

Chapter 4

Development amidst Communal Conflict: Case study of a Christian FBO in a Buddhist-Muslim conflict region in Myanmar¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of a Christian FBO operating in the Buddhist-Muslim conflict region of Rakhine State, Myanmar. Significant tension and sporadic violent conflict has long marked relations between the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist population and the Muslims who call themselves 'Rohingya'. The underlying issues derive from the Colonial era, if not earlier, with large numbers of Muslims migrating but then being denied citizenship after Independence. Both groups fought separatist struggles after Independence, for overlapping territory, fuelling mutual fear. Simmering tensions erupted in 2012, resulting in almost 200 deaths, 10,000 homes destroyed and 140,000 people displaced. It is in this context that Bethel, a small Pentecostal Christian organisation led by a converted Buddhist monk, in partnership with international FBO GraceWorks Myanmar, commenced both highly contextualised religious outreach and development activities in 2006. Development activities were stepped up amongst Buddhist communities and separated from religious outreach in 2012, prior to the recent outbreak of violence. What is interesting about this case is that, despite the vitriolic ethno-religious conflict, the introduction of development activities led by converts to a third and evangelistic religion has resulted in largely effective empowerment, and not resulted in any significant negative reaction. This chapter is based on new qualitative primary field data collected from Bethel facilitators and the Buddhist villages in which they work. It examines the dynamics of this cross-faith relationship, looking at the degree and nature of the tensions created by this engagement, and explores questions about proselytism, the impact of the faith difference on effectiveness, and the accommodations and approaches to faith interaction which shape positive and negative interaction.

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Introduction: The research question

Faith can be a powerful force for positive development and social change, but as James (2011) notes, it is highly flammable fuel that can also easily result in negative outcomes. The pervasive influence of religion in the lives of many gives it a unique ability to shape both individual and communal identities (perceptions of self and others). While religious identities can be an incredibly positive force, they can also be used as a source for exclusive and intolerant attitudes, with a potential to feed nationalisms that become motivators or justifications for conflict. This is particularly true in tense multi-religious contexts where competing ethnoreligious nationalistic identities and historical claims are forced to coexist—especially for faith-based development agencies that relate to one of those identities.

This chapter explores the work of a small local Christian FBO working in Buddhist communities within a region of significant Buddhist-Muslim tension and recent violent communal conflict, as a case study of development across complex faith boundaries. Local FBO Bethel works in partnership with the international FBO GraceWorks Myanmar (GWM). Making this case particularly interesting, Bethel has evolved out of a related religious organisation that still maintains a mandate for preaching a contextual Christian message to Buddhists, and most of the local workers are converts from Buddhism. Given the most inflammatory religious sparks for worsening conflicts are widely regarded to be discriminatory practices and proselytism – or perceptions of proselytism (e.g. Clarke & Jennings 2008; Flanigan 2010) – this case study is interesting for the way these issues are handled. This chapter includes new research examining whether and how this FBO has been able to avoid inflaming tensions and been broadly granted a social mandate to operate in Buddhist communities, even though it constitutes a third religious actor in a context of vitriolic inter-religious conflict.

This chapter examines the history and nature of the conflict in Rakhine state (broadly defined to include both non-violent and sometimes violent expressions), and the dynamics of this cross-faith (Christian-Buddhist) development relationship. It looks at the degree and nature of the tensions created by this engagement, examines the impact of the faith difference on development effectiveness, and explores the accommodations and approaches to faith interaction which shape both positive and negative interactions. It examines concerns about proselytism which have emerged, as well as other religious difference issues, and explores the solutions and adaptations introduced. The aim of this chapter is to identify keys with wider applicability when working across faith boundaries, particularly in areas with pre-existing communal tension.

There six sections within this chapter. The first section has introduced this chapter. The next section provides the background to the case study, introducing the Rakhine State context and development agencies involved, before a third section briefly describes the fieldwork methodology. A fourth section documents the issues encountered by the FBO workers in their programme implementation across faith boundaries, and the solutions and success factors they have identified in working across the faith boundary, while a fifth section analyses this data to identify keys to success and potentially-transferrable elements. A final section offers a brief conclusion to this case study.

Background to the Case Study: The conflict and agencies

Rakhine State is now the poorest state in Myanmar, suffering deep multi-dimensional poverty. The *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey 2009-2010* (IHLCA 2011), the most comprehensive poverty data for the country until detailed 2014 census data is released, estimated that in 2010, 44% of the population lived below an absolute poverty lineⁱⁱ of 1,030 Kyat per day

(about US\$1). Malnutrition levels are 53% (moderate) and 16% (severe) respectively. Other indicators were also low, for example, 32% had no immunisations, 50% had no access to safe drinking water, 46% had no toilets, 80% had only thatch roofing and 63% had attained no higher than a grade 4 education. The conflict since 2012 has negatively impacted even this low level of human development, and this deep poverty impacts both Buddhist and Muslim communities. However, the lack of citizenship and lower education levels leaves most Muslims more marginal, and they bore the greatest loss during the recent violence.

History & Nature of the Rakhine Conflict

Communal violence erupted in Rakhine State in June 2012, two years after the recent political transition began in Myanmar, and flared again that October. The June violence saw Muslims and Buddhists both impacted relatively equally; the October round, however, appeared to be planned and well-coordinated, with most deaths and property loss on the Muslim side (ICG 2013). Official government figures put the combined toll at 192 dead and 265 injured, across 11 local government townships (of 17 townships in Rakhine), with 8,614 homes and almost 2,000 public buildings razed (UoM 2013). Some 140,000 Muslims and 20,000 Buddhists remain in camps in 2015, with international agencies providing humanitarian aid and large numbers of military troops brought in to ensure security, separating the two communities. Today there are few schools, clinics or markets which both Muslims and Buddhists attend anywhere in the state; the Bamar-dominated military forces ensure widespread segregation.

This conflict is based in part on competition over scarce resources in a context of deep multidimensional poverty. It is inflamed by the constant public retelling of competing historical narratives. The Rakhine Buddhist population believe most local Muslims arrived uninvited (by them) during the colonial period (1824-1885), or illegally as a result of the Pakistan Civil War (Bangladesh Liberation War) in 1971. They fear the growing Muslim population poses an existential threat to their territory and ethnocultural identity, and perceive them to be associated with religious extremism. Many of the Muslims, on the other hand, self-identify as ‘Rohingya’ⁱⁱⁱ and claim to be indigenous to the region, and thus demand rights to citizenship, ethnic self-identification and (some of them) limited self-rule as an ethnic minority national race. Both sets of claims are questionable, built on nationalistic revisionist histories.

The history and archaeology of this region is under-studied. What is known is that at its height the historical Buddhist kingdoms of Arakan (Rakhine), commonly dated as being founded in 1429, ruled not only over current northern Rakhine but also over the Muslim Chittagonian region now in Bangladesh. Small Muslim communities coexisted largely peacefully in majority Buddhist areas now in northern Rakhine, as did Buddhist communities in Muslim-majority areas in Chittagong. The kingdom waned, then ended in a conquest by the Bamar (Burmese) in 1784, with a massive exodus of both local Buddhists and Muslims. The Bamar particularly targeted Muslim minorities (Charney 1999; see also Tin Maung Maung Than & Moe Thuzar 2012). When the British annexed the region into British India in 1826, the return of refugees and promotion of Chittagonian migration laid further foundations for communal tension. In the absence of traditional political power structures, intense competition between returnees and migrants led to a religious communalism (both Buddhist and Muslim), as local communities turned to religious centres for their unity and leadership (Charney 1999).

It seems that the ethnically-diverse Rakhine Muslim population adopted a single nationalistic self-identification during this period. The original small local Muslim population was “absorbed by the newly immigrant Chittagonian Bengalis... fundamentally transform[ing] the profile of the Muslim population in northern Rakhine” (Leider 2014, p.229). Yet, in most regards the newer

migrant majority took on the historical self-identity of the original local Muslims. Immigration was so high during the colonial period that Chittagonian migrants became the dominant group in Akyab District (northern Rakhine), growing from 10% in 1869, to 30% in 1912 census, to a majority by WWII (Baxter 1941; Leider 2014; see also Smart 1917; Yegar 2002). The dangers of rapid immigration were apparent by the end of the colonial period. Baxter's (1941) *Report on Indian Immigration* expressed concern that Indian/Muslim migration "contained the seed of future communal troubles" (p.51).

Violence erupted during WWII, as the retreating British armed the Muslims as a last line of defence and the Rakhine Buddhists sided with the Burmese—and thus the Japanese. Massacres and mass dislocations occurred on both sides, resulting in almost total segregation of Muslims to the north and Buddhists to the south (Mole 2001; Murray 1949, 1980). The violence "created wounds that never healed and cemented the division between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in northern Rakhine" (Leider 2014, p.16). Tensions erupted again at Independence in 1948, with competing armed separatist rebellions fighting for competing land claims (Murray 1949; Smith 1999; Ware 2015; Yegar 2002). The armed rebellions were largely crushed by the late-1960s, with at least 13 major armed operations directed against the Muslim 'Rohingyas' alone since 1948 (Selth 2004), but unresolved tensions toward each other and the Burmese have remained. Tensions were further fuelled by widespread allegations during and after the Pakistani civil war that corrupt officials allowed large numbers of Bengalis to enter the country illegally (the economic opportunities being better in Rakhine than Bangladesh during the 1970s), as well as by government 'document verification' programs targeting Muslims and by harsh Burmese military operations against insurgencies in the area.

Thus while Buddhists and Muslims have co-existed in Rakhine in relative peace for long periods, conflict tensions have long simmered and were only suppressed by authoritarian rule. It would be incorrect to attribute the current tensions primarily to recent grievances or issues only. Many The relaxed free speech, media censorship and internet and social media restrictions allowed renewed expression of old issues, alongside new grievances.

This is a 3-way power struggle between the Burmese (Bamar), the Rakhine Buddhists and the Muslims 'Rohingya', in which both Buddhist and Muslims react as a 'double minority complex': both feel their very survival is threatened by both the other and the Bamar, fuelling religious-linked nationalist narratives (Ware 2015). Many on both sides blame the Bamar for inciting problems, and Bamar government policies and practices for escalating tensions. In return, common Bamar narratives consider the Rakhine troublemakers, and the Muslims illegal immigrants. In this sense, this is a communal and identity struggle, not a sectarian one *per se*, despite the religious identity labels and narratives employed (Htoo Kyaw Win & Cheesman 2015). Thus while the violence was more communal than sectarian in nature, religion remains a major point of demarcation between the two communities and a major part of the narratives constructed to sustain communal identities, fears and tension.

The Development Agencies: Bethel and Graceworks Myanmar

It is in this context that the Christian FBOs Bethel and Graceworks Myanmar (GWM) have commenced a community-led local empowerment and development programme. Internal evaluations suggested the *Community Development Education (CDE)* programme was fairly successful, with relatively little religious tensions despite being a third religious identity in a conflict region—and the religious identity connected with the former colonial power. As will be seen in the discussion that follows, the research for this chapter found considerable challenge has in fact been encountered due to this religious difference and context, but positive development

results have nonetheless been attained and the work given a social license to operate. This paper will examine these challenges, and how and why they have been overcome, despite the context.

GWM is a small international FBO, founded in 2004 as a 'non-denominational community development organisation'. GWM focuses on holistic education, health, community wellbeing and livelihood projects, and has a clear policy against proselytism. Bethel was founded as a mission organisation in 1995, based out of a local church in Shwepyitha, Yangon Region. Being church-based, from the outset Bethel had a dual mandate to both provide practical assistance in local communities *and* seek to present a Christian message hoping for conversions. The potential for proselytism should therefore be noted.

In this chapter, 'proselytism' is understood to be an unethical exploitation of vulnerability, a form of coercion or inducement to change faith allegiance, even if unintentional. This stands in direct contrast to an empowered, informed decision to change faith that is grounded in reasoned agency, which is considered in this paper to be a legitimate conversion. Proselytism 'amount[s] to the assault by one religious group against the territory, ecclesiological or faith integrity of another—an unethical way of engaging' with religious difference (Kerr 1999, p.12). Proselytism effectively demands a transfer of cultural or political allegiance in addition to religious belief, and thus at least a *de facto* acknowledgement of subordination (Heideman 1996; Kerr 1999).

Bethel commenced work in Rakhine in 2003, seeking to both provide practical assistance to poor communities *and* present a contextualised Christian message to Rakhine Buddhists. GWM and Bethel reached a partnership in 2012 to implement the CDE programme in Rakhine, including an agreement to avoid proselytism. This small FBO is still thus grappling with the expression of their dual mandate while avoiding such negative behaviour. Since the commencement of this programme Bethel have thus structurally separated the development and religious activities of the organisation.

The CDE programme recruits local volunteers for training, who then work for 3-4 years (minimum) in 1-2 communities each to facilitate community-led participatory development activities, relying primarily on local resources. The programme uses a strength-based or asset-based approach to help communities analyse their circumstances and the underlying causes of their poverty, then develop and implement a community action plan using bottom-up assessment and planning, relying on representative decision-making and leveraging their own means and social capital for resources. (For further details on similar approaches, see Ware 2013, 2014). This sort of approach has been found to be particularly powerful during this time of rapid political and economic change in Myanmar, during which government officials are increasingly prepared to engage positively with communities, and government and international development funding is becoming increasingly available for projects. Bethel's CDE facilitators range in age from late-30s to late-50s, have an average grade 6 education (2 years above Rakhine average), and would all be considered to be amongst the more successful members of their rural communities. Bethel's CDE programme currently only works in Rakhine Buddhist communities.

Fieldwork Methodology

This chapter is based on new qualitative primary field data collected by the authors in early 2015, through focus group discussions with 12 Bethel facilitators (who work across 2 villages: 9 paid, 3 volunteer; 8 Christian, 4 Buddhist) and interviews with recipients in 9 of those villages. Fieldwork data was collected 2.5 years into the programme.

Focus group discussions were conducted over 3 days, during regular quarterly Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)-based training, and involved a series of facilitated activities provoking reflective discussion. Facilitators identified a range of issues encountered, with various degrees of resolution at that point. They engaged in extensive discussion to try to understand both the nature of the issues, particularly those relating to the religious divide, and analyse any root causes underlying presenting issues. While not all issues identified related to working across faith boundaries, those that did are explored in this chapter. Both co-authors were present throughout these sessions, as was a bilingual GWM local staff trainer, with written notes taken during sessions.

Nine in-depth, unstructured recipient interviews were also conducted by the second co-author. These interviews were 1.5-2 hours long, and conducted without the knowledge of the interviewee (who thought they were only having a prolonged, informal conversation). Interviews were not recorded, but extensive notes written immediately after the interview. Interview villages were dispersed across 4 of the 11 local government townships the programme operates in (Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, Kyauktaw, and Thandwe), and selected as locations where tension between the Rakhine and Muslims was high. Interviewees were socially diverse (3 farmers, 2 teachers, 2 businessmen, a Buddhist monk and a trishaw driver), and were selected based on referral by facilitators as known to be moderate, to avoid exacerbating conflict tensions. With so few interviews and only friendly interviewees, a significant selection bias does exist and responses are non-representative. This was, however, an unavoidable concession to conflict-sensitivity.

It is also acknowledged that researcher bias exists, given that the two authors are associated with this programme.¹ Every effort has been made to minimise this risk, by facilitating open discussion and minimising the impact of power difference, as well as examining primary data impartially and phenomenologically before analysis. Given the dearth of research on FBOs working across faith boundaries, it is suggested that data collection and analysis still holds significant value.

Facilitator & Community Perspectives: Issues encountered, solutions and stories

Issues surrounding working across the faith boundary

As they attempted to initiate the programme in communities, all facilitators reported initially encountering a range of personal misunderstandings, obstructionism and accusation for being Christian or working with a Christian organisation. Sometimes these reactions were fairly hostile. The two most common negative reactions were allegations of proselytism, and—interestingly—allegations of lax morality. Discussion showed the latter stems from a fear that non-adherence to the Buddhist precepts would manifest in the community as a degradation in sexual standards, increased alcohol consumption and other immoral behaviour. In other words, the recipients' presuppositions were that development across a faith difference would result in inducement or coercion to convert, and corruption of their morality and way of life.

In several communities, monks or village headmen obstructed attempts to generate involvement in 'seed projects', small-scale initiatives early in the project cycle designed to develop community participation and cohesion. In several communities, the impact of this opposition was a very low level of involvement in activities and delays establishing the programme. In other communities, while not directly opposing the work and never openly speaking negatively about the programme, monks or village headmen remained distant and modelled passive resistance, also decreasing participation. When questioned, religious reasons were mostly given for this: suspicions about the motives of the facilitators and of the result of allowing religious difference

to exist in the community. The issue of religious difference was also raised quite commonly by ordinary community members in open communities meetings, such as during awareness seminars about the programme or participatory planning and decision-making meetings, with direct questions being raised about the motivations of the Christian facilitators (or of the Buddhist facilitators in choosing to work with a Christian FBO).

In many cases, these issues have been resolved through 2½ years of trust building and step-by-step programming in communities, although in other cases this issue does still require further effort. What is particularly clear, though, is that both Rakhine Buddhist leaders and community members initially fear religious difference in their community, and its potential for conflict, manipulation, proselytism and moral degradation.

Solutions found and stories of success

Analysing the ways they dealt with this religious resistance, the Bethel facilitators identified three consistent keys to the successes some of their number had achieved: emphasising ethnic solidarity, communal rights and responsibilities, and unity and non-confrontations. These are each explored below:

a) *Emphasis on ethnic solidarity with openness to discuss difference*

Buddhist nationalism in Rakhine is summed up in the common saying, *'To be Rakhine is to be Buddhist'*. During one focus group session a Christian facilitator related a pivotal discussion he had held with a Buddhist monk. In a genuinely honest discussion, the monk has asked, *'You are Rakhine. Why are you not Buddhist?'* The Christian FBO facilitator responded confidently, *'I am Rakhine, but I can change my mind and embrace new ideas based on new information and still remain Rakhine.'*

Another facilitator explained,

'I lived in the village I work in for a long time, and was a Buddhist until only a few years ago. People came to me when I started work in the village for the programme and asked why it was that I use to drive away the Christians, but now I am one—and why it is that as a Christian I want to do these things. I explained that previously I did not understand what Christianity was about, but now I had come to understand more and have chosen to become one. I said they knew me, and I am Rakhine, so hoped they would understand my motives are sincere. Because they know me, they accepted this difference.'

This sentiment was also borne out during the recipient interviews. One of the interviewees responded in a similar manner, perhaps because of this sort of narrative was also being communicated by the facilitators: *'Religion is our own choice, but our shared Rakhine identity and culture is very important.'* Another interviewee said, *'Even though the facilitator is a Christian, he is a Rakhine man. That is why we trust him.'*

Thus it would seem that being seen as ethnically and culturally Rakhine has been a particular key for Bethel's success working with Rakhine Buddhists, despite the organisation and a majority of the workers holding different religious beliefs. In a context in which religious difference has been promoted as a primary marker in the communal conflict with the 'Rohingya' Muslims, Bethel's Christian orientation has been able to overcome the risk of being seen as foreign, different and dangerous through a very strong ethnic and cultural identification. While this has served Bethel well in being able to gain the trust of Rakhine Buddhist communities, it obviously has implications on their ability to cross the cultural and religious divide to also work amongst Muslim communities at any time in the near future, and limits the scope of peacebuilding activities they could introduce.

b) *Emphasis on communal rights and responsibilities*

Bethel's CDE programme leader in Rakhine, a facilitator himself in several communities, indicated that he initially had problems in several communities. Learning from initial thorny reactions, he suggests, *'the approach I now take in communities is to encourage people to: 1) be a good Rakhine; 2) be a good community member and citizen; and 3) be the best believer of your own religion you can be.'*

Another facilitator explained a similar approach:

'I did a series of awareness seminars, including about our rights and responsibilities towards one another. I included discussion about religion being our own choice within that discussion, but that our shared Rakhine identity and culture is very important for all of us to preserve. People respected that.'

Thus, a second key to community acceptance of the religious difference has been emphasising the shared rights and responsibilities of committed community members—with a call for tolerance of difference where individuals remain committed to communal responsibilities. In other words their success has been through building a sense of shared values, particularly about community, using shared ethnicity to blur the faith boundary.

c) *Avoidance of disunity and confrontation*

The final key Bethel facilitators identified to deescalating concerns over religious difference was to avoid creating disunity or confronting monks, leaders and authority figures in ways that challenge their authority or cause them to lose face, and allowing actions to speak louder than words. This meant respecting the wishes of monks or community leaders who do not want the FBO working in their community, sometimes even leaving to find another community and always avoiding anything that directly challenges their authority or position.

Explaining his response to initial problems in several communities, the leader of the CDE programme in Rakhine, indicated that,

'Opposition was never spoken about with me directly, openly, but was more like a collective opinion. In one community a monk was clearly leading the criticism. I went to see him privately and talked the issues through, avoiding any heated discussion, and that resolved the issues. In another village the monks requested I not come back, so I complied and did not go back. By the second year, after working in nearby village, many of the villagers from that first village have seen our work from a distance and are now telling the monk, No, he is not doing that. He is a good person and is doing development work with the community, not propagating religion.'

Those facilitators still experiencing the greatest difficulty implementing their programme in communities acknowledge they have persevered in communities where monks and community leaders have passively or actively resisted, rather than moving on to new communities in which they might have been more widely welcomed from the outset.

Analysis: Factors behind the reactions and successes

Analysis of allegations of proselytism

Early in the focus group discussions, the facilitators confirmed an understanding of proselytism as unethical, as coercive or inducement, and thus an exploitation of vulnerability to be avoided. There was agreement they must and had avoided preaching or seeking conversion, at least during the 4-year project cycle. There was extensive discussion about avoiding even the appearance of

this, despite their religious desire for others to embrace their faith as well. Extensive discussion ensued to try to analyse the root causes of the issues and allegations made against them. The facilitators concluded that more often than not, issues which had been framed by opponents as being about religious difference and proselytism were in fact not really about religion at all, but about feeling threatened by new ideas and potential realignments of power. Change always threatens some, even ‘good’ change, and provokes resistance or criticism from those with vested interests. The facilitators concluded that the existence of religious difference in a context that has framed violent conflict around religious identities makes it easy to label any resistance as religious. This is exacerbated by the divisions existing *within* Buddhist society in Rakhine which is home to two denominational sects, each with their own competing monasteries and temples.

In the words of one of the facilitators:

I work in two communities. I have no problems in one, with even the village leaders on board, good participation and doing lots of projects. In the other village, there are two monks and two temples, belonging to different Buddhist denominations, and they are deeply divided. In that community I have been confronted by community division. As soon as some people became involved in planning and doing projects, the monk from the other monastery opposed the work, leading his whole group to not get involved. The issue quickly became presented as one of religion, and they began circulating accusations that I was proselytising.’

This observation led to much discussion about facilitators being caught between competing monks of different Buddhist denominations, or the local politics of competing village leaders, with cooperation by one being easily misrepresented by the other as compromising with proselytising religious zealots. The best solution many had found was simply trust- and relationship-building, not just between FBO workers and the community, but helping ease the divisions between groups in the community:

In my village the people are also split into two Buddhist groups, and we began having similar problems. Noting that it was the younger people who were more open and willing to be involved, I organised a football match to bring everyone together, and to show them that we are all in this together regardless of religion. I decided to build relationships first, then we can explain things like the programme and our principles later—only then can we talk about and plan projects together.’

After much discussion, the facilitators concluded that, at its root, much of the opposition they had faced stemmed from the internal politics of the villages, particularly when the community was already divided and factionalised, with religious labels used to generate opposition by drawing on pre-existing fears of religious conflict. They noted the ease by which some leaders or one group might adopt such labels to try to discredit the work. What is interesting about this is that they concluded that any development initiatives in this environment, including secular development, would be likely to generate similar reactions with only minor change in the labels used to generate resistance. The facilitators felt it is clear that the issue is not primarily about religion or proselytism, with even some of the few local Christians having equally undermined the work because of the FBO’s emphasis on helping poorer and more marginalised community members more than them—not a religious complaint at all.

In fairness, these were the conclusions of FBO facilitators with a vested interest in not identifying proselytism or their own actions as a major issue. However, the conclusion is consistent with the findings of secular agencies implementing similar programmes elsewhere in Myanmar, who faced not dissimilar issues albeit in less religiously tense parts of the country. For example ActionAid (2010), Ferretti (2010), and Löfving (2011) all noted significant resistance and attempts to undermine similar style programming by leaders with vested interests, despite the agencies involved either being secular or the same religion as recipients. In other words, the challenge that community development poses to vested interests itself invites criticism,

opposition or resistance, even apart from faith difference. This fact makes it difficult to identify how much of the accusations about faith really have anything to do with religion, as opposed to power and control. Other means will be required to analyse whether *any* of the concerns expressed over religion are the result of actual proselytising behaviour.

Interestingly, and corroborating this in part, several recipients interviewed expressed concerns about secular development workers coming, well summed-up by this reaction:

If someone comes [to our village as a development worker] who has no religious belief, we will think twice because he/she has no ethical standard like Buddhists and Christians. If he/she does well, it is OK. But we should not accept him/her as one of the community members because he has no religious belief. It will be hard for him to talk about issues that relate to religion.'

Other factors behind the reactions

Most Rakhine villagers have very low levels of education and have rarely travelled beyond their region, and thus have little experience or exposure to cultures or religions. Given the extent ethno-religious nationalism has developed through decades of escalating tension with the local Muslim population, the very idea that some Rakhine might choose another religion (or chose not to practice any religion) is very confronting, challenging core aspects of their sense of identity. Many local Buddhists have heard rumours foreign religious organisations pay money to locals for every convert made, and in their nationalism easily believe that no local would choose to convert without coercion, inducement or manipulation. The facilitators noted a common suspicion that, being Christian and connected to international funding, they would automatically be paid for making converts.

While there may be some basis in fact behind this accusation, this attitude appears a spillover of Rakhine Buddhist attitudes towards the Muslims into broader fears about religious difference. The Buddhist population, while a majority in both the state and country, feel very threatened by Islam and the Muslim population living both in their state and across the border in Bangladesh (Ware & Laoutides 2016 (forthcoming)). The facilitators and interviewees all had stories of very definite rejection of Muslims wanting to live near Buddhist communities, even if for trade. All interviewees indicated that they would not accept a Muslim development worker in their community under any circumstances. Two indicated that they knew that, in theory, if they wanted to see their community develop, they should be willing to accept help from anyone who came bringing expertise and goodwill, but all nine made definitive comments such as the following two:

If a Muslim comes to our community to do development, we will not accept him/her.'

*If our community is to be developed by a Muslim, wherever he/she is from, we do not need him/her'
(aggressively)*

What is interesting, therefore, is that emphasis on ethnic solidarity and shared community values was enough for the FBO to largely overcome deep religious suspicion, and become regarded by many Rakhine Buddhists as sharing key cultural and religious values.

Returning to the common presumptions about lax moral standards due to religious difference, particularly in sexual behaviour and alcohol consumption, such assumptions are not altogether surprising either. Teachings about morality in most religions includes a responsibility to socially enforce their particular precepts onto the rest of their society, implying that non-belief (or belief in a different religion) is morally disobligating and allowing this disobligation to persist will result in wider moral decay and social degeneration. One facilitator explained the issue and response as follows:

'Some people are very zealous about their religion, and any time they see anything different they point it out very quickly. I have found that being known to be a Christian, maintaining high credibility is very important. Misunderstanding are quickly levelled about behaviour and conduct, even though many of the Buddhist monks are quite lax about following the precepts of their religion themselves. So when we are clearly upright in Christian conduct, we gain a voice and win credibility to move into development.'

Such concerns are not unexpected in an environment of religious nationalism in which most people have heard narratives undermining other religious beliefs and have rarely had personal relationships with people of other religions. Winning trust requires both care and time.

Bethel's contextualisation

The fact that all Christians associated with this FBO are ethnically Rakhine, and associate with both Rakhine culture and their Buddhist roots, clearly aids their acceptance by Buddhist communities. This is supported by the fact that other workers with Bethel are Buddhist Rakhine, with no Muslims or other Burmese ethnicities working for the FBO. This allows the idea of ethnic solidarity to grow, locals to permit a tolerance of religious difference by reducing the boundary being crossed to one of faith only, not faith *plus culture*. This blurring of the boundary is in stark contrast with the much more complete rejection of the local Muslims of Bengali descent, who have a different cultural and linguistic background in addition to religious difference and darker skin colour.

Further though, detailed contextualisation has been a deliberate decision by Bethel. Their religious practice has been deliberately contextualised to minimise cultural and social difference, maintaining as much Rakhine culture and tradition as possible. For example, Bethel Christians use Buddhist words, concepts and even stories - amongst themselves as much as with Buddhists - when describing Christian ideas and teaching, in preference to the words more commonly-used by most Christians in Myanmar. Likewise, even when they pray or sing, Bethel Christians adopt Buddhist-like postures and words, and traditional Rakhine-style melodies. In other words, not only in development practice but also in personal religious practice, the Christians in Bethel have adopted highly contextualised language and behavioural practices that demonstrate Rakhine cultural connection, and are thus less foreign to Rakhine Buddhists than most Christian practice in Myanmar would be.

We suggest that this accommodation to and respect for local culture has contributed to the relative de-escalation of religious tension issues with their Buddhist brethren, and helped facilitate the acceptance of a local cross-faith development partnership in most of the communities, despite the very high degree of Buddhist-Muslim tension in the region.

Conclusions: An ongoing discussion

This case study has explored an FBO *Community Development Education* programme amongst Rakhine Buddhist communities, implement for only a few years by a small local FBO. It has examined the tensions involved in working across religious difference in a context of long-running communal tension framed in religious terms. The 'double minority complex' in Rakhine, in which the local Buddhist majority feel an equally-threatened minority as do the Muslims, creates fears of existential vulnerability for both sides. Accompanying this is an intense fear of coercive Burmanisation and loss of identity. The mere presence of Christian converts and a Christian FBO working in this environment does pose a challenge to personal and communal religious identities, and causing complications for development and making scrupulous avoidance of even the appearance of proselytism an absolute imperative.

Claims of proselytisation have been made, as well as that religious difference will compromise moral standards. The conclusion of the facilitators, both Christian and Buddhist, was that these claims are based on fear, ignorance and vested interest, and that resistance to the development programming framed as religious was predominantly not actually religious at all. Good community development always poses a challenge to vested interests, risking criticism, opposition and resistance. It is easy to mobilise factions to oppose change by pointing to religious difference and drawing on pre-existing religious attitudes and fears, and similar opposition to change occurs for secular agencies.

Given the facilitators have a vested interest in reaching this conclusion, it must be treated with caution—but there is no other particular reason to doubt the finding. Likewise, the fact that the problem of proselytism is understood by an FBO, and that the FBO agrees that coercion or incentivisation are improper, does not prevent either the perception of proselytism or zealous staff from 'crossing the line'.

This case study has highlighted the need for strict separation of religious and development activities for FBOs, particularly in regions of ethnoreligious tension or conflict like Rakhine. No preaching or attempts to convert should occur in the context of development, and a genuine desire is required to address both any coercion or incentivisation, however unintended, and the perception of such activities. Continual care and monitoring is required, to neither deny the core religious convictions of the FBO, nor engage in practices of coercion or incentivisation. Continual and honest analysis is required to determine when community concern about proselytism indicates a real problem in practice, however unintended, and when the accusations are a smokescreen for vested interests. In a context like Rakhine, denial and getting this wrong this could very quickly and seriously undermine a development programme, and even spark renewed violence.

However, this case study has also born out the fact that faith boundaries can be minimised. What is very surprising in this context of heightened religious fear and identity politics, is the extent to which obstacles have been overcome and boundaries have been blurred by creating a sense of shared cultural identity and faith-inspired community values—although religious difference still challenges the recipients' sense of identity. An emphasis on Rakhine solidarity has assisted building trust, and an emphasis on communal rights and responsibilities has allowed them to create a degree of tolerance around religious difference and personal choice. This has been supported by contextualisation of personal religious practice, which in turn has helped minimise the sense of cultural and religious difference. Contextualisation works because it highlights shared values around a centrality of spirituality in daily life, and contributes to a moral authority to have a voice in a deeply religious context. It appears highly likely that this accommodation for and respect of local culture has contributed greatly to the relative de-escalation of religious conflict, and helped facilitate acceptance of a local cross-faith development partnership, despite the high degree of Buddhist-Muslim tension. This, in turn, highlights the importance of a high degree of religious literacy.

The keys have been the high degree of contextualisation, avoidance of proselytism, and meticulously maintaining high moral standards to slowly build trust, as well as maintaining an emphasis on ethnic and cultural solidarity and shared values. On the other hand, this sense of solidarity with the Buddhists does place the agency in a very weak position to act as a peacemaker in the Buddhist-Muslim tensions, or to work across both communities at any time in the future.

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ⁱ By way of disclosure, note that both co-authors have been actively involved in this programme, although we believe the analysis is still fair and objective. Anthony Ware developed the concept and material for the *Community Development Education* programme being conducted, on behalf of the international NGO, GraceWorks Myanmar, and instigated the partnership with the local NGO, Bethel. Peter Thein Nyunt is the founder and director of Bethel, the local NGO, and is a converted Rakhine Buddhist monk now Christian pastor and community development leader.

ⁱⁱ The absolute poverty line was calculated by the Myanmar Central Statistics Office and the UN Development Programme for this survey, to reflect a basic calorie intake on local foods while continuing to subsist in terms of basic housing, clothing, etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ The name 'Rohingya' is a heavily contested term, defining a political and possibly religious rather than ethnic identity. Many Muslims adopted the idea of a 'Rohingya' identity, many claiming to be a persecuted 'ethnic' minority race. However, their claims to be an 'ethnicity' are weakened by their acknowledged multi-racial origins. 'Rohingya' is not one of the Myanmar government's 135 recognised ethnic groups, and many Rakhine and Bamar consider it to be an implicit claim for recognition under the constitution, recognition that could result in a limited self-rule region if accepted. This is something both the Rakhine and Bamar are strongly opposed to and which creates intense animosity within Myanmar. This identity label is thus very political, and said by many to be at the root of the conflict. The government and many others in Myanmar call them 'Bengali', which is also contested as it adds to the idea they are recent arrivals rather than having a long history in the country.