

# 6

## Wholistic worldview analysis: understanding community realities

by RAVI JAYAKARAN

### Introduction

Worldview analysis is a participatory tool for understanding a community's perception of what it does to survive and continue with life processes. It collates important participatory learning and action (PLA) information collected in the community. It is used for carrying out a participatory needs analysis for development interventions that will impact the community.

Through several workshops and discussion groups, this technique has been shared with NGO representatives from several counties in Asia and Eastern Europe. Judging from extensive feedback following training, the technique is fairly well refined for wider use in the field. It is easy to learn, and practical, and does not require facilitators to be highly skilled or technical. This article introduces the technique in a simple and straightforward way, with details of what is required to get things started. There is also a detailed description of a field exercise where it was used recently, with photographs of the process showing the close involvement of the community right through. I hope that field practitioners will feel inspired to find out more about the technique.

### Specific advantages of the tool

I first researched the wholistic worldview analysis tool

A WWVA exercise being facilitated in a community in China



Photo: R. Jayakaran

(WWVA) in India in 1997. I subsequently developed and modified it in Cambodia, Lao PDR and PR China. The findings from this initial study were shared in a series of workshops. Feedback was collected from the participants on the different type of 'field' needs they had for planning, and the tool was then further modified to make it more user friendly and practical.

## “To achieve sustainable development it is necessary for interventions to be compatible – and in resonance – with the community’s worldview”

The tool can be used to gather base information for facilitating a participatory village-level development plan. In the past, field staff have usually faced two major problems when using participatory tools. They not only have to bring together all the findings of the exercises and analyse the information so that it can be used as a planning tool where the community continues to remain an active partner. They must also create a collated and analysed depiction of the survival strategy of the community. The survival strategy of a community is the combination of strategies that it employs to survive and thrive in its environment. I believe the uniqueness of the WWVA is that it fulfils both these tasks. As far as I know, this approach/tool is the only one that measures and creates a diagram of a worldview in measurable terms.

The worldview analysis tool brings together the information collected using PLA exercises. Then it can be analysed to see what type of development interventions are appropriate for that community. In addition, the tool enables the creation of a wholistic baseline for the community.

### How community survival strategies develop

When a new community is established, it develops a survival strategy using the resources it has available to generate a sustainable livelihood.<sup>1</sup> These resources are:

- natural capital (e.g. land, water, forests, animals);
- social capital (e.g. social networks, social services);
- physical capital (infrastructure and constructions to aid use of natural resources);
- financial capital (money and assets); and,
- human capital (e.g. simple skills, acquired skills, technical skills, entrepreneurial skills, education).

The initial survival strategy is a very simple one. The main dependence is only upon what existing capital the community already has. In time, the community interacts with those outside, e.g. to sell products, or to import new skills and services. These interactions are soon integrated into the community’s survival strategy, which gets more complex. Some of these linkages are tangible/visible. But there are other linkages that are also made. The supernatural world of gods,

spirits and ancestors are as real to the community as their linkages with outsiders. All these together compose the overall survival strategy of the community and this is what reflects their worldview (how they perceive their world).

Analysing a community’s worldview is one way of understanding how the community sees itself and the rest of the world. Analysing worldviews has never been easy. When the analysed information is required for development interventions, it becomes even more complicated. To achieve sustainable development it is necessary for interventions to be compatible – and in resonance – with the community’s worldview.

This prompted me to develop a simplified tool for worldview analysis. Once finalised, the methodology was also used in Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Kingdoms of Thailand and Cambodia. It is integrated with a tool called the ten seed technique (TST), and it has also become possible to create a diagram that measures the integration process of the various components and dimensions of the survival strategy.

### How the WWVA and community survival strategy are connected

The WWVA profile of the community shows how the community perceives itself – and therefore is a profile of the survival strategy of the community. By studying the WWVA, we can understand what the community does to survive in its environment, and the type of challenges, problems and uncertainties it faces and its ability to cope with these.

### Getting started

#### Initial analysis exercises

Carry out some initial PLA exercises to gain a general understanding of the community. These should include e.g. livelihood analysis, problem analysis and uncertainty analysis (uncertainties that the community faces).

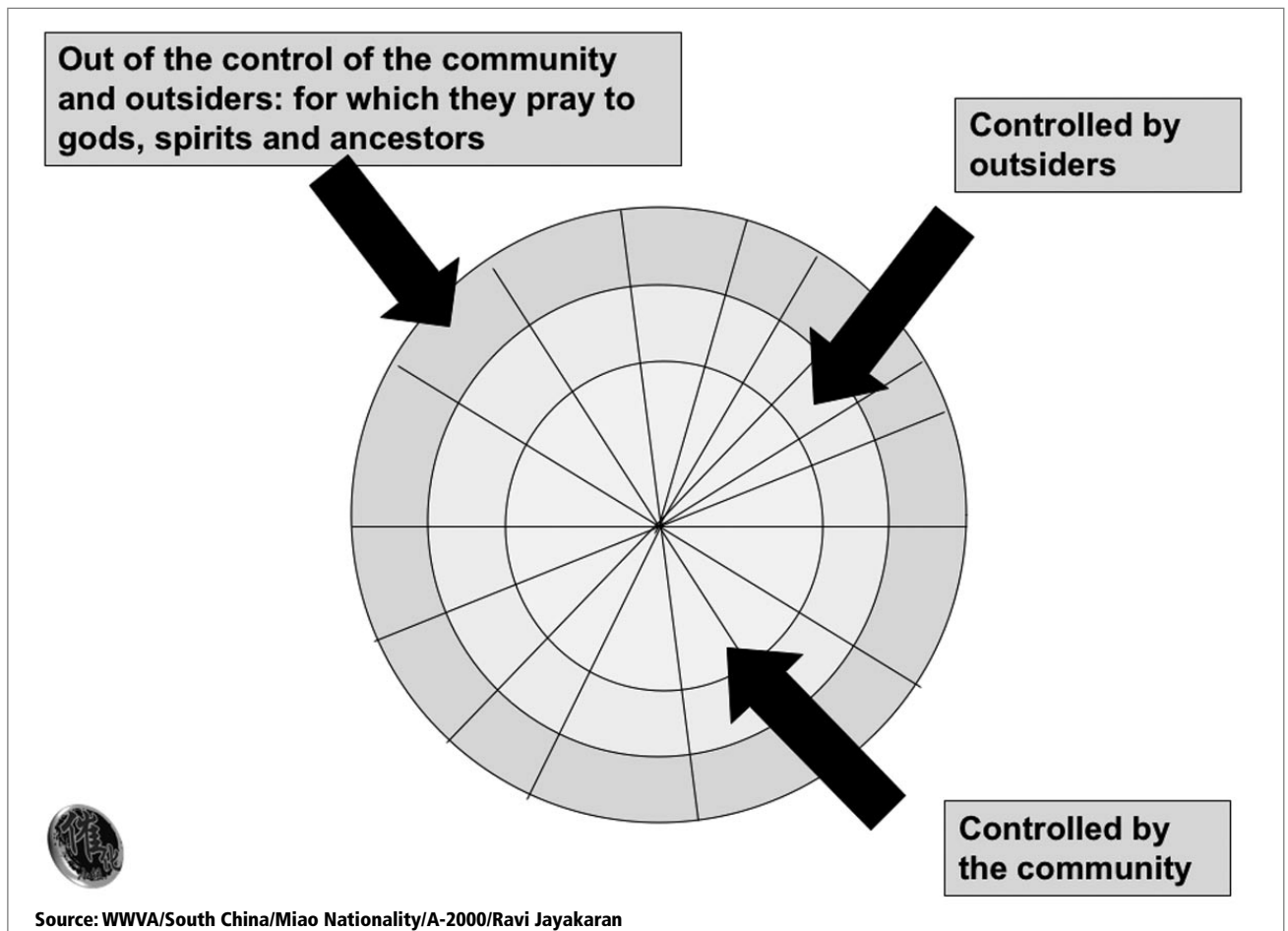
The information collected from the various exercises is shared with the community to get their feedback and for triangulation of any errors. The information will help authenticate the validity of the other exercises.

#### Creating the WWVA diagram

This information can now be added to the WWVA diagram. First, prepare the outline of the diagram by making three concentric circles as shown in Figure 1 on a large sheet of paper:

- the innermost circle represents areas where the community exerts its influence and has control;

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. the IDS/DFID sustainable livelihoods framework: [www.fao.org/docrep/006/ad688e/ad688e03.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/ad688e/ad688e03.htm)



- the middle circle shows areas that outsiders associated with the community exert influence over and control; and
- finally, the outermost circle represents areas that are outside of the control of both the community or outsiders.

The circles are now divided into segments (like spokes). Each segment represents a particular issue raised during the different analysis exercises.

The number of issues determines the total numbers of segments. The segments might represent e.g. sources of livelihood, problems faced by the community, or uncertainties they encounter as a group. To make it easier to see which issues are related to which analysis, the issues are colour-coordinated in the diagram.

Once this format is ready, you can explain the rest of the process to the community. Using a method called the ten seed technique (TST), ask participants to begin placing seeds into each segment.

### The ten seed technique

The ten seed technique involves asking the participants to distribute ten seeds into each segment allotted to an issue, to show which aspects were:

- within the control of the community;
- dependent on outsiders; and,
- totally out of everyone's control (see Box 1).

The segments in which these appear show which particular issue the community's capacities and vulnerabilities are related to:

- the seeds in the outer circle show the vulnerabilities of the community;
- the seeds in the inner circle shows the capacities of the community.

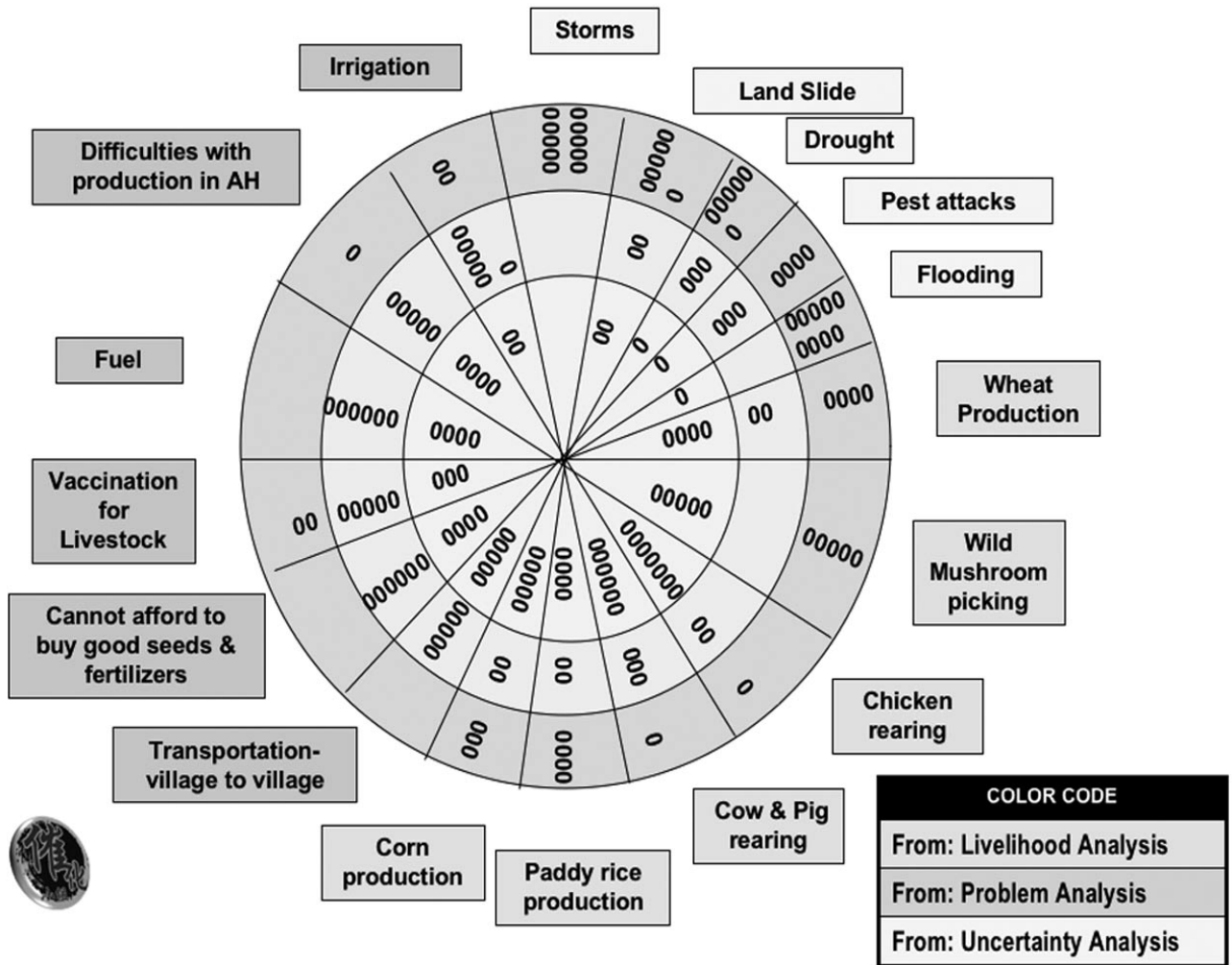
After the community understands how to use the ten seed technique, the facilitator can step aside and watch the intensive discussion and interaction as the ratios are

**Box 1: An example of using the ten seed technique**

We held a workshop in south China. For one segment, we asked participants to consider the factors that determine the successful cultivation of corn. They had already selected this as an important issue concerning the livelihood of the village.

The participants placed five seeds in the inner circle, two seeds in the middle circle and finally three seeds in the outer circle. When asked, they explained that some factors they and outsiders could control. But the three seeds in the outer circle represented the uncertainty they experienced due to both a lack of rain at the right time and pest attacks. As a result, they prayed to their ancestors to control what they could not! Further exploratory discussions revealed an option for providing 'back up' irrigation through a small lift irrigation programme and appropriate use of pesticides. The emerging reality was, that through these facilitated discussions, the community discovered that what they thought was impossible to address before, could be provided for with an appropriate intervention.

**Wholistic Worldview Analysis-WWVA**



An example from a community in South China Miao Nationality, April 2004.

**Participants watch closely as the WWVA diagram emerges during the south China workshop**



Photos: R. Jayakaran

discussed, debated, re-assigned and finalised!

While facilitating workshops on the use of the exercise, I have sometimes encountered doubts among the external participants on whether the community will understand what 'appears' to be a complicated technique. However, at every location whether in Lao PDR, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Philippines, China or Thailand, irrespective of how remote the village was, the community's excitement was unprecedented! They understood immediately after the first example, and got so excited about proceeding from one segment to the next that it was sometimes very difficult for us as facilitators to get close enough to watch them distribute the seeds. This is because the technique enables them to discuss a topic that is extremely relevant to their world and intimately connected with their overall survival strategy. It is good to allow at least two hours for this exercise, because there is sometimes a lot of discussion and debate.

### Facilitate everyone's input

The facilitator has to be available to seek triangulation to ensure that the perspective of a small group is not mistaken for being the perspective of the larger group. All this requires is to be observant and see if there is a display of body language (or even murmuring) when the rest don't agree. At the beginning of the exercise, remind the group that what is being sought is a portrayal of the situation as it relates to the whole community in the present circumstances, not merely a small group of individuals.

It is important to remember that participants display different types of reactions. Some people respond more to specific issues, while others become observers. On other issues, these same people may become active in the discus-

sion. However, silence doesn't mean non-involvement. The safeguard is to ensure that no particular individual or group of individuals dominates or overrules the inputs from others. Each person finds their own way of ensuring that their inputs figure in the emergence of the WWVA diagram.

Once the final diagram emerges, there are plenty of noisy discussions and laughter, reflecting satisfaction and compliance with the community's perspective. At several locations, participants got so involved placing seeds that some actually got on the paper. There are often many footprints on the final output!

### Analysis: interviewing the diagram

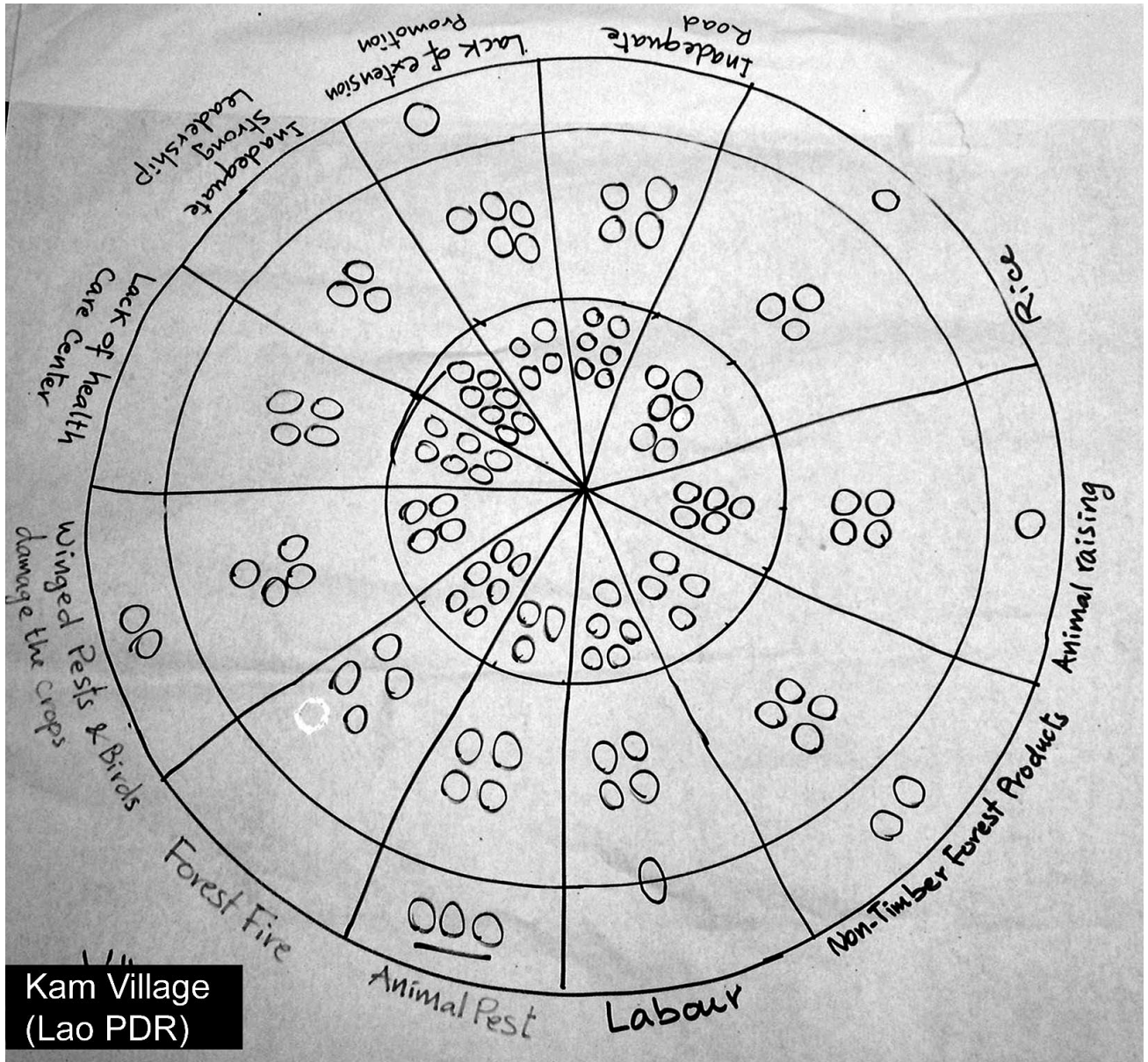
When the last segment is completed, there is usually an increase in the volume of discussion, followed by silence as the group waits expectantly to see what will happen next. This is the stage for analysis of the survival strategy.

The next step is to 'interview' the diagram. This involves seeking clarification from the community on seed allocation to a particular location that may not be clearly evident. Then, the facilitator marks out the community's:

- greatest vulnerabilities (outer circle); and
- greatest capacities (inner circle).

An important point to remember is that **at this stage** the seeds in the middle circle are not considered. It is assumed that outsiders are constructively associated with the community. However, after making progress with community development, this 'external' dependence must also be considered as a vulnerability to be overcome. When this is done, the community's development will move towards long-term sustainability.

The WWVA of 'Kam' village in Lao PDR



**Kam Village (Lao PDR)**

Photo: R. Jayakaran

**Using the information**

After the WWVA has been carried out and analysed, the next stage is to work on reducing vulnerabilities and building the capacities of the community's survival strategy. Some simple important principles to follow are:

- Just building capacities without reducing vulnerabilities will result in frustration for the community, because the vulnerabilities will remain and continue to be a hindrance.
- But, just removing vulnerabilities without building capaci-

ties will result in the community becoming dependent on the development agency.

- The first steps are to identify the greatest vulnerabilities that the community encounters. The vulnerability with the highest number of seeds should be the first development priority followed by the next highest, and so on.

After preparing the development priority list, carry out a stakeholder analysis for each issue within the community. After identifying the main stakeholders involved, look at the

capacities and vulnerabilities of each of them. Then identify the interventions required for 'building capacity' and 'reducing vulnerability' for each stakeholder in helping to overcome that vulnerability.

These become programme activities, which can then be combined under the 'outputs' they will generate. These in turn can be grouped together under the impact that they will produce. This information can be put on a logframe, and will be entirely community planned, and community owned. Planning using the WWVA tool can be done at a village level, commune level, district level, provincial level or country level. The composition of the planning group will change to include those familiar with the area at that particular level.

The WWVA tool is used to find out the current wholistic worldview of the community at a given point in time (i.e. before any development plans are implemented). This becomes the focal point around which the participatory community/village development plan unfolds. With the intervention will come changes in attitude (e.g. to pest attacks/disease incidence). Hopefully, these will no longer be seen as being beyond control (provided the intervention is effective!). For example, in India, a community believed that a *devi mata* was causing sickness amongst the children.<sup>2</sup> By building awareness and successfully vaccinating children against measles, the project was able to change the community's attitude.

At a later point in time, the worldview analysis will be different from what it was in the beginning. Hopefully, the differences will show and track progress over time. In this way, the WWVA can also be used as an evaluation tool. A good example of this is a village in Cambodia which was experiencing recurrent drought. After identifying this vulnerability, a water gate (a dam with a sluice gate) was built with support from an NGO. On reassessing the situation after the water gate was fully operational, the community was able to see that it had increased its area of control and was no longer vulnerable. Its capacity increased and its vulnerability was reduced!

The following related information can also be generated from the WWVA exercise:

- consolidated community survival strategies;
- capacity/vulnerability analysis of the community's survival strategy;
- areas where the community depends on outsiders for survival;

## **“By studying the WWVA, we can understand what the community does to survive in its environment, and the type of challenges, problems and uncertainties it faces and its ability to cope with these”**

- comparative community poverty profile for comparison with other communities for prioritising for development;
- basic foundation for developing a participatory community (level) development plan; and,
- a wholistic baseline profile of the community.

### **Final thoughts**

In this article I have sought to highlight aspects of the analysis that relate to the wholistic baseline of the community and the wholistic integration of their worldview. Communities (like individuals) often seek help from 'god' in the areas of their greatest needs (vulnerability). The WWVA picture helps to illustrate that the areas of greatest need are often issues where the community seeks help from the supernatural, their gods, spirits, and ancestors. The community perceives this dependence as a very concrete component of their survival strategy. Outsiders, who are not sensitive to this, may see it mainly as a 'vulnerability' that needs to be countered and overcome through the process of development. The community sees it as an area for which they have 'handed over' to their 'supernatural helpers' on whom they are 'dependant' as much as they are on the outsiders they interact with as a community. This dependence is manifest in the community in the form of sacred places and temples.

In fact if one were to carry out a rapid vulnerability profile, these sacred spots and structures often show the greater vulnerability being represented by a greater structure. This is why when new programmes are introduced in a village to overcome 'vulnerabilities' the community initially resists them. The action is seen as breaking loyalty with one of their supernatural helpers to seek help elsewhere! Community development workers can often either be insensitive to this dimension or proceed 'as if it doesn't exist'. There is a need to address a community's worldviews wholistically, because that is the way their worldview is, and address their concerns in each area. So development organisations need to understand these realities before seeking to change – or even challenge – their worldviews.

<sup>2</sup> *Devi mata* is a generic term for a Hindu female deity.

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**NOTES**

The photographs in this article are from actual field situations in South China where the wholistic worldview analysis exercise was conducted. All photographs were taken by the author Dr Ravi Jayakaran.

**FURTHER READING**

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