Religious Literacy in Development Cooperation
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Worldwide there is renewed interest in the role of religion and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in development cooperation. The notion is growing that people’s actions are based on their values and motivations, and religion is a major source of inspiration.

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the importance of including all stakeholders in the process towards a world without poverty and marginalization. Where over 80% of the world’s population adhere to religious convictions, FBOs have unique potential and ability to mobilize many people. They are part of the broader civil society arena where civilians organize freely to address issues such as values, solidarity, development, leisure, and other shared interests. Increasingly, FBOs and their critical solidarity networks are aligning their work in the fields of development cooperation and humanitarian aid with the 2030 Agenda. They are acknowledging its relevance, and contributing their own unique and autonomous voices and strengths towards programs and public policies that are working towards the fulfillment of the SDGs.

Themes such as ‘Religion and Development’ and ‘Religious Literacy’ are high on the shared agenda of religious actors and other stakeholders working on the 2030 Agenda.

Civic Engagement Alliance and Civic Space

The Civic Engagement Alliance is an alliance of Dutch faith-based organizations operating in strategic partnership with the Dutch Government to focus on lobbying and advocacy. Through its networks and contacts, the Alliance has a presence at local, national and international level. Enhancing civic space for civil society organizations, including FBOs, underlies all programs of the Civic Engagement Alliance. In their advocacy work, the members of the Alliance aim to connect the issue of enhancing civic space in general with the specific roles FBOs can play to support and augment this space.
Religion is Back on the Agenda, Be it with Hesitations

As some terrorist and other groups promote their own interests in the name of religion, it is not uncommon for FBOs to be regarded with suspicion by some societies and duty bearers. Contrary to the inclusive aims of the 2030 Agenda, there is a tendency among national governments towards growing mistrust of the role of civil society actors at large. This may come as a reaction to destructive forces, but it can also become a way of strengthening a power base and consolidating the interests of selected groups of people. One consequence is that the operational space of civil society organizations is being progressively limited: specific counter-terrorism measures limit more than just terrorist groups.

Nevertheless, with their core values, FBOs can play an important role in strengthening the constructive forces in society. Moreover, religious actors may be the first to recognize when people try to make misuse of religious convictions purely for their own political or individual interests. The specific religious sensibility of constructive religious actors may help to recognize at an early stage the unjust efforts of others to re-sacralize societies and the misplaced creation of new mechanisms of exclusion. They often play a decisive role in the creation of truly tolerant societies that are based on the acceptance of differences and inclusion for all.

The role and position of FBOs is also still widely disregarded on another front. In the predominantly secular western worldview of development cooperation, FBOs are often not acknowledged as actors in their own right and for the strengths they possess. This is a persistent and worrying blind spot in mainstream development theory, policy and practice, not the least because many people in the West know less about religion. FBOs are often absent in stakeholder analysis, power analysis and theories of change, simply because the dominant development frames lack specific antennas for these actors. Furthermore, there is still a dominant perception that associates religion with conflict, or with conservatism, rather than with positive forces that strengthen society.

However, despite these realities, opportunities to work together and join forces to enhance just and sustainable societies are growing.

Dr Azza Karam

While we see a growing interest in the role of religion and religious actors in achieving the SDGs, at the same time there is a lack of knowledge on the concrete input that religious actors offer to help create just, participatory, and resilient societies. More insight is essential and secular western countries and organizations need that knowledge.

For this reason, the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the VU Amsterdam and development organizations ICCO and ACT Alliance established an extraordinary chair in Religion and Sustainable Development in January 2019. Dr Karam will hold the chair for the next five years. She is also a senior Advisor on Culture at the United Nations Population Fund and Chair of the UN Task Force on Religion.
Enhancing Religious Literacy

Critical to a definition of religious literacy in relation to development cooperation and humanitarian aid, is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences in their context and as being inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience. Religious literacy is not simply a way of understanding other beliefs and cultures; rather it is based on a genuine interest in and critical solidarity with religious people and the values that move them.

It is critically important that decision-makers and development planners enhance religious literacy so we can come to a matter-of-fact attitude towards FBOs, relinquishing prejudices on the one hand and too high expectations on the other. At the same time, staff of FBOs may need to learn more about how to translate faith language into the idiom and values that prevail in development cooperation circles. Religious literacy may also help to distinguish between religion and religious actors that are a constructive force and those that manipulate religion for their own interests and transform it into an instrument of destruction, exclusion and misuse of power.

Ethiopia: Creating Space for Change

“Much of our land had become degraded because of extensive farming,” explains Bereket Tassew, Director of the TDA, a partner of ICCO Cooperation. “When it rained, it would wash the top layer of the land away. Rain is also very erratic in Ethiopia and there can be long periods of drought. When the rain fails, farmers would have a significant drop in production or even lose their harvest altogether. This significantly reduced the food security of many smallholder farmers.”

TDA introduced a new and simple soil management technique that meets the needs of poor farmers who cannot afford an ox and plough. The method also responds to the needs of women farmers who are excluded by cultural norms from ploughing the land with oxen. When the new technique met with resistance, TDA decided to actively involve the local church in their efforts. The church not only supported the project by providing land; local pastors also talked to congregation members about the importance of sustainable farming, using biblical stories as a source of inspiration. The church proved to be the best ‘way into’ the community, as most farmers were congregation members. “The people often trust churches more than the government,” explains Tassew.

♥ Farmer in Ethiopia. Photo: ACT/Paul Jeffrey
The Strengths of Faith-Based Organizations

FBOs have specific characteristics that are of importance in development work and humanitarian aid.

**Presence**
Most FBOs have a longstanding relationship with the local communities they work in, work with and work for. They are part of the communities. They speak their language, know their problems, ambitions and strengths. They are often the first to respond when disasters occur, and humanitarian aid is needed – and they stay when other aid organizations leave. Their enduring presence also enables them to adopt a process approach that goes beyond the short-term intervention approach of many development programs.

**Indonesia: Cooperation for Effective Lobbying**
Some years ago, PESDAM, a local NGO that works with indigenous people, visited the four main FBOs in Indonesia, including PGI, the Council of Churches in Indonesia. They wanted to lobby the government to change the Law on Civil Administration, which includes regulations on identity cards and sought the support of the main religious organizations. Where the identity cards asked for people’s religious affiliation, indigenous religions were not permitted.

Having to fill in ‘no religion’ makes indigenous people vulnerable to discrimination and violation of their rights, including their land rights. Rather than the current option available to indigenous people, which is to leave the religion box on their identity card (KTP) blank, the four FBOs demanded the complete removal of the box. “Religion should not play a role,” explained Henry Lokra from PGI. “The KTP should show your name, age and address, yes, but not your religion!” Thanks to the joint statement by the four main FBOs, the government was willing to engage in dialogue on the issue with civil society and is currently discussing ways to review the Law on Civil Administration. Thus, by reaching out and gaining the support of FBOs, the local NGO PESDAM managed to gain access to the government. Conversely, by supporting this lobby, FBOs are enhancing the space for civil society and indigenous people and their land rights throughout Indonesia.

**Responding to deeper layers of conviction**
FBOs are able to address the deeper layers of conviction and belief and are able to work on real sustainable change by accessing people's deepest morality through the questions, doubts and anxieties that arise at this level. FBOs are able to translate moral convictions into concrete and just policy proposals. FBOs go beyond the technical approach that characterizes much of development cooperation. Their approach is holistic. Without appealing to these deeper layers, developmental change may remain too superficial and runs the risk of not being sustainable. Touching the hearts and souls of people helps to root desired change in solid ground.

▲ Women in Sulawesi dancing after the earthquake in 2018.  
Photo: ACT/Simon Chambers
Part of strategic networks
Through their networks, FBOs are able to link up the grassroots level with local, national and international levels. They can speak with authority. They often represent a vast constituency, and the voice of religious leaders is broadly respected by politicians and society. An influential global faith-based network is the ACT Alliance, a coalition of 152 churches and church-related organizations working together in over 125 countries.

Kenya: Win-Wins as a Result of Innovative Cooperation
Child labor is a substantial problem in rural Western Kenya. Children drop out of primary school to work as cheap day laborers and girls face pressure to marry early. The Children at Risk coalition was formed to eradicate all child labor and to ensure the right to education for all children. The coalition is composed of local civil society organizations and FBOs.

Partnering with a church was new for KAACR, a secular child rights NGO that wants to distance itself from identifying with any religion because they believe in the right to education for all children, irrespective of their religious background. Partnering with a secular NGO was equally new for the African Divine Church (ADC) and other local churches that got involved in the program. “It comes down to partnership. KAACR has molded [‘enriched’] us...,” said a pastor of the African Divine Church. As a church, we are growing. Then as we grow, other people are also growing in the County of Kisumu.”

Likewise, KAACR needed the churches for their sheer strength in terms of community outreach and mobilization. John Uduoro from KAACR: “One serious difference they have with us is the power to mobilize. They have meetings with over a hundred people. We have trained all pastors on child rights advocacy. Besides, where the bishops and pastors learnt to speak the language of rights, lobbying and advocacy, our staff members learnt about the power of religious sermons and prayer.”

If You Need Us, Allow Us
‘If You Need US, Allow Us’ is a field and desk study commissioned by the Civic Engagement Alliance and written by Annette Jansen. The report is the product of many: farmers, women, church leaders, Muslim representatives, teachers, young activists, academics and development staff in North Central Java, Western Kenya, Ethiopia and the Netherlands. The full report can be found on the website www.civicengagementalliance.org
How Can We Handle Religion in Our Work?

Based on the experience of ten country programs and the report 'If You Need us, Allow Us' (see Box on page 5) the Civic Engagement Alliance makes the following recommendations:

1. On FBOs and the localization agenda
More emphasis on FBOs as part of civil society in southern countries is paramount and part of the much needed localization agenda. The central position of local people’s organizations, FBOs and other civil society organizations at the forefront of creating sustainable development must be strengthened in all future development cooperation. Southern people and their organizations need to have more voice in public policy decisions that affect their lives. This implies reducing the space for donor-driven agendas and increasing space and ownership for local and southern-driven agendas. Being strongly connected with southern FBOs, the Civic Engagement Alliance can play an important role in brokering cooperation between strategic southern FBOs and northern counterparts and donors (governments, back-donors).

► The Alliance offers expertise, contacts and case-based training for embassy staff.

2. On religious literacy
The Civic Engagement Alliance challenges donors, governments and other duty bearers to better connect with FBOs in order to mutually improve their performance and effectiveness. Enhancing the religious literacy of donors, planners and field workers will help to establish mutual understanding and cooperation. Development planning tools (stakeholder analysis, power analysis, context analysis, etc.) need to include assessments of the role of religion and FBOs.

► The Civic Engagement Alliance offers its support in regard to religious literacy and in helping to improve development planning tools.

3. On strengthening interfaith cooperation
Interfaith cooperation has proved to be a very relevant factor for augmenting space for civil society and improving its impact in some countries. The Civic Engagement Alliance urges decision makers and other duty bearers to actively foster interfaith cooperation and cooperation between FBOs and other civil society organizations. This sharing of power, ideas and visions will break open closed or diminished spaces, offering new and innovative opportunities.

► The Civic Engagement Alliance offers its service to support the process of strengthening interfaith cooperation on development issues, including stronger cooperation between faith organizations and non-faith organizations, and with duty bearers and other stakeholders.
Civic Engagement Alliance is a joint collaboration in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Address:

Address:

% ICCO Cooperation
P.O. Box 8190
3503 RD Utrecht, Netherlands

T: +31 30 69277911
E: e.urban@icco.nl
I: www.civicengagementalliance.org