

COMIMEX and Another Attempt at Assessing Whether Groups are Reached or Unreached

Michael Jaffarian

Missionary Researcher, WorldVenture, USA

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At the HIS (Harvest Information System) meeting in Rockville, Virginia (October 2005), I found myself at a lunch table with Dave Markham (davemarkham@comimex.org). I asked him a lot of questions and kept him talking so that his food got cold before he could eat it (sorry about that, Dave).

He is living and working in Mexico with COMIMEX. COMIMEX is the Mexico counterpart to COMIBAM, which is an inter-organizational ministry working throughout the Spanish- and Portugese-speaking world in missions mobilization, education, and coordination.

Dave and the COMIMEX people are writing people profiles, in Spanish, for the Latin American missions movement. So far they have written 1000 profiles (wow) and consider themselves to be 1/3 of the way through the job. Most of the groups of which they write are in Africa, Asia, and Europe; most are tribal peoples or 10/40 Window peoples. They began with an 18-month process of gathering, from near and far, all the existing profiles they could find. (In that, they discovered a dangerous gap in the area of Pakistan and India). Their profiles include photo, map, text, population data, Bible translation status, adoption status (via the Adopt-A-People Campaign in Latin America), and the Morelia Scale.

Morelia Scale? Yes. Morelia is the city in Mexico where this scale was developed, for Mexican missions research. It's a 7-point scale they use to mark where a people group is at in the process of rising from Unreached People Group status to Reached People Group status. This is how it looks:

The Morelia Scale:

1. The people group has no knowledge of the gospel.
2. The people group has knowledge of the gospel, but no believers.
3. The people group has believers but no congregations.
4. The people group has at least a nascent church, a church in birth.
5. The people group has a church and at least 2 of the Signs of a Contextualized Church.
6. The people group has at least 4 of the Signs of a Contextualized Church.
7. The people group has all 5 of the Signs of a Contextualized Church.

The Signs of a Contextualized Church:

1. The church is reproducing other churches within their people.
2. The indigenous people are leading and governing the church.

3. They are sustaining themselves without outside help (in the form of money, books, outside conference speakers, and so on).
4. The church is culturally adapted to this people (meaning that it is not a replica of the culture of the missionaries).
5. They have at least the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament in their language.

So, according to the COMIMEX people profile series, which groups are Unreached People Groups? The answer: any that have not reached point 7 on the Morelia Scale. Which groups are they giving priority attention to, when it comes to writing these 3,000 profiles? The answer: (1) those that are at 3 or lower on the Morelia Scale, (2) some groups that may be at 4, but still have a relatively large population and relatively few churches, and (3) they're giving priority status to peoples needing a Bible translation.

I told Dave Markham I might be writing about his work and publishing it somewhere. Among his comments: "We appreciate the promotion of the project. We are still raising funds for it if you happen to know of interested parties that could help. We have a detailed proposal we can send."

You can learn more at their website: www.infoglobal.org. They hope to put all the profiles on the Web, and show adoption status for the Latin missions movement. COMIBAM is organizing a big international missions conference for November of 2006, in Spain. About 3,000 are expected to attend. All will be given a CD-ROM with all the COMIMEX profiles, Lord willing (that's a lot of work; pray for them).

Some comments from me (Michael):

1. This is a great project. I commend these people. I'm delighted to see such serious and extensive Unreached Peoples research, publishing, and mobilization in Latin America, and for the Latin missions movement. I'm personally impressed with Dave and his team. I continue to be impressed with COMIBAM. I'm delighted to hear about the upcoming Spain event.
2. I am not surprised to see them invent, in and for their context, their own criteria or scale for assessing whether groups are reached or unreached. This is healthy. It's an exercise in missiological contextualization. It reflects their own regional (Latin) experiences and perspectives in missions mobilization and ministry.

At the same time, this sort of thing can sow confusion. The Latin missions movement does not stand alone on the earth. There's a lot of flow between it and other regional, local, or organizational missions movements, and, of course, the global missions movement overall. If different researchers keep on inventing different scales or criteria, it will get harder and harder to talk about 'Unreached People Groups' and be understood.

So it's healthy, and it sows confusion. Both.

Regional missions researchers (like COMIMEX) have to think, write, invent, and apply criteria that make sense and work in their own context. *Global* missions researchers have to think, write, invent, and apply criteria that make sense for the whole world, for all regions and many kinds of Christians. This latter task is not as impossible as it sounds, especially in our era of globalization. Global researchers need to listen to regional researchers, or their work won't make sense or be usable around the world. Regional researchers need to listen to global researchers, or their work will lead their regional audience to places that keep them from learning from the rest of the world.

3. About some of the points on their Morelia Scale.

“1. The people group has no knowledge of the gospel.”

I'm not sure what they mean by this, or how they are applying it. 'Percent evangelized' I understand. As developed and used by the *World Christian Encyclopedia* and the *World Christian Database*, 'percent evangelized' answers the question, "What percentage of the people in this group have heard the gospel in a way they can understand, and have had a valid opportunity or opportunities to become Christian?" 'No knowledge of the gospel' I can understand for an individual. I have a hard time understanding it for a group. I would be interested to know what sort of criteria qualifies a group for this position.

“2. The people group has knowledge of the gospel, but no believers.”

'No believers' is a workable category, in Evangelical missions. I imagine it's the same as the common Evangelical category, 'no known believers'. A group has 'no known believers' if the Evangelical missions community knows of no Evangelical converts in the group. Later in the process, '30 known believers' or '1000 known believers' might be reported. Such statistics don't count Christians of other kinds than Protestant Evangelicals, and don't add estimates for believers that likely exist but are not personally known to an Evangelical missionary or worker.

But again, I'm not comfortable with the phrase, 'the people group has knowledge of the gospel'. This is not a light switch, yes/no situation. It's always a percentage. Maybe 1% of the group has heard the gospel, or 25%, or 85%. 0% (which the Morelia Scale point 1 seems to imply) is rare. So is 100%, which seems to be implied in the wording of this 2nd point. To have 100% of a group knowing the gospel and still have zero believers – that just doesn't happen.

“3. The people group has believers but no congregations.”

OK. This is easily understood, and can be counted.

“4. The people group has at least a nascent church, a church in birth.”

Is there a number to this? If there is one church of 5 members, in a group with a population of 250,000, do they qualify for point 4 on this scale? If not, what are the quantified criteria? Be transparent with us, please. I suspect the COMIMEX researchers do apply a number here, a quantified criteria, but this statement, standing alone, does not reveal it.

4. About some of the points on their Signs of a Contextualized Church.

“1. The church is reproducing other churches within their people.”

Good ... although there is such a thing as a dead church. A stagnant, non-growing, non-reproducing church is still a church. It may not be a very good church, and certainly not a healthy church, but it's still a church. It can even be a contextualized church. Every culture can develop their own distinctive kind of dead church.

“2. The indigenous people are leading and governing the church.”

Good. This marks the transition from a missionary-led church to a national-led church. Also, it's appropriate to appear in the number 2 spot, since a missionary-led church can still be reproducing.

“3. They are sustaining themselves without outside help (in the form of money, books, outside conference speakers, and so on).”

Interesting. In this era of globalization, I think churches of all kinds, all over the world, will use resources of all kinds, from all over the world. This 3rd point seems to be prescriptive as much as descriptive. It seems that someone in Mexico has a vision that says good indigenous churches only use indigenous resources, and is advocating for that vision – by stating a research category in this way. I just don't think the world is going to function like this anymore. In America, in our indigenous churches, we sing worship songs written in New Zealand, as do indigenous churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I have no doubt that Mexican churches will contribute important resources to the global Body of Christ, that will be used in all continents, including money, books, and speakers. It's probably happening already. So why proscribe it for Mexico?

The sign of maturity for an indigenous church is not that it uses no resources or accepts no influences from the global Body of Christ, but that it sends its own stream of resources and influences, out to the global Body of Christ.

“4. The church is culturally adapted to this people (meaning that it is not a replica of the culture of the missionaries).”

Good in principle. Hard to judge. Very subjective. Different workers, both nationals and missionaries, will have different perspectives on this. Thus tough to use as a research category. Also, this will differ greatly from one denomination to the next. In Sudan, one denomination might have a strong Western flavor, and another a strong Sudanese flavor. These two denominations might each grow in a healthy way – the one among more-Westernized and the other among less-Westernized sectors of the population. This point is also complicated by globalization. Every country on earth now contains some people holding to traditional indigenous ways and views, and others holding to Western or modern or global ways and views, and everything in between. It's a continuum among both the Christian and non-Christian community. Tricky.

“5. They have at least the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament in their language.”

Good. This one is a firm, clear research category.