Conference report

Religion, change and development

Monday 24 – Wednesday 26 October 2011 | WP1123
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This conference brought together practitioners, academics and interested people from differing secular and faith perspectives to discuss the role of religion in change and development. The aims were to: examine how to engage with the issue of religion as a dynamic in development; address tension points between secular and faith-based approaches and identify ways of engaging as effectively as possible with communities in countries where faith has a pivotal role.

Key points

▪ Over the past decade there has been increasing recognition that religion has an important role to play in the development process.

▪ There is still room for broader recognition by policy makers, donors and actors on the impacts that faith and religious practice has on the development agenda and how these can be nurtured for better humanitarian and development outcomes.

▪ All organisations are value based, whether religious or not. The influence of faith is wide and strong and given that every community includes people from faith groups, the question for secular organisations is not whether to engage but how.

▪ There is a need for increased and improved religious literacy between the religious and the secular which moves the discussion on from simply tolerating diversity, to valuing, sustaining, and promoting it.

▪ All development actors - from policy makers to those providing on-the-ground technical assistance should also be given the skills necessary for religious literacy including the knowledge not just that religion matters but how it matters.

▪ Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) need to be able to measure and communicate the impact that they uniquely bring to the development sphere (and where the information exists, to be more forthcoming in sharing it).

▪ Sustainable development is not considered achievable without the empowerment of women. Religion has been the source of good work in this area as well as an actor in the discrimination of women.

▪ The distinctions between working on, with, and from religion should be made. We must hold onto complexity and diversity and to avoid simplifying definitions and identity as this is indeed the strength of authentic dialogue.

What role do religious beliefs, communities and organisations play in the development process and as dynamics in wider social economic change?

1. Over the past decade there has been increasing recognition that religion has an important role to play in the development process. Increased understanding of interfaith
issues has opened up, due amongst other things, to the processes of globalization, 9/11, increased immigration and the global financial crisis.

2. This presents a marked shift from the unsuccessful James Wolfensohn’s 1995 initiative ‘Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics’ to the relative success of Kofi Annan’s equivalent response through ‘The Alliance of Civilisations.’

3. Dysfunctional political systems, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, are entwined with religion contributing to complex socio-political dynamics. When analysing a given countries’ political and socio-economic context as a precursor to development action, understanding religious dynamics is therefore vital.

4. Faith groups are already recognised as active in some key sectors, such as health and social care. One report by the World Health Organisation noted that at least 30% of basic health care around the world is delivered by faith groups. This reflecting, perhaps, that FBOs, through their strong local networks are often able to reach some of the most deprived people within their communities.

5. Given the opportunity, religious groups are able to present an alternative development discourse. Care for the environment might stem from a stewardship model – acknowledging and passing-on the value of resources rather than a discourse which can be more dominant in secular organisations where there is a stronger focus on our being curators – focusing only preserving resources (which might be argued to be a romanticised view).

6. FBOs have a unique role to play in development. Members internalise the objectives (faith basis) of the work rather than being driven only by results. Their objectives are often part of a complex tapestry of values and beliefs.

7. To facilitate working with faith in development action, various more ‘secular’ institutions are developing guidelines on engagement with FBOs and communities on a faith basis.

8. Public funding of FBOs is viewed as a legitimate and effective way of meeting development aims and, where appropriate, can and should be scaled up.

9. There remains some scepticism about engaging with religion as some elements of more traditional religious teaching do not always sit well with perceived necessary development practice. There may, for example be challenges in engaging with some faith based groups on reproductive health or gender rights. It is however possible to have a tactical agreement on some issues even though there may be disagreement on others.

10. Oppression of women can be inherent in different expressions of faith, so a number of groups are working on creating a space for women to share stories of the spirituality that sustains them. There is a need for positive non-dominant masculinity, activism, policy making and gender socialisation. Movements of women of faith speaking from within their own religious traditions and sacred texts therefore need to build bridges with their secular counterparts.

11. There is a lack of a substantial evidence base which would enable FBOs to quantify specific impacts that they make. However, it might also be that the more recent successful engagement with FBOs and religious groups has come precisely because it is unseen and unquantified.

How do secular organisations engage with religion as a factor in their theory of change? What are the acceptable limits to the expression of the faith component by FBOs? How to address issues such as conditionality and exclusivity and gender?

12. The growing awareness and pro-active engagement of some secular organisations with issues of faith in development practice, has been triggered, for example, by
observations that when communities encounter natural or economic shocks, people often turn to the churches. It is therefore short-sighted to ignore the role of religious institutions in building resilience.

13. There is a need for increased and improved religious literacy between the religious and the secular which moves the discussion on from simply tolerating diversity, to valuing, sustaining, and promoting it.

14. In many countries, religious institutions are important in a number of policy areas and so religious actors themselves need a certain level of literacy to engage credibly in public advocacy.

15. All development actors – from policy makers to those providing on-the-ground technical assistance should also be given the skills necessary for religious literacy including the knowledge not just that religion matters but how it matters. With religious literacy in place, work must be done around difficult issues so as to frame discussions in the most useful way possible.

16. There is an unanswered question about whether FBOs are agents of change just because of what they do or whether faith itself is an agent of change and development.

17. Sustainable development is not considered achievable without the empowerment of women. Religion has been the source of good work in this area as well as an actor in the discrimination against women. A theology of the rights of women can be informing and empowering; in Britain there has not been the space within Muslim groups for women to explore a values based theological approach to human rights.

18. There can be an uncomfortable dialogue between secular and faith-based groups - perhaps because secularism is the estranged child of western Christianity?

**How do religious communities and organisations view the development process and actors within it?**

19. Religious communities are not homogenous between or even within themselves. Also, religious teaching and practise can vary hugely. It must not be assumed that there is a simple dichotomy between religion and non-religion.

20. Secular organisations have their own value systems – either explicit or implicit. These need to be understood before a secular organisation can engage effectively with others.

21. The theological understanding of development from the Catholic Church sees the spiritual and material as inseparable. This holistic approach is similar to a secular view of people reaching their human potential but it differs in the assertion that ultimate fulfilment is found in God.

22. The alternative in this theological understanding is the link between injustice, poverty and sin, with a moral poverty seen at the root of injustice. Economic, social and political structures are therefore seen as essential but not fully sufficient for full human development.

23. Development projects should never just be instrumental but one must look at the real footprints - the impact of the work.

24. Within a Christian theology of sin and development there are two useful qualifiers. Firstly, it is important to distinguish between personal sin and structural sin (the idea that there exists a larger, social dimension of sin beyond individual wrongdoing). As the word ‘sin’ might prove to be a barrier in dialogue between the religious and the secular, a way forward might be to couch discussion in terms of ‘shared unethical human behaviour’.

25. FBOs should weigh the extent to which they are involved in political engagement as there is an inherent danger that they can be co-opted by civil or other authorities for
political ends which may, in some circumstances, be linked to material personal gain. Advocacy activity must therefore come with an understanding of communal benefit.

26. For such advocacy to be effective, FBOs should also ensure that they are engaged in discussion from the start of the process rather than being co-opted later or simply used themselves as an advocacy tool.

27. Many FBOs fulfil a prophetic role, advocating for the longer term goal of human flourishing, rather than simply short-term economic and social development.

What are tension points, opportunities and barriers between secular and faith-based approaches? How can we identify ways to co-operate more effectively?

28. All organisations are value based, whether religious or not. The influence of faith is wide and strong and given that every community includes faith groups, the question for secular organisations is not whether to engage but how.

29. Non-FBOs in the north, in particular, therefore need to give more than a grudging and patronising recognition of faith groups in the south.

30. A broad and well informed religious literacy is needed that does not assume uniformity and takes into account other complexities such as the links between religion and culture, and between religion and politics. At the same time, religious actors need to have mastered sound development literacy.

31. In the complexities of religious literacy, creative tensions need to be recognised and maintained rather than swallowed up.

32. If civil authorities or other actors lack faith literacy, there is a high risk that faith groups are not just misunderstood but are ignored.

33. Issues of structural engagement need to be addressed. FBOs should be challenged when faith is used to maintain existing debilitating power structures (recognising that this more of a people problem than a religion problem).

34. If there is a move to action based on faith values, then the northern based capitalist economic structures also must be reviewed. How complicit are we as individuals in a world economic system that creates and maintains so much poverty?

35. There is some data on the impact of FBOs in development but there is a need for more robust and extensive quantitative and qualitative research. Research findings need to be aired publicly. Not all the existing research related to the positive impact of FBOs has been widely disseminated. It was recognised however that such research outcomes might be particularly complicated to interpret due to the sometimes delicate interplay between religion, culture and politics.

36. Heed must also be given to the fact that metrics shape outcomes and that there can be an implicit tendency for groups to take on the values of the supporting donor (known as institutional isomorphism).

37. It is often assumed the contemporary human rights frameworks are neutral and objective, but we should question their origin and their interplay with religious understandings. Most have their origin in the enlightenment and also millennia of religious understandings of justice, particularly those with Judeo-Christian roots. Human rights reframe a lot of theological understandings in a voluntary and individual sense whereas most religions have a more corporate understanding of humanity and human flourishing. Human rights and faith based frameworks do overlap though there are very real tensions. It was argued strongly that there should be no excuse for violating human rights because of cultural or interpretive / theological differences.

38. There was a concern that ‘faith’ can all too easily become instrumentalised and taken
on by development actors as simply another development tool.

**Case Study Themes**

39. Case studies were from Afghanistan, China, Kenya, Russia, South East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Yemen including the perspectives of a range of Jewish, Muslim, Christian and secular organisations. The following section sums up the key discussion points brought to the plenary session.

**Religious Literacy in Africa – why it matters**

40. The rapidly growing spiritual / Pentecostal churches, appeal to poorer people because of their focus on healing and meeting personal needs. Such an approach resonates with the indigenous spiritual background of many African Christians. They also fight against witchcraft activity. Such churches impact on development; governments are let off the hook by a blaming of the spirits rather the structures. The ‘prosperity gospel’ is also a potentially distracting and dangerous force.

**Legitimacy of Religious Groups**

41. Some religious groups have been branded as terrorist organisations or non-legitimate interlocutors by the international community. Humanitarian and development actors may be ‘punished’ if they then negotiate with these groups in order to, for example, gain access to communities in conflict impacted areas.

**Faith Influencing Community Responses**

42. The 'Africa Talks Climate' project aimed to find out what Africans felt about climate change. What was unexpected was the extent to which people's faith influenced their reflections. A strong fatalist notion of divine punishment and powerlessness emerged. This was prevalent in both Christian and Muslim groups.

**The Question of Fatalism**

43. A number of presentations reported on the sometimes negative effect of religious fatalism on worldview and action within some faith communities (i.e. a belief that events are predetermined to occur and that there is no ability of a person to alter the predetermined plan of God in any event). This was most commonly observed in actions relating to disaster risk management and strengthening community resilience. Development actors can sometimes reinforce this sense; note that much of the language used to describe climate change is highly negative.

**FBOs working in Alternative Faith Environments**

44. Anecdotal evidence suggests that local religious actors are more comfortable with other religious actors than with non-faith actors due to a closer shared understanding of fundamental motivations.

45. FBOs can engage with religion as an agent for change from a 'lived' position. The shared experience can provide a sound basis for reflection and change.

46. India, the highly diverse religious environment seems to enable FBOs to work quite effectively. However there are not enough studies to back up these observations. Here it is important to work with a broad range of actors rather than a single FBO.

**Religion as an agent for development**

47. The Communist Party of China has recognised religion as a significant development agent which strengthens social and economic development process within China. The strongest forces within the republic are economics and the Confucian notion of social harmony. Religious groups are valued when they are seen to be contributing to the development of a harmonious society.
Common Language in the Religious Space

48. There are different interpretations of what 'religious space' and 'freedom of religion' mean and represent in, for example, China compared to Europe. This highlighted the need for dialogue and understanding of the state / religion settlement in specific contexts.

Media Impressions

49. The Russian media image of the Church is often inaccurate and this is exacerbated by the western press image of the Church as subservient to the state and hand in glove with it. The situation is much more complex than is portrayed.

Religion and Class

50. In Russia, the rich and middle class in some development contexts contribute to the provision of schools, hospitals and other social institutions.

The Church Contesting

51. The Church as a voice of opposition was true even during the period of militant atheism in the Soviet Union when it was really the only ideological opposition. Currently monasteries are the new centres / cells of civil society that are conducive to local social and economic development. This needs to be researched further.

How to work with religious scholars and teachers?

52. Collaboration between religious scholars and leaders can amplify and accelerate development action and increase impact in terms of quality, resources and measurable outcomes. There are cases of very effective use of this kind of collaboration in the decision making and dissemination processes.

53. Engagement with scholars should focus on those who understand the local context and culture. External experts may not fully understand quite localised cultures. At the same time, faith literacy alone is not enough. A robust understanding of cultural context is needed to gain recognition and legitimacy.

54. Engagement with religious scholars and leaders is not always an effective solution. Religious actors can oppose progress and development. Care needs to be taken that the most appropriate religious leaders are consulted as interlocutors (engaging with the ‘wrong’ leaders might legitimise an authority that was not recognised previously by the community).

55. Ideally, there will be a balance between religious and secular leaders and experts for best outcome and not seeing religion as ‘better’ but rather as an under-deployed partner.

56. Civil authorities need to develop a range of mediating institutions, providing space where religious and secular actors can work together. This also needs to incorporate training religious leaders in understanding of development. The role of mediator is to find the best language to facilitate the dialogue, along with an ability to help others agree to disagree.

57. When legal frameworks are changed, the training of local religious leaders is important as they can be key points of reference and understanding for the community.

58. Working with women’s networks is also important, especially in terms of religious rights and training for empowerment. Workshops at community level and the use of media including radio are vital in the communication of the subtleties of ethical decision making.
Setting dynamics; building constituencies for change

59. Models which involve complexity and provisionality are amongst the best ways of describing most development. A simple problem (like doing a jigsaw) has one way to do it and one outcome; a complicated problem (like making a rocket) has lots of elements but one repeatable outcome; and a complex problem (like raising a child) has more than one possible outcome which is not possible to predict. We have a very reductionist approach to development or humanitarian work. Causality cannot be predicted but systems do emerge – emergent self-adaptive systems. Such systems repeat and they stabilise.

60. Stereotypes are often not untrue just incomplete. There is real power in single stories to inform. Single narratives are easy to communicate and understand. They bring together people of different beliefs and do so with the possibility of opening up a fuller picture. This space brings potential for a new paradigm to emerge. The role of the facilitator, mediator or storyteller is analogous to that of a midwife.

61. The EU is the biggest aid donor, giving €8bn per year but there is €800bn capital flight every year from Africa to the west. The EU is not always comfortable partnering FBOs.

62. The Agenda for Change is a review of development work by the EU, looking through to 2015. It aims to empower local systems and institutions. A sound evidence base is vital in this process. Currently it is not known how much EU money goes to FBOs or those inspired by faith.

63. There is a danger of single narrative and a need for double listening – listening to self and to those in the development context. Development organisations have not traditionally been good at self-reflection; they seem to have some sort of corporate amnesia which gets in the way of answering the profound questions about the effectiveness of aid on the ground.

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Wilton Park | 2 December 2011

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