

**SECTION I:**  
**RELIGIOUS NGOs AND**  
**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLITICS**



## Religious Engagement in Development Work: A Continuing Journey

### **Introduction: the “resurgence” of interest in religious matters**

One protagonist describes the bitter conflict in the Central African Republic as pitting Christians against Muslims, while another argues vehemently that religion has nothing whatsoever to do with the conflict.<sup>1</sup> As international agencies mobilized vast resources to address the Ebola pandemic in 2014, they focused strategic attention on the positive and negative roles of religious leaders only after public health officials recognized that popular reactions against undignified burials of the dead exacerbated the spread of the disease (Marshall et al. 2015a). A recent global commission on the path ahead for education barely mentions religious institutions and related issues that play vital roles for education systems (cf. The Education Commission 2016). These situations illustrate how religious dimensions of important global agenda issues can be distorted, ignored, overstated, or sidelined. They reflect an all too common pattern that results, in part, from legacies of the Cold War (and, it could be argued, centuries of European and Middle Eastern history) that cast religious topics in largely political terms, together with a “secular assumption” that often associates religion with private beliefs, tendencies to evoke tensions, and rather archaic practices and institutions.

This picture is changing, albeit slowly and unevenly. In many countries and institutions, sidestepping of religious matters is giving way to more systematic and evidence driven approaches. This shift in focus at times results from clear-eyed reflections on global affairs and contemporary challenges that up-end many earlier assumptions but it can also be seen as driven by a herd tendency. The latter contributes to the phenomenon of erratic approaches: a new focus is often not sustained or coherent, and may be based on insufficient analysis both of the history and the stakes involved.

<sup>1</sup> The author has witnessed several such discussions, including during a 2017 exchange at a Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored event in Helsinki.

Recognition of what is sometimes described as a “resurgence” or at least a “revelation” of religion has prompted both academic reflection and a range of policy and institutional initiatives. Several persistent and ugly conflicts in different world regions are driven by at least an element of religious tension. The sharper focus in recent years on religious dimensions has therefore tended to focus on extremism and violent conflict. There is less appreciation that religious actors play multiple and complex roles in far wider global agendas. Yet contemporary events underscore a reality that religious institutions, beliefs, and practices are vitally important for large segments of the world’s population (more than 80 percent, according to a study by a think tank, the Pew Forum (2015). The large institutional assets of religious institutions of many kinds play significant political, social, and economic roles that extend well beyond their core spiritual functions.

This chapter examines forces that underlie the renewed interest in religious aspects of international affairs and especially development and peace-building. It begins with a brief discussion of definitions, then highlights topics where doubts have emerged and where exploration of religious dimensions enriches understanding and impact in development programs, and concludes with a discussion of outstanding issues that merit research, dialogue, and policy action. The objective is to highlight and clarify major topics that are debated within operational circles, pointing towards better quality and more just development programs. An underlying premise is that full human development is not possible without regard for essential religious values.

## **Definition challenges**

No discussion of religious topics can escape questions that involve core definitions. What, after all, is meant by religion? Faith? Spirituality? Secularism? Who are religious leaders? Where should we draw lines between culture and religion? The term secular is used quite widely (at times pejoratively) as a contrast to religious, though the boundaries between secular and religious are complex and contested. The meaning of each term is fiercely debated, complicated by different usage and understandings in various disciplines, for example theology, anthropology, politics, and psychology, not to speak of different languages.

The many questions that these debates pose about the nature and impact of religious beliefs and practices are beyond the scope of this discussion; it is vital, nonetheless, to underscore their significant impact on attitudes and

behaviors and the ways in which they reflect deeply held views and approaches to existential as well as daily life matters. There clearly are no perfect definitions and recognizing different uses of terms and underlying understandings is vital. This author prefers to avoid the term “religion” as overly broad, instead using “religious” as an adjective pointing to, for example, leaders, institutions, beliefs, and practices. A different but related topic is concerns and sensitivities around what is termed “instrumentalization”, referring to a tendency or perception that religious actors are “used” rather than viewed as respected and equal partners.

A significant distinction that has particular relevance in exploring various forms of partnerships is between a belief-centered approach involving intellectual dimensions and what many term “lived religion”. The former might, for example, center on religious teachings about economic motivations, while the latter pertains more to the way in which individual behavior and life attitudes are influenced by religious teachings or community engagement. The distinction is illustrated by debates around female genital cutting/circumcision (FGC). While most religious scholars and leaders state unequivocally that no religious mandate exists for the practice, many people continue it, giving various justifications including often their understanding that it is required by their religion (Gaul 2012). Many topics, including approaches to education, land tenure, agricultural practices, nutrition, health care, and relationships between men and women have both theological dimensions and are influenced by religious institutions and beliefs. Another pertinent topic involves leadership. While most formal religious leaders are men, women play critical but often hard-to-pinpoint roles. Appreciating the complex realities of formal religious teachings and structures versus “lived religion” and its impact on daily life and change is both an intellectual and a practical challenge.

It is equally important to appreciate that definitions surrounding what we call development are equally fraught and demanding, and also involve complex boundaries, notably with humanitarian action and peacebuilding. Understandings of what constitutes development and what is good and bad are contested and change over time. It is telling that the World Bank recently dropped use of the term “developing” countries because the distinction between “developing” and “developed” countries is no longer clear, any more than using the term “third world” is meaningful today, long after the “second” world took on very new forms.

The focus in this chapter is on institutions and their practical roles. A wide variety of institutions inspired by different religious traditions and communities are directly engaged in development programs. Many are

prominent in debates and action involving development and humanitarian affairs. This includes notably the large group of organizations affiliated with or inspired by religious communities that work transnationally (Caritas Internationalis, World Vision, Islamic Relief Worldwide, for example) or at national and community levels (Marshall 2013; see also Marshall 2017a). A far larger group of religious congregational structures like the Vatican, Islamic education systems, or Buddhist *sanghas*, play significant roles as do spiritual movements like the Community of Sant'Egidio, and the Ramakrishna movement. Interfaith organizations like Religions for Peace and United Religions Initiative, and intrafaith or ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches engage directly on various issues and aspire to leadership and coordination roles. Individually and collectively these institutions bring substantial assets and resources to development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding work, and many engage in partnerships with international and national institutions, public and private.

## Global agendas, religious involvement

At the turn of the millennium in the year 2000, world leaders met to revitalize the post World War II framework embodied in the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>2</sup> that emerged involved soaring visions but also measurable targets with deadlines. In 2015, (when a set of those deadlines came due) a new and broader framework was developed, this time following a remarkably broad participatory process. It defined seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These, too, look to the discipline of targets (169), indicators, and deadlines.<sup>3</sup> The complex structure extends well beyond “development” as conventionally understood, and is designed to include all countries and societies. It is summarized in five “Ps”: peace, prosperity, people, planet, and partnerships. The goals thus encompass and constitute a broad global agenda, applicable to all countries and communities.

A pertinent question is how religious topics are involved in various aspects of this global agenda and to what extent religious communities share responsibility for their implementation. Indeed there are religious implications and relevance across the full spectrum of issues, although this

2 <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/>.

3 For the Sustainable Development Goals framework see <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>.

fact is far from universally appreciated and recognized. Various deliberate efforts to understand and to engage with the complex array of actors and institutions involved include a standing United Nations task force<sup>4</sup> and efforts linked to the annual process of great power consultations known as the G20.<sup>5</sup> The German government, USAID, and several other multilateral and bilateral aid organizations are supporting a consortium known as the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development or PARD that includes both governmental and intergovernmental actors and faith-inspired organizations.<sup>6</sup> The global interfaith organizations like Religions for Peace and the United Religious Initiative support the global goals. These and other structures aim both to assure active involvement of religious experience and concerns in SDG implementation and to shape the continuing global agendas in areas ranging from peace and security to global health and action on global climate change.

The following section focuses on reasons why religious facets are often ignored and some doubts that have hindered more productive partnerships. That discussion should be set in the context of the numerous positive reasons for engaging religious actors, and the many assets they bring. Such assets notably include high levels of trust in religious leaders and institutions; in many surveys in different world regions religious leaders are the most trusted (politicians often are the least trusted occupation).<sup>7</sup> Widespread admiration for Pope Francis is an example, as is the enduring impact of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Desmond Tutu. Religious entities and infrastructure are often the most visible institutional presence in communities and they are active in delivering services, notably health and education and providing social safety nets, especially during natural disasters and conflicts. Religious entities play vital if often underappreciated roles in fragile and poorly governed states and communities. Religious actors are noteworthy for their communication skills and increasingly work today with social media as well as more traditional preaching, radio, television, and print media. And religious actors frequently wield considerable financial and political power, not least the power to mobilize volunteers, both within countries and internationally. In reflecting on “assets and liabili-

4 [http://www.partner-religion-development.org/fileadmin/Dateien/Resources/Knowledg\\_e\\_Center/UNIATF-Tor-and-2014-Overview.pdf](http://www.partner-religion-development.org/fileadmin/Dateien/Resources/Knowledg_e_Center/UNIATF-Tor-and-2014-Overview.pdf).

5 <https://www.g20interfaith.org/>.

6 <http://www.partner-religion-development.org/>.

7 Among numerous examples are the World Bank Voices of the Poor studies, BBC and Gallup polls, Philippines Weather Station, and both Lationobaromotro and Africabarometer studies.

ties”, perceived and actual, that religious institutions bring to the work of development, it is useful to bear in mind that religion can be part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

## The religious landscape in development work

Today religious actors of many kinds engage on development issues in countless ways. In practice, all development and humanitarian actors (whether they acknowledge it explicitly or not) confront a multitude of questions about whether and how religious beliefs and practices are relevant for their work. Religious institutions especially in fragile states but also in wealthy communities are taking on new roles, at a time when violent conflicts and tensions around pluralism color a far wider discourse that has development and equity as its focus. Grievances that fuel anger and the unsettled spirit of our times on topics ranging from gender roles, quality of education, employment opportunities, and corruption also have religious dimensions.

Contemporary approaches to religious engagement by global and national institutions working in international development have emerged through various paths. The development programs of various countries (Norway, Germany, and Switzerland are examples) were in practice strongly influenced by church-related and missionary groups, especially in their formative years. Several United Nations specialized agencies have taken on engagement with religious institutions as a matter of course, UNICEF and UNHCR, for example; others more recently launched increasingly purposeful approaches (the World Food Programme is an example). For various multilateral agencies (the World Bank among them) personal leadership from upper echelons has played influential roles. The ecumenical World Council of Churches has had a longstanding interest both in health policy and in various economic approaches underpinning development work. And a wide range of non-governmental organizations originated largely in response to the demands of humanitarian crises but have evolved over time to focus on broad-based development programs (institutions that are part of Caritas Internationalis, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and World Vision are examples). The result is a patchwork of experience and a complex web of institutions and of coordinating mechanisms.

The overall focus on religious matters in international relations generally and with respect to international development has changed and increased over time. Notable turning points were the Iranian revolution of 1979 that

shone a spotlight on religious matters, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 that forced a confrontation with terrorism couched in religious terms. Overall there has been a trend towards broader and more institutionalized approaches. These have come with controversies, as some governments have questioned the merits of deliberate engagement with religious actors in public policy settings.<sup>8</sup> The present situation therefore is mixed, with various United Nations, bilateral, and other development agencies engaged in efforts to understand and build partnerships with religious institutions while others maintain a policy of distance or deliberate neutrality. Given concerns about possible bias towards or against religious actors, institutions and individuals may mask or fudge their religious approach and nature, even internally among their own staff. Features of the aggregate picture include poor coordination (this is a central problem across international development work), scattered documentation and evaluation, and a focus that depends unduly on senior leadership that results in a somewhat erratic, stop and go rhythm in focus and action.

Meanwhile, the development field has become far more varied and complex. As an example, private financing of development activities has outstripped OECD/DAC funding and civil society and private sector institutions (including foundations) have multiplied and are changing rapidly in their structure and roles. Likewise, NGOs and other non-state institutions (including many with religious inspiration and links) have taken on new roles and forms, at transnational, national, and local levels. There is increasing differentiation among different country groupings, notably middle income countries with strong management capabilities, low income countries, and fragile and conflict-riven states. The complex reality today is that different countries and societies are at very different stages of modernization, prosperity, and income equality, and have very different needs.

## **A bumpy path to religious engagement**

The path to constructive engagement and partnerships has in practice been quite bumpy with numerous and often persistent hesitations about religious roles. Some of the concerns along the path are specific to religious institutions, though others (for example around appropriate civil society roles and

<sup>8</sup> An example was the World Bank experience under president James D. Wolfensohn launched in 1999–2000. The Executive Directors, representing member states, voiced serious doubts as to the wisdom of a systematic interreligious dialogue about development.

aspects of core economic models) relate more broadly to the evolving policy and institutional evolution of development work. The path involves both international perspectives on development and institutional approaches and local issues, focused at national level; examples there include the development roles of entities like the Muslim Brotherhood and Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, with its strong Buddhist links. Focusing on some of the obstacles and questions is instructive in appreciating the complex landscape of contemporary approaches to religious dimensions of development practice.

Central concerns turn around understandings of the appropriate relationships between religious and public institutions. This applies especially in countries where constitutions or traditions emphasize the importance of distance (the United States and France are clear examples) or of synergy (several Islamic states, for example). In various settings this can translate into both institutional and individual unwillingness to engage with religious actors (and sometimes vice versa with secular actors). A related issue involves understandings of appropriate political roles of religious actors. If the view is that religious institutions are political actors or that religious involvement in policy is inappropriate, this can translate into unease at engagement in a wide spectrum of issues, for example health or education policy. Religious actors in practice are not infrequently seen in as highly politicized, with clear interests that include power, adherents, and financial benefit. And in many settings religious actors are seen as intrinsically conservative, essentially opposing changes that are associated with social and economic development. Various challenges follow from these issues, some legal, and some attitudinal.

An analysis by scholar and public intellectual Michael Ignatieff illustrates the complex interplay of politics, religion, and economics in broad understandings of how religion relates to geopolitics and thus to development: “We fell prey to an illusion dear to the generation of 1914, that economics would prove stronger than politics and that global commerce would soften the rivalries of empire [...] Until the hopes of the Arab Spring were dashed, the moderate, globalized middle classes in the region believed they had the power to marginalize the forces of sectarian fury.” (Ignatieff 2017) In short, as scholar Peter Berger observed, the world is “ferociously religious” and that reality today is hard to ignore (Berger 2015).

A second set of concerns relate to the perceived legitimacy and authority of religious actors to engage on development topics, notably where development is perceived as a technical, often purely economic domain. Lutheran World Federation leader Martin Junge, speaking at an interfaith

gathering, addressed such challenges to religious engagement in blunt terms. As a religious leader he is asked, directly or otherwise, “Do you actually know what you are talking about?” Does he, as a theologian, a pastor, have any right to engage in a debate about economic issues? He responded that indeed he did. “The pastoral ministry of churches all over the world exposes us to realities of poverty and marginalization. We know and we serve the people and the populations who for reasons often totally beyond their control are sentenced to a life in abject poverty, or see themselves sliding inexorably down into vulnerability and exclusion. We know of entire generations migrating to other countries, or entire villages migrating to the cities.”<sup>9</sup>

This reflection highlights a theoretical challenge that takes practical form in the critical question of who sits at the tables where policy is discussed and decisions are made. Junge’s argument and message is that religious institutions have an incontestable right to engage because they have direct knowledge about the realities of poverty and broader social matters. This is especially true when the focus is on misery, inequities and inequalities, from global to local levels. This argument also applies where conflict and peace-building are concerned. However, bringing these insights and experience to the table is complex because religious communities are by their nature decentralized, with few denominations positioned to address issues in the terms that development actors, and notably development economists, can absorb. The religious insights vary widely as does experience.

A third issue follows from this observation, turning about authority and “representativity”: who can speak for the large religious communities? Clearly there is no single religious voice or perspective, and rarely are formal religious leaders (even, for example, the Catholic Pope) “representative” in a democratic sense. This links to significant issues around women’s roles and gender norms. Religious community positions fall along a wide range, notwithstanding a common assumption that there are fixed religious positions reflecting patriarchal attitudes. In practice religious voices include some of the strongest advocates for women’s rights as well as opponents to them (United Nations Population Fund 2016). Nonetheless formal religious leadership tends to be heavily dominated by men and not all of them embrace the principle of full equality between men and women. Since women’s empowerment is a central tenet in development approaches, exclusion of women from many decision-making circles is problematic and

<sup>9</sup> Exchange reported by the author who was on the same panel at the Sant’Egidio Prayer for Peace meeting in Antwerp, Belgium, September 2014.

counterproductive. Engaging women is possible (indeed an irony is that women tend to rank higher than men on religiosity indices) but it takes a special effort.

Differences in priorities and starting assumptions present other challenges. A recent exchange (that I witnessed) about education in the Middle East, involving a priest and a development economist, illustrates some of the issues involved. Both were keenly interested in the topic but approached it from quite different perspectives. The priest launched into a discussion of a proposed exchange program between a UK theological college and Al-Azhar University in Egypt that would enhance knowledge and understanding among religious leaders. The economist saw no interest in the topic. When I asked how far he engaged on the content of curriculum he asserted that his goal was value-free education, to the priest's horror. In this instance, the challenges of educating religious leaders was not on the economist's priority agenda so he was poorly equipped to appreciate operational issues, and his reference to values-free education (by which he meant non-ideological, non-rote) fed the priest's worst preconceptions of secular approaches. The discordance brought the discussion to a halt. More broadly, while both religious and non-religious institutions have a keen interest in education from many perspectives, differences in priorities and even vocabulary can be barriers to meaningful dialogue and partnership.

Approaches colored by understandings of a “clash of civilizations” represent further obstacles to constructive engagement around religion. The current focus on CVE/PVE, or countering or preventing violent extremism, highlights religious dimensions, often in highly simplified terms. Religious tensions dominate many discussions as does a focus on such tensions within Islamic communities, even where extremist tendencies among numerous religious traditions are acknowledged. Analysis of religious dimensions thus tends to focus on links to violence and conflict. The potential peacemaking and peacebuilding roles of religious actors receive increasing focus (witness, for example, the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, supported by the Finnish government)<sup>10</sup>, but primarily in the context of a focus on violence and extremism. Religious dimensions of conflict and roles in fragile states have great significance but the focus on violence including funding of research and action detracts from broader agendas.

10 <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/>.

A further concern centers on the common perception that religious engagement frequently if not necessarily involves efforts to convert those involved to a religious community. Proselytism is widely perceived as a primary motivation for religious engagement in humanitarian and development work, even though international norms and the missions of leading faith inspired organizations are clear that linking evangelism and development work is inappropriate, especially when any quid pro quo or conditionality is involved. There is need for clearer codes of conduct both to reassure those concerned about the issue and to offer clear guidelines as to where appropriate boundaries lie.

A final obstacle is limits in knowledge and understanding of the complex worlds of religious institutions and practices. Many professionals working on development issues have benefitted from scant educational exposure to religious history and contemporary institutions: “religious literacy” is as much an issue for them as technical “development literacy” may be for religious actors. Various efforts are underway, for example a Harvard Divinity School program<sup>11</sup> and a series of strategic learning exchanges within the United Nations<sup>12</sup>, to remedy this issue but when lack of understanding is compounded by preconceptions and over-simplified views partnership is especially difficult. On other topics, for example roles of gender and remittances in development situations, research and solid evidence has played vital roles in changing attitudes and shaping policy. Similar marshaling of evidence on religious experience is indeed needed and can make a significant difference. However, the topic is vast and the knowledge gaps are not easily filled, especially if analysis is colored by efforts to “prove the case”. Religious data is notoriously complex and difficult to come by. Efforts to provide operational analyses of religious landscapes and engagement on development topics are an important first step.<sup>13</sup> Rarely will it be possible or indeed desirable to demonstrate that religious engagement is intrinsically different from other approaches. However, better information and analysis is a critical need, for example in moving forward towards sound partnerships on topics like education and smallholder agriculture where religious roles are significant but quite poorly mapped.

11 Harvard Divinity School Religious Literacy Project, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/>.

12 See for example <https://www.unfpa.org/events/strategic-learning-exchange-faith-and-development>.

13 The country mapping work of the Berkley Center/World Faiths Development Dialogue for Cambodia, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria, Philippines, and others are examples of such work. See <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd/countries>.

## Eight live topics to address on religious engagement

### *Religion and violence*

Concerns about religious roles in conflict and violence tend to dominate many approaches to contemporary discussions about religion, including in diverse aspects of development work. This has operational importance both because it contributes to unease in positive engagement with religious institutions and because religious actors play vital roles in many if not most fragile state situations but are rarely engaged in conflict resolution, reconciliation, and development in strategic ways. Recent history in South Sudan and the Central African Republic are examples. One reason, highlighted by scholar Karen Armstrong in her book, *Fields of Blood* (2015), is the tendency to blame violence and conflict on religion (as the scapegoat) far beyond what is reasonable. This can obscure a sober analysis of the complex roots of conflict and paths towards conflict resolution. The CAR example cited in the opening paragraph is a case in point as are debates about the nature of religious engagement in the complex conflicts in Nigeria. What is needed is an open-eyed analysis and a sharper focus on the peacemaking and peace-building potential of religious actors.

### *Motivations and boundaries: the issue of Proselytizing*

In many world regions, a central concern is the disruptive potential of active proselytizing aimed at conversion. This stands in contrast to human rights principles that look to freedom of religion and belief and evidence of the benefits of religious freedom. Where development and humanitarian programs are concerned, the primary concern is the actual and perceived links between development work by religious organizations (for example as first responders following natural disasters, providers of health care, support to orphans, and running schools) and efforts to evangelize within the affected communities. Enticements to participate linked to benefits and possible discrimination are particular concerns. In humanitarian situations, both practical guidelines and agreed ethical norms are quite well established (Geneva Conventions), though some religious organizations contest them, arguing that spiritual comfort must be an integral part of humanitarian relief. Most faith-inspired organizations, however, fully adhere to humanitarian norms. The issues are more complex where development programs are concerned, as there is a dearth of clear and explicit codes of conduct.

This is significant because of the widespread perceptions that link religious organizations and proselytizing. Further, there are grey areas, for example in appropriate curricula in religiously run schools and in care for vulnerable populations, notably orphans and people rescued from situations of trafficking. There is a need to sharpen dialogue on issues and solutions and to advance important work undertaken to date to define appropriate norms and codes of conduct (Marshall 2015b).

### *Controversies on gender*

Equal rights for women and programs that work to empower women, starting with equalizing gender enrollment in education at all levels, are a core strategic objective embedded in the MDGs and SDGs and in most development strategies. This involves in most societies significant changes in gender roles and norms, as a fundamental facet of modernization and development. Much progress has been made, notably with enrolling girls in schools and in family planning, but there are still stubborn areas where progress is slow, for example in ending child marriage and practices like female genital cutting (FGC). The issue of rights of LGBT communities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) is proving especially contentious, with over 70 countries with discriminatory legislation on their books. The roles of religious bodies in these areas is complex. There are religious communities that actively support reforms and changes in norms. However, in many situations there is unease, outright opposition, or backlash and backtracking. Some topics are well defined, for example sexual rights and abortion, where there is organized opposition. The issue extends beyond these visible areas of tension. For example, at national levels or at the United Nations, even efforts to end domestic violence encounter opposition grounded on religious arguments (the interests of preserving family unity, for example). The rather slow progress in implementing UN resolution 1325 that aims to engage women in peacebuilding extends also to still slower progress in engaging religiously affiliated women. Common perceptions equate religious institutions with persistent patriarchal norms and behaviors. These are not fictional: a Bangladeshi newspaper in August 2013 reported the voice of a madrasa principal arguing: "You women should stay within the four walls of your houses. Sitting inside your husband's home you should take care of your husband's furniture and raise your children, your male kids. These are your jobs. Why do you have to go outside?" He compares women with a tamarind, "a fruit that any man would like to

taste”, and asks, “Why are you sending your daughters to work in garment factories?” Girls should stop school after four or five years, just enough to keep their husband’s accounts (Marshall 2017a).

Given the importance of women’s rights to progress towards equitable and prospering societies, deeper understanding of the obstacles and dialogue aimed at changing attitudes has particular importance in this area, which stands as one of the major obstacles to progress in engaging religious actors more constructively across development fields.

### *Coordination and harmonization*

The question of who coordinates development work and who is coordinated has particular sensitivity where religious actors are concerned. A first issue is that there is a tendency to fragmentation of activity and a lack of harmonization of work by religious institutions, whether led by international organizations or local communities. The lead responsibility for aid coordination normally falls to governments who often do not integrate an understanding of religiously led work in their strategic plans. There are varying roles of large players and smaller institutions. This is a significant challenge that is rarely well addressed.

### *Governance issues*

Governance, a term used in a wide variety of ways, poses numerous core and complex issues, ranging from constitutional and practical relationships between government and religious institutions as well as international partners, to more specific issues such as efforts to curtail corrupt practices. As noted above, the political roles of religious institutions are often at issue, as is the caliber and role of the state in managing development policies and programs. Accountability is a central concern: to whom, and by whom, and how is it defined, measured, and judged? Transparency involves access to information about financial transactions and policy approaches, for example toward extractive industries and management of state budgets. Roles of religious actors on all these fronts are at issue.

Corruption is a special issue and concern, and given the impact on poor communities and its ethical nature, there are reasonable expectations that religious actors would play leading roles. This does take place on occasion, but less than might be expected. The reasons for muted religious roles are numerous and include the fact that the financial affairs of many religious

organizations are often less than fully transparent and defensible. Some religious actors tend to set their understanding of corrupt practices in a broad setting of social justice involving inequality and global power relations. The “bottom line” here is that there is a need for more active and effective advocacy in many countries and, globally, for stronger religious presence and voice in integrity alliances, for example in the Transparency International organization and in the biannual IACC (International Anti-Corruption Conference).

### *Instrumentalization debates*

Religious actors bristle at the suggestion that partnerships will involve them serving as implementors of development strategies and programs designed without their active engagement. This does occur in too many settings. The reverse can also apply, with religious actors seen as “using” their development partners to their own ends. The importance of balanced and carefully thought through partnership arrangements is thus important. It is crucial (if not always easy) to assure reasonable approaches to engaging relevant partners, including religious actors, in policy discussions that can range from varying visions of the models that underlie development programs to practical program planning. The “power of the purse clearly plays vital roles in relationships, but one key to stronger partnerships is to assure that non-financial knowledge, relationships, and contributions are valued.

### *Human rights*

Human rights are core principles of United Nations, and provide the ethical scaffold for many organizations, including some that are religiously inspired. They involve fundamental notions of respect. However, various religious actors are uneasy about or contest aspects of human rights, sometimes arguing that the Universal Declaration is in essence “Western”. This may lead to tepid support and questions, for example on LGBT and women’s rights and freedom of speech. The common gulf between advocates of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and broader human rights poses questions that deserve response.

### *Debates about models*

What is the “right” development model? The appropriate “theory of change”? The ideal society aspired to? The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si!* (2013) is an example of fundamental questions about care of the earth, the role of markets and capitalism, the need to distinguish good management from the nature of the essential, core model that underlies policies as well as the role of state, role of consumption, and debt and interest. The potential for constructive dialogue on these interwoven topics has rarely been taken to a satisfactory level.

Monday morning: what comes next?

The following are priority areas for action:

- Support leadership among development actors so that they recognize, engage, broaden visions, and offer training to encourage strategic engagement by religious actors;
- Engage key countries/governments at national level or regional levels (e.g. ASEAN) more directly on these topics;
- Pursue thoughtfully the need to enhance both religious and development literacy
- Address the question of how to enhance formal religious engagement at priority policy “tables”, along the lines of religious engagement in UNAIDS;
- Tackle priority issues where there are noteworthy tensions between secular and religious entities (for example extractive industries, gender roles, financing for development, private sector engagement, entrepreneurship, and youth engagement);
- Address specific areas of tension like proselytizing linked to development work;
- Support research and information dissemination;
- Address religious roles in fragile states more boldly and strategically, starting with a systematic review of religious landscapes in several fragile states and engaging with the G7+ organization which represents those countries;
- Build on ecumenical and interfaith alliances and approaches starting with specific priority sectors and linked to the SDG framework (e.g. health and education).

There has been progress towards reflecting better the array of religious roles on development topics, but there is far to go before this is a mainstream part of development work. Next steps should involve appreciating, learning, and acting in the light of experience that highlights the complexity of religious dimensions. Resilient religious values can help development actors to enrich their diagnoses and prescriptions for action. Looking ahead, sharp divisions between “people of faith” and “others” need to be avoided. Seeking to engage a “faith” sector” as a distinct, separate entity can involve pitfalls; there are too many institutions involved and far more complexity than a simplistic approach would warrant. Defining understandings of what religious engagement involves is obviously needed by the pertinent institutions; measures to develop better data about religious institutions and activities, as well research to enhance understanding of the impact of varying levels of religiosity is a priority need, as is stronger evidence about how religious experience intersects with other dimensions (for example evolution of private markets for health and education).

The key questions, though, are often subtle and call for nuanced reflection and dialogue: what new ideas does appreciation of religious roles bring? And what are the implications for policy and action? How can constructive voices best be identified, amidst what can seem a cacophony? Some religious actors are at leading edge of global reflections: true prophets. Some, however, conform to stereotyped images of patriarchy, support for autocratic regimes, and resistance to change. While it is important to understand the concerns of and work with formal leaders and institutions, it is equally important to seek out religiously linked women, younger voices, and different, often emerging types of institutions and leaders. New geopolitical roles of religious actors on topics like fighting atrocities can also have significance for development work.<sup>14</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi offered wise advice in his admonition to seek the best in religious teachings and institutions (for example the focus on solidarity and compassion), while ignoring what is less fine, for example discrimination like caste and racial bias. Similar counsel is pertinent both for religious actors committed to implementation of the SDG framework and working to address global issues and to the development actors who seek to engage with them as partners.

14 Faith central to hope and resilience, highlights UN chief, launching initiative to combat atrocities. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57183#.WWpTy9PysO>

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