

Faith Matters in International Development Cooperation

Report on the International Consultation on Religion and Development, 15-18 Dec 2014, Berlin

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1. More than 50 international experts from Christian development organizations and churches, coming from 25 countries, discussed some leading issues in religion and development during a consultation which was held from 15-18 December 2014 in Berlin. The consultation was co-organized by Bread for the World and the Lutheran World Federation. Participants included practitioners in development cooperation, researchers, policy makers and also key representatives from government agencies like German ministry for development (BMZ) , the EU parliament and commission. A selected number of key representatives from ecumenical partner churches and organizations in Africa, Latin America and Asia were present as well. The participants raised crucial questions concerning the understanding of partnership and emerging concepts of development and how to strengthen collaboration and sharing of resources informed by religion in development.
2. Participants realized that major regional and international actors in development cooperation in recent years have emphasized the need for the re-assessment and new appreciation of the role of religious ideas, religious communities and religious practices for and in development. While in the past the role of religion(s) was sidelined and not really taken seriously for several decades due to the dominance of the ‘secularization thesis’ and the modernization approach as the leading development paradigm within western development discourses after World War II, the intersection of religion and development has become increasingly important today. There is a growing realization that since the majority of the world’s populations, and those for whom development initiatives are undertaken construe their world of ideas, values and daily practices informed by religion, such an orientation needs to be comprehensively engaged if development is to be sustainable through local ownership.
3. There was consensus of this central role of religion in development among the participants. These comprised of academics, religious leaders and institutions of higher learning engaged in pioneering work on the interface of religion and development, some of which are involved in research, others in awareness raising efforts and others in policy advocacy, but all informed by a clear understanding of the potential of religion for either good or bad. It was also observed that the work and findings of these leading scholars and the good practices of the development actors from the religious sector to a large extent remain scattered, unconsolidated and often not fully noticed by relevant actors. The potential of local religious institutions for development still is under-researched while the value-added function of religion in development can and should be properly supported by evidence.
4. It was also noted that the recent ‘religious turn’ in development is a bag of mixed fortunes. The complex and manifold history of mutual misconceptions and prejudices between religious and political actors remains. In many developing countries, religion, especially the less critical

versions, is being easily co-opted into service to entrench hegemony or consumerism. Within western development studies (both the theory and practice), when embraced, religion is often presented as a handmaid to the prevailing economic paradigm which it must endorse uncritically or which it can serve as a raw material. Where it is rejected, it is seen as a nuisance that must be removed from the scene if full development is to be attained. It was affirmed by many experts that actors in the development field need more religious literacy in order to properly understand how religion contributes to human progress and human rights and that new actors in the religious field have to be more intentionally integrated into development policies and decision making. The conference therefore emphasized both deliberate attempts to increase the “religious literacy” of staff in developmental organizations as well as in politics in issues of religion and development, and also recommended further dialogue on how to translate factors and indicators of religious life in context assessments (national expertise papers) as well as in project criteria so as to contribute to mainstreaming the insights of the religion and development debates in current project processing.

5. The consultation underlined the need for a balanced and differentiated view of both religion(s) and development. While religion is certainly not the only and readymade ‘answer’ to eradicating poverty or overcoming global injustices, clear approaches should be forged for authentic engagement by development actors with religion. Here religion is viewed as a legitimate partner of development with a great potential to enhance development outcomes not to be merely defined in terms of a traditional modernization agenda and primary economic growth orientation. Both the concept and perception of religion as well as the concept of development need re- definition, constant checking and critical re-interpretation, as there are “good” and “constructive” concepts and understandings of religion as well as of development and at the same time also distorted, misguided and destructive concepts of both religion and development. The conference was convinced that the re-definition of holistic and integral “development” and transformation which currently is sought for by many actors, needs vital and strategic input from religious traditions, as fundamental value decisions about the guiding principles of human and ecological developments at stake today. As the traditional “development” language is disappearing and the language of “human dignity for all” is moving towards the centre it is even more important that religious organizations articulate their own specific understanding of human dignity and a new concept of development.
6. The conference was taking place at a moment when dominant assumptions of the ‘secularization’, ‘privatization’ and ‘regionalization’ of religion, especially in the West, are slowly giving way. Religion is no longer wholly assumed to be something relating only to the private sphere of life or a personal relationship to some supernatural deity. Religion both in history and in the present has immense implications for the value systems within societies as well as for actions to alleviate poverty and to promote justice and human rights. With globalization and rapid movements of people from one region to the other, religion can no longer be seen as something only of relevance for the so-called “developing countries” in the global South. It is now accepted by many development actors across the globe that in light of the 2015 sustainable development discourse, religion will have a critical function for the future of life on this planet both for countries in the global North as well as for those in the global South. The North will need to learn the value of religion in the process of integration of many

migrants while learning again the notion of holistic living necessary for sustainable economies informed by the religious concepts of the sacredness of creation. The South will also learn the value of critical engagement with faith in order to minimize its potential for excesses and distortion of human dignity. We need to be prepared for a new global, honest, participatory and comprehensive conversation between North and South, East and West about the critical role of religion for development. In the face of growing religious extremism there is no alternative than to increase collaboration between all moderate actors in the field of religion and an approach to development which is oriented towards human rights and the dignity of human beings.

7. This conference also was taking place in a context in which faith-based organizations have adopted the institutionalization and professionalization of development cooperation informed by the secular results and impact logic. These faith based organizations, for their own survival, will need to demonstrate what special contribution and added value they make both in their faith based conception of development as well as in their models of cooperation with partners, most of whom tend to be receivers of donor funding. Many studies to redefine the two aspects have been produced and others are still being produced, but there is no particular system currently to consolidate this new self-understanding of FBOs. The new international debate on religion and development also includes the chance and need for Christian development organizations to clearly spell out what their specific added value and specific conceptual perspectives are in the context and wider global landscape of development organizations.

The conference in looking towards the global year of special summits in 2015 relating to development issues saw a special *kairos* to spread and translate religion and development perspectives into global policies on development. The example from the German Ministry for Development Cooperation about the broad-based consultative process in German society on the “Charta for the Future: One World – Our Responsibility”¹ was seen as a very important model to organize a common reflection process on actual goals of development in a social context in the global North, which can also serve as example for similar processes in Asia and Africa and Latin America. For the follow up process of the Berlin conference it was suggested to bring together researchers, scholars, practitioners and religious institutions for continued fruitful engagement in issues of religion and development in the period past 2015. The conference mentioned that the year 2015 will have major international events with a deliberate focus on development cooperation (climate justice Paris, new SGDs New York). It should be explored how and with what targeted objectives key players in the field of FBOs should raise their voices together on issues which are of strategic importance for the future of humankind. One of the key question always is: Who is at the table? Who invites und who is invited to the table? Who is excluded from the common table?

8. The conference did some substantial work in 10 thematic seminar groups which discussed the following areas of interest:
 - a) Religion, peace and conflict solution;
 - b) The interface between human rights, religious identity and moral values;
 - c) Development and freedom of religion;

¹ See: <https://www.zukunftscharta.de/ecm-politik/zukunftscharta/de/home/file/fileId/2954>

- d) Religious resources for sustainable development;
- e) Religion, Gender and development;
- f) Evidencing the intersection of religion and development;
- g) Interfaith partnerships in development;
- h) New religious movements and their role in development;
- i) Religious identities, impartiality and humanitarian aid;
- j) Strategic capacity building and leadership training in religion and development.

9. Out of this experience several important thematic areas were identified for which religion can be regarded key and for which further global networking and exchange is needed in order to continue research, dialogue and collaboration. As some of the most urgent thematic fields which the conference recommend for further action and reflection processes the following were listed:

- a) Religion, conflict and peace-building
- b) Religious values and transformation in economics, politics and society
- c) Religious health assets and new thinking on partnership
- d) Religion, gender, childhood and broader personhood construction
- e) Evidencing the intersection of religion and development on national and regional levels (national expertise papers; indicators for religious assets in social transformation; tools to introduce religious and cultural factors in project management)
- f) Interreligious dialogue and the concept and practice of development
- g) Religion and sustainability of life
- h) Religion, human rights and shared life
- i) New religious movements (new churches) and a new terminology of development
- j) Religious extremism, terrorism and the information age
- k) Religion, humanitarian aid, development and institutional capacity of religions
- l) Religion and strategic leadership for churches and nation-building
- m) Pedagogies of change, education for transformation in the intersection of religion and development

10. The conference suggested to establish a strategic Global Religion and Development collaboration platform and appointed a continuation committee of 8 persons to oversee the process of establishing this network with a tentative name *“International Network of Studies and Action in Religion and Development”* (INSARD). The network would be built within the ACT alliance model of “community of practice” with the LWF and Bread for the World taking organizational lead. The platform will mainly aim at (a) increasing the visibility and role of religion in development discourse, research, practice and policy (b) enabling the sharing of information and resources related to religion and development, (c) establishing collaborative processes among faith-based development academics, actors, and institutions in the north and south in order to avoid the duplication of efforts. Some of the most imminent needs and steps proposed for follow up of the conference were the following:

- a) to establish and consolidate the many scattered efforts of existing information sharing and religion and development networks with some already identified during the conference to plan for issue related thematic conferences as a follow up (might be one every second year),

- to focus on certain more specific issues and selected regions (like: gender, religion and development; religion, popular movements and development; human rights, religion and development; new churches and development; interreligious dialogue on development);
- b) To plan for an initiative for strategic leadership formation in the area of religion and development/ theology of enough/theology of sustainability (International Institute for Leadership Formation in Religion and Development);
 - c) To share resources and course outlines/curriculums of training courses on theology and development/religion and development, including an updated annotated bibliography;
 - d) To share new textbooks on religion and development and guides for developmental staff (like the ones produced by Church of Sweden).

The conference was seen as a very successful, rich and motivating platform of exchange and mutual learning which will have repercussions in various direct and indirect levels. Keynote lecture and resources from group work were made available on a common website.²

² See: <http://www.globethics.net/web/religion-and-development?layoutPlid=13227594>