



Proceeding Paper

The Missionary Approach to Development: Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education for the Most Marginalized †

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Abstract: Missionary development organizations across all denominations are vital to providing quality inclusive education in developing countries, often being the only providers of quality education for marginalized people. Research conducted by Misean Cara shows how the Missionary Approach to Development Interventions (MADI) enables missionaries committed to social justice and the realization of rights to contribute to equitable quality education, especially reaching those at risk of being left behind. In their unique approach, missionaries address the immediate needs of learners worldwide by providing inclusive and equitable access to safe and quality education, while also supporting local authorities in the strengthening of their education systems, ultimately enabling them to fulfil their role as the primary provider of education.

Keywords: missionary approach; faith-based; development work; quality education; furthest behind; SDG 4



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1. Introduction

Historically, and to some extent up to today, secular development practitioners have been hesitant to engage with religious and faith-based or missionary organizations [1]. Yet, faith-based organizations and individuals play a crucial role in the provision of basic services in many places [2], and make valuable contributions to policy making, system strengthening and long-term impact. Today's development work by Irish missionaries is based on the principles of social justice and focused on rights, and missionaries are at the forefront in delivering quality services, especially in education and health.

Against this background, recent decades have seen a 'turn to religion' [3] and an increased international appreciation of the value of faith-based approaches to development and humanitarian work. This is seen in the numerous faith-based and missionary organizations with consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the high profile of faith-based organizations (FBOs) at the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Faith Initiative started by the World Bank in 2014, and the establishment of the multi-donor International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development in February 2016.

For decades, Irish missionaries have played a significant role in advocating for human rights and social justice; they were pioneers in the evolution of Ireland's overseas development cooperation. Since the early 1970s, missionary development work has availed of funding through Ireland's international development program [4]. Today, Irish development funding for missionary development projects is distributed through the organization Misean Cara.

Although the role of some types of FBOs is contested in certain aspects and contexts, given the centrality of public service education, organizations such as those discussed in

this paper play a crucial role in advancing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 across the world. While the 2021–22 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report warned that “without adequate regulations on private education or the capacity to enforce them, equity, inclusion and quality, the core principles on which SDG 4 is based, are at risk” [5], all projects supported by Misesan Cara operate within government regulatory environments, with the vast majority being subject to national education authorities’ reporting and inspection frameworks.

The 2021–22 GEM Report shows that there is often no crystal-clear distinction between public and private education—and governments support faith-based schools in 120 countries. Yet, it is crucial that state and non-state actors are working—separately and collaboratively—in the same direction, based on a recognition of state parties’ primary obligations to ensure access, quality and systems that deliver the right to education. In addition to capturing concerns about some faith actors’ practices, in some aspects and contexts, the Report notes an appreciation that faith-based and religious organizations “are often doing the essential work on the frontlines of combating extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services and alleviating suffering” [6].

Continuing Irish missionaries’ global contribution to the UN principle of Leaving No One Behind—or, in their own words, to *reaching the last, the least and the lost* (“The last, the least and the lost” is a phrase that has been used by missionaries to describe the communities with whom they choose to work; it comes from three verses in the Gospel of St. Matthew (20:16, 25:40, 18:11))—Misesan Cara supports a total of 88 missionary organizations in their development and, occasionally, emergency work. Project funding is exclusively provided for the development and humanitarian work of members; pastoral initiatives are not supported. Misesan Cara members working in education, health, livelihoods, and sustainable development do not discriminate based on religion, just as they do not discriminate based on ethnicity, language, gender or politics: all support provided is equally available to people of all faiths or none. Misesan Cara’s members support some of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities worldwide to realize their human rights, as well as working for systemic change through advocacy, networking and community mobilization.

Over centuries, missionaries have been providing quality education to the communities they serve. Still today, faith-based organizations across all denominations are vital to providing quality inclusive education, often being the only providers of quality education for marginalized people. According to the Global Catholic Education Report 2021, 62 million children are enrolled in Catholic pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools globally (note that equivalent data from other faiths is limited), with numbers growing particularly strongly in sub-Saharan Africa [7].

2. The Missionary Approach to Development Interventions (MADI)

Research conducted by Misesan Cara in 2017 provides a deeper understanding of the unique and successful approach missionaries take to humanitarian and development projects. All its member missionary organizations take their inspiration from Christian values and are guided by the same core principles of human dignity, social justice, the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, subsidiarity and care for creation. Projects are also influenced by their organization’s particular commitment or charism. Furthermore, it was found that all Misesan Cara member organizations are strongly committed to the core values of respect, justice, commitment, compassion and integrity.

Based on the findings of this research, a theoretical framework emerged (see Figure 1), describing the unique way of missionaries working to enrich and transform the lives of poor, vulnerable and marginalized people worldwide. This Missionary Approach to Development Interventions (MADI) [8] is defined by the following five distinctive features:

1. Crossing boundaries: Missionaries regularly cross boundaries, including those of nationality, identity, marginalization, and the accepted status quo. Missionary organi-

zations are international, and missionaries can draw on the technical resources and personnel of their global network.

2. Long-term commitment: Supporting communities for decades rather than for short project cycles allows missionaries to become deeply embedded in the communities they serve. Their strong local presence provides them with insights into the local context and social norms, and affords them a high degree of credibility, trust and influence within these communities.
3. Personal witness: A high level of dedication to their work, a simple lifestyle and solidarity with the poor allow missionaries to build trust and respect in the communities they live in and serve.
4. Prophetic vision: Striving for a better life for all, missionaries are unafraid of taking risks and forging new pathways, building on the inherent knowledge, strengths and capacities of communities to identify and address needs.
5. Holistic approach: Missionaries see and treat individuals and communities not just as project beneficiaries, but as dignified human beings with a wide range of capacities, needs and rights. This often manifests itself in projects that grow in size and scope over time (e.g., starting as an education project that soon also incorporates elements of psychological support, income-generating activities for parents and nutrition and health interventions).

While other development stakeholders may incorporate some of these features in their work, it is the combination of all five that makes the work of missionaries working for social justice—committed to human rights and aligning closely with the Sustainable Development Goals—unique within the international development sector. See Box 1.

Box 1. Example of the Missionary Approach to Development in South Sudan.

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto Sisters) in South Sudan established the first Girls' Secondary Boarding School in Western Lakes State in 2008. With this project, they cross many boundaries, being an international mission of Sisters and educating girls from different ethnic backgrounds to live and study peacefully together, despite the conflict that surrounds them. Girls are empowered to become confident and knowledgeable leaders, crossing cultural boundaries by enabling them to become doctors, lawyers, businesswomen or community leaders. The Sisters show long-term commitment to the school and wider community, keeping the school open throughout times of conflict and hunger. (Only COVID-19 restrictions forced them to close the school temporarily, while providing remote support to students.) The Sisters' personal witness is demonstrated by their dedication to living simply with the community and not fleeing at times of war and uncertainty. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary was founded in 1609 by Mary Ward who had a vision at that time that 'women, in time to come, will do much'. This vision encourages the Sisters to take risks such as opening a school in a war-torn country without having all the necessary funding secured. They have been proven right, with their first students now having graduated from university. Thanks to the holistic approach taken, the Sisters address a range of social and cultural barriers to girls' education through innovative approaches such as family contracts of commitment to permitting their daughters complete their education. To reach their full academic potential, students and their families are provided with medical, nutritional, personal, and social support. More recently, the Sisters established a primary school and opened a health clinic, while also supporting the opening of a secondary school for boys in the area.

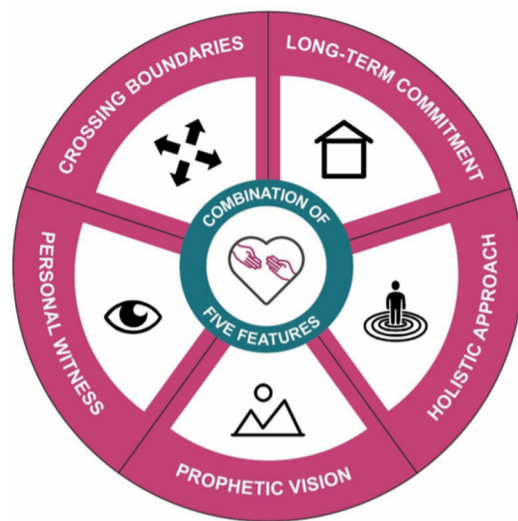


Figure 1. Five core elements of the Missionary Approach to Development.

3. Reaching the Last, the Least and the Lost

Misean Cara’s 2020 follow-up research [9] further examines the degree to which the work of missionaries aligns with the global community’s commitment, through the Sustainable Development Goals, to leave no-one behind while reaching those furthest behind first. The research found that the work of missionaries is closely aligned with Agenda 2030 for the SDGs.

Missionaries have a rich and distinctive vocabulary when referring to the people they serve. In the Gospels, there is not only recognition of the last, the least and the lost, but also frequent reference to the oppressed and the voiceless. A further reflection of this is the preferential option for the poor, used by Catholic theologians in Latin America in the 1960s, who “placed themselves firmly on the side of the poor, according to the Gospel’s imperative to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, and to set free the downtrodden” [10]. Here, “the poor” is understood in its broadest sense, including all those who are marginalized and vulnerable. This is closely aligned with today’s understanding of “the furthest behind”. While the language used by missionaries may differ from the terms common in the wider development community, missionaries have been working for centuries towards outcomes that align well with today’s SDGs.

Misean Cara’s missionary members particularly support those furthest behind by following a cyclical approach, which can be summarized as “Six ‘A’s”. Figure 2 below shows how missionaries identify and target those furthest behind and continuously check to leave no one behind. See also Box 2.



Figure 2. The Six ‘A’s’ approach.

Box 2. Example of the Six 'A's approach in Peru.

The Columban Fathers in Peru have close contact with marginalized communities through their daily parish work. Identifying children in disadvantaged areas as those furthest behind, they set up a project in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Lima to realize marginalized children's rights to justice, education, rehabilitation and a life free from abuse. Starting with a day center to provide a safe space for children while their parents were at work, the project soon expanded to include speech therapy, a Child Defense Desk, a home for children escaping domestic violence and a remedial school to help students who had dropped out of formal school. The project works closely with parents and teachers to reintegrate children into healthy family structures and mainstream schools, and advocates on behalf of children within the local community and public sector. The Columban Fathers and their lay project teams are recognized as leading experts on child protection in Peru and support other NGOs, schools and authorities in the review and strengthening of their own safeguarding approaches. They adapt quickly to changing circumstances, such as the recent influx of Venezuelan refugees and the COVID-19 pandemic. While the projects are established as independent NGOs to work in the long term, the Columban Fathers are known to 'leave when tarmac arrives' [11], i.e., when some degree of improvement comes to an area, which underlines their commitment to continuously search for and support those in greatest need.

4. Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education for the Most Marginalized

Misean Cara and its members recognize governments' vital roles and human rights obligations as core providers of quality education for all. Yet, in fragile contexts in particular, states are often unable to account fully for the educational needs of their populations. Even in non-fragile contexts, those furthest behind are particularly at risk of not reaching their potential through education. While access and inclusion are often mentioned in official policy documents in the countries where members work, the principles are frequently neglected (or inadequately addressed or resourced) in practice. Equity and quality considerations tend to be imperfect at best for disadvantaged groups in society, not to mention groups more systemically marginalized or excluded in certain states (e.g., for reasons of origin, ethnicity, caste, language, gender, religion, status or location) [12].

The Missionary Approach to Development Interventions, in combination with the aspiration to reach those furthest behind, inspires missionaries to contribute to equitable quality education, especially reaching marginalized people and groups. Living long term within the communities they serve, while maintaining strong national and international networks, missionaries find themselves in a unique position to address the immediate educational needs of those at risk of being left behind and also to support governments in strengthening their own approaches as education providers.

4.1. Leaving No One Behind

As part of the preferential option for the poor, Misean Cara members tend to work with communities that are neglected or disadvantaged in terms of education and, often, other basic dimensions of human development. Within marginalized communities, and migrant communities in particular (fueled by a fear of deportation), there is often a distrust of the state which can inhibit access to basic services. Missionary development projects can fit comfortably into the space between the marginalized community and the state, providing services and acting as intermediary, building trust and understanding, and encouraging integration.

For its Strategy 2017–2021, Misean Cara's missionary member organizations decided to make reaching people furthest behind, or at risk of being left behind, a shared objective, in line with their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and the SDGs' principle of Leaving No One Behind. As such, decision making on funding (particularly for larger amounts and multi-annual commitments) actively favors initiatives that are in remote or isolated areas, informal urban settlements, and conflict-affected or post-conflict areas. It also favors initiatives that target specific groups known to be at risk of being left behind, as the following project examples demonstrate:

- **Girls**—In South Sudan, girls are more likely to die giving birth than to complete high school [13]. In 2017, the country was ranked the world’s most difficult nation for girls to access education [14]. In this environment, where only 2% of girls enroll in secondary school, a Loreto girls’ secondary school enables 98% of its students to complete their secondary education through its holistic approach, incorporating community outreach to tackle practices such as GBV and early marriage, and supporting girls in their personal development.
- **Children with disabilities**—In Zambia, access to education remains a challenge, especially for children with disabilities, orphans and other vulnerable children. To address this situation, the Sisters of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary opened an all-inclusive primary and secondary school to provide quality holistic and inclusive education to deaf blind children, offering technical vocational training, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy. Opened in 1998, the school has become a center of excellence and is used as a national resource for pre-service teacher training in special needs education.
- **Forcibly displaced people**—In Lebanon, many Iraqi and Syrian refugee children remain culturally and linguistically isolated, and educationally disadvantaged. Most children do not attend school and fail to complete even one year of education. Against this context, a joint initiative by the De La Salle Brothers and the Marist Brothers offers a holistic education approach to grow stable diverse communities by intentionally mixing Christians and Muslims (Shia and Sunni), girls and boys, Syrians, Iraqis, and Lebanese. Special activities include language and basic ICT training to improve academic performance, pre-school courses to qualify refugee children for Lebanese schools, counselling and trauma healing, nutrition, socialization programs, gender-specific health classes, and livelihoods opportunities.
- **Migrant communities**—In India, entire families migrate seasonally to the brickfields of West Bengal. They generally do not speak the local language, leaving their children without access to education for a large part of the year. The Loreto Sisters’ Brickfield Schools Project provides quality education in their own language to over 2500 children who travel to the brickfields with their families. The Sisters have designed several teaching resources including a “school in a trunk”, which contains all the essential educational resources needed to deliver a class. The Sisters also work in the home areas of the migrant families, encouraging children to stay at home and not interrupt their schooling.
- **Ethnic minorities**—In Paraguay, the indigenous Ava Guaraní are often denied access to basic rights. After many years of lobbying by missionaries and a strong wider network, the Paraguayan Ministry of Education opened an office exclusively devoted to bilingual-intercultural education, and a Law on Differentiated Indigenous Education was passed. The Servants of the Holy Spirit support Ava Guaraní communities to prepare their own curriculum and textbooks in their language and relevant to their ancestral culture.

4.2. Contributing to Education System Strengthening

Misericordia members promote a wide range of initiatives aimed at strengthening government policies and structures, practices and accountability. They also promote the right to education by supporting participation, non-discrimination and empowerment within the context of state laws, educational frameworks and regulation. Through increasing access and equity, testing and modelling good practice, awareness-raising, community mobilization, influencing stakeholders and sometimes more formal advocacy (as the context requires), missionaries engage duty bearers as to their responsibilities, and often help them build their capacities to fulfil their obligations [12].

Members operate within strong national and global networks of state and non-state actors, which allows them to support education system strengthening at both national and international levels, as the following examples illustrate.

The Redemptorist Fathers in Zimbabwe run an Accelerated Numeracy and Literacy project targeting out-of-school children with the aim of reintegrating them into formal education. The success of the project is such that most children enter a formal school within one year, where they receive the continuing support of the project to retain them in education. The project's methodology directly influenced a UNICEF program which was implemented nationally. The expertise developed on Accelerated Literacy & Numeracy Education has been shared with other organizations in Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Kenya.

In South Africa, Misesan Cara has supported the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE), working through multiple congregations (Sisters of the Holy Cross, Salesians of Don Bosco, and Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux) to contribute to building peaceful Catholic schools. CIE's interventions tackle violence, xenophobia and racism through whole-school restorative justice, peace-building and safeguarding approaches, in ways that are modelling change for the nation's entire school system. The initiative has recorded changes in school management practices for a peaceful psycho-social and physical environment; in the behavior of school leaders and teachers; in awareness and behaviors on child safeguarding; and in more harmonious staff and student relationships. A 2019 external evaluation noted that the initiative—implemented in 61 schools across 6 regions—is contributing to safer, fairer schools. For students, peer mediation training is also creating a means to participate in restorative approaches. CIE engages with statutory education agencies and makes inputs to the Department of Basic Education on draft policies and issues of safety and children's well-being [12].

Edmund Rice International, the joint advocacy body of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers, made a submission to the UN General Assembly on the Right to Education (2015), and joined the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education at the 44th Session of the Human Rights Council (2020). To drive fundamental change, they have made 44 Universal Periodic Review submissions since 2012, including for all 24 developing countries where they have a missionary presence, and delivered 48 Oral Statements at UN Human Rights Council sessions.

Misesan Cara members are active in the Justice Coalition of Religious at the UN (JCOR), as well as the NGO Major Group, the Women's Major Group, and the Major Group for Children and Youth. They are active year-round on the broad UN program of business on sustainable human development and engage strongly on the SDGs' principle to Leave No One Behind and the imperative to reach the Furthest Behind (often with a strong education focus), particularly while participating in the annual High-Level Political Forum process to review SDG progress.

4.3. Responding in Times of Crises

Reflecting their trusted relationships at the community level and experience working with particularly vulnerable or excluded groups, even when regional or national contexts are challenging, Misesan Cara members have been quick in responding to changing circumstances such as localized outbreaks of violent conflict, severe climatic events or health emergencies—including the West Africa Ebola outbreak in 2017 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In the latter case, thanks to their holistic approach, missionaries have been able to offer integrated approaches: not only responding to the educational needs of students but also addressing secondary effects of the pandemic, such as the resurgence of child labor and discrimination against girls, and a deterioration in children's health, well-being and physical safety. They have done so by incorporating well-being and life skills, family livelihood and food interventions, and community-based supports, as well as advocating for especially vulnerable cohorts. In addition, missionary-run schools have often been able to provide creative new forms of remote education when schools were forced to close.

5. Accountability

The 2017 Global Education Monitoring Report [15] focused on accountability for delivering SDG 4 targets and the mechanisms that can be used to hold all stakeholders to account for inclusive, equitable and quality education.

From local to global levels, Misesan Cara's missionary member organizations are engaged with these mechanisms: monitoring teaching and learning, school leadership and community responsiveness; engaging parents, students, and community leaders; promoting teaching, school, and system standards; testing access and equity in using digital technologies; and advancing monitoring, evaluation and research.

At a macro level, they interact with state and international processes, exploring education policy and practice; promote ODA commitments, including a focus on poor and marginalized communities; and engage with the right to education through sectoral processes and human rights mechanisms—often bringing to the table the rights, and voices, of marginalized people and groups.

As private, not-for-profit education providers, Misesan Cara missionary organizations are accountable at three levels:

- To the communities they live and work in, through structured school/project governance and accountability mechanisms;
- To national and district education authorities, since they act within national regulatory, educational and inspection frameworks, and collaborate to support state priorities and capacities;
- To peers in development and national/international donors, including through public transparency, audit and accountability mechanisms.

Additionally, Misesan Cara members report annually on income, expenditure and results, but also on stakeholder engagement and alignment with government policies; on accessibility and inclusion; on their focus on marginalized people and groups; and on their contribution to education system strengthening. The data show that in 2019, members contributed in at least 17 countries to the preparation of national education policies or Ministry of Education annual work plans and led over 200 advocacy initiatives on inclusive education in 37 countries.

6. Conclusions

Missionary organizations have a long tradition of transforming lives by providing inclusive quality education around the world. In addition to delivering broader access to inclusive and high-quality educational services, Misesan Cara member missionary organizations working for social justice—supporting human rights and aligning with the SDGs—use their knowledge, long-term commitment, expertise and experience to strengthen education systems. They influence teaching, learning, community engagement, school leadership and the enabling environment through modelling good practice; actively engaging in policy, processes, and methods; and through advocacy and campaigning. They work within the framework of government structures and policy, standard setting and regulation to advance inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Evidence-based research commissioned by Misesan Cara shows that the Missionary Approach to Development Interventions offers an effective way of reaching those furthest behind, in keeping with the imperative of the Sustainable Development Goals. Staying long term in some of the hardest to reach areas (often despite wars, natural disasters or health emergencies) allows missionaries to gain deep trust and respect within the communities they serve. This enables them to overcome cultural and social barriers, and turn their educational interventions into transformative experiences, especially for marginalized and isolated groups. In many instances, in the absence of government capacity, missionaries have been the only source of education for communities.

Misesan Cara's missionary development projects are integrated into both local communities and local and national education structures, developing capacities and providing examples of innovation and best practice. Their focus on the dignity of each individual,

inherent in the Missionary Approach to Development Interventions, means that education can be a truly transformative experience for those who are furthest behind.

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