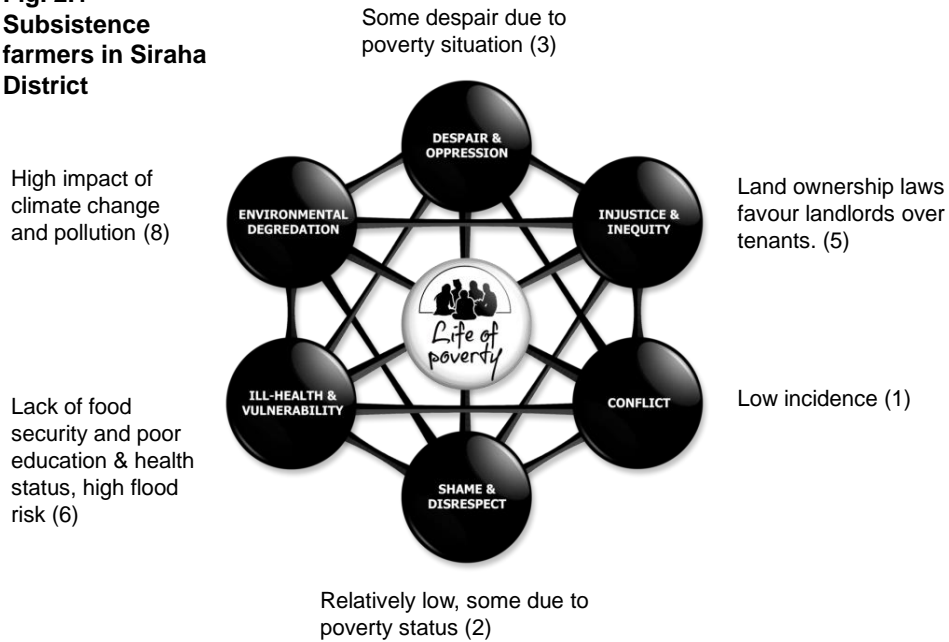
Fig. 2.1 Subsistence farmers in Siraha District

Some despair due to poverty situation (3)
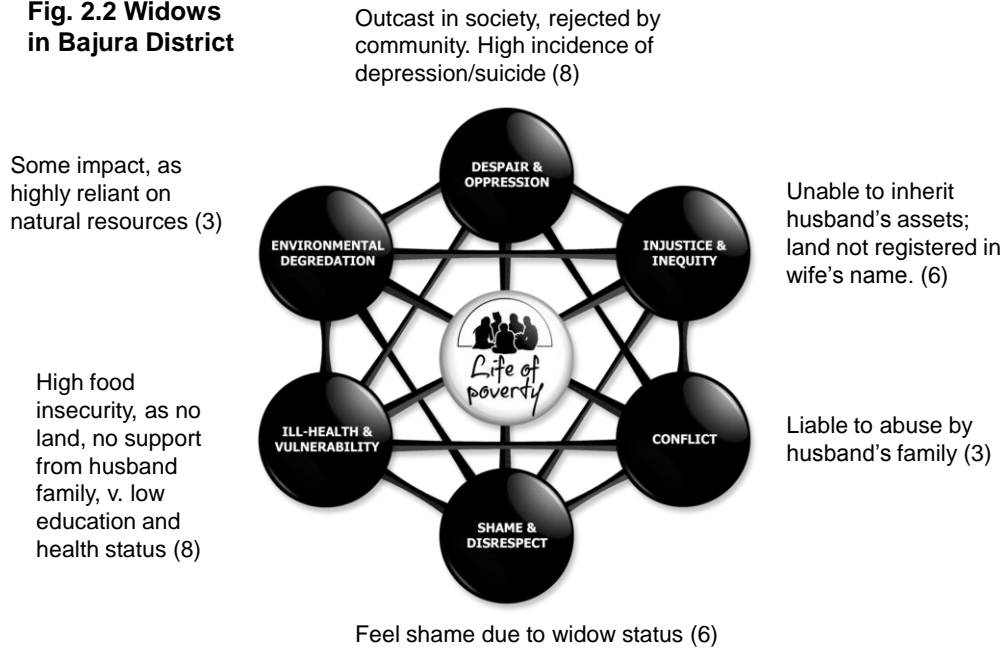
High impact of climate change and pollution (8)

Land ownership laws favour landlords over tenants. (5)

Lack of food security and poor education & health status, high flood risk (6)

Low incidence (1)

Relatively low, some due to poverty status (2)

Fig. 2.2 Widows in Bajura District

Outcast in society, rejected by community. High incidence of depression/suicide (8)

Some impact, as highly reliant on natural resources (3)

Unable to inherit husband's assets; land not registered in wife's name. (6)

High food insecurity, as no land, no support from husband family, v. low education and health status (8)

Liable to abuse by husband's family (3)

Feel shame due to widow status (6)

Table 1: Summary table of 'life of poverty' scores

Poverty aspect	Bajura widows	Siraha Farmers
1. Ill-health and vulnerability	8	6
2. Envt degradation	3	8
3. Despair and oppression	8	3
4. Injustice and Inequity	6	5
5. Conflict	3	1
6. Shame and disrespect	6	2
TOTALS	31	25

This exercise, though crude, helps to identify the differing aspects and experience of poverty between different groups and therefore what needs to be addressed to enable them to move from a life of poverty towards fullness of life. As with any participatory exercise, the richness is from the group discussion that goes into the analysis rather than just the result of the final scores.

c. Use of the models and related indicators to measure impact at the community level

Initially we decided not to try to develop measurable indicators for each aspect of the Fullness of Life model, thinking that this would narrow its flexibility and dynamism. However as we have used the model, we have realized its practicality and have made a decision to develop a tool that can be used at the community level with different groups and/or individuals. To achieve this we have developed a set of questions which can either be used

as a group discussion, or in a survey format with individuals.[7] This would involve separate discussions with different groups in the community e.g. disaggregated by age, gender and caste. Three to six questions have been developed for each aspect of the model, along with several more general questions . For each question, four possible answers are supplied, which the respondents can choose from. Once again, the discussion that takes place in coming to agreement on the answer is of course as important as the answer itself. No explanation of the Fullness of Life model itself is given, in order to discourage 'correct' rather than 'truthful' answers.

These questions and the link to specific indicators will enable us to be more purposeful in the use of the model in our impact measurement and therefore tracking contribution towards our vision and Ends statements. The development of these indicators and questions has helped us to think more clearly about what the different aspects of the model mean for the communities that we work with, particularly when it comes to the less tangible issues of 'Dignity and Respect' and 'Hope and Freedom'.

Impacts on the organization

The development of the new vision statement, together with the Fullness of Life model, has had a significant positive impact on the organization. The power of having a short, succinct, memorable and inspiring vision statement that all staff know and understand is well recognized. Specific benefits that we have experienced in UMN included a clearer understanding of what the organization is working towards and therefore greater ownership of this vision. This has also led to a strengthened organizational identity around the vision statement, and an increased dynamism and creativity in working towards this.

The models developed for Fullness of Life and Life of Poverty have added to this, in giving a clear picture and understanding of what we are working against (Life of Poverty) and what we are working towards (Fullness of Life) and ensuring these concepts do not remain vague conceptual ideas at the top level of the organization, but practical concepts that are understood by all our staff and embedded into all levels of the organization from the Ends policy

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7 A similar tool has been developed by Tear fund UK called the 'LIGHT' model

statements to regular planning and reporting systems and processes. The models have also helped in the clear communication of our Christian identity and our vision and strategy to our supporting and donor organizations, who have been very positive towards this approach.

The models have acted as a 'unifier' within the organization and given a clear expression of UMN's Christian identity that is owned by all of our staff, whatever their faith background. In the past the prime mechanism for articulating our faith to all staff has been our organizational values. These of course remain vital, but the Fullness of Life model has in many ways been more powerful, as it has addressed what we do and what we are ultimately working towards, while the values express how we go about this. The consistency between the model and the values also means that they re-enforce one another in a helpful way.

These models have also led to a significant impact on the overall strategy of the organization. During this strategic period we started to develop projects which were more integrated and will more specifically tackle root causes of poverty. As we have developed our strategic plan for the period 2015 to 2020, the models have became central reference points, and have led to a shift in the strategic focus of the organization, away from more technical solutions to poverty to a focus on 'community transformation', the process by which communities and society move from Life of Poverty towards Fullness of Life.

Next steps / possibilities

While significant progress has been made internally in the development and use of these models, the journey is far from complete. In our new strategy we have made a minor amendment in the presentation of the models, removing the references to specific aspects, e.g. material (Wellbeing and Security), ecological (Environmental sustainability), or spiritual and cultural (Hope and Freedom), as we felt these reduced the dynamism of the model, but otherwise the models have remained the same.

A key next step in the use of the model is to pilot it as a tool to track community progress. A key limitation so far is that we have only used the model within the organization and not at the partner or at the community level. However we believe that due to its simplicity, there is scope for using this at the community level also.

Lessons learned

The process of model development and vision and mission re-expression has taken a significant amount of time, particularly due to the participatory approach adopted, ensuring involvement and therefore ownership by UMN's staff. It has also been a key learning process.

The lessons learned can be summarized as follows:

- Clarifying and developing an organizational understanding of poverty is time-consuming, but leads to clarity and focus that is invaluable for the organization

- Developing a practical model of the opposite of poverty (what the organization is working towards) is unusual, but also leads to significant benefits from increased clarity and focus, and releases significant energy and creativity into the organization.

- In time it also helps the organization to adapt its work to better fulfill its vision and higher-level goals, and ensure coherence of vision, mission, values and strategy

- Any model developed needs to reflect both the internal and external context of the organization, and should be understandable and acceptable to all staff

- The religious context (internal and external) of the organization is vital, but providing clear models or explanations of biblical terms (such as 'fullness of life' or '*shalom*') and exploring the biblical basis of these, if done sensitively, can engage staff of all faiths and none – not just Christians.

Conclusions

This paper has shared one organization's experience of developing and embedding an understanding of poverty and its opposite, Fullness of Life, into its life and work over a period of about six years. This has been an interactive, dynamic and iterative process and is far from complete. However by honestly sharing our experience it is hoped that others can benefit from the lessons learned and the experience gained.

Despite the significant time and energy involved in this process, we would recommend that organizations working against poverty take time to clearly articulate their own understanding of poverty, and its opposite (*shalom* or Fullness of Life), for their own context. By involving key actors in this process, particularly staff, significant ownership of the vision of the organization is gained. This provides clarity and direction to the organization, with multiple benefits in terms of both organizational culture (ownership of the vision) and effectiveness (implementation of the vision). It enables the organization to move the biblical concepts of Fullness of Life and *shalom* from being restricted to lofty vision-level statements which have little to do with the day to day work of the organization, to well-articulated concepts that are embedded into the thinking and everyday practice of the organization.

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[1]Robert Chambers. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. (Longman scientific and technical (1983) [pp103 – 139]

[2]Jayakumar Christian. *God of the Empty handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*. Acorn Press. 2011.

[3]Bryant L Myers, *Walking with the Poor. Principles and practices of Transformational Development. Revised and Expanded edition.* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2011)

[4] Ibid