

Religion and Development

Rick James
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Why would you want to mix religion with development? They appear to be completely different things – at best incompatible; at worst highly combustible. After all some strands of religion have an overtly political agenda, while other strands promote or condone violence, including terrorism. In some instances religions promote discrimination against women, children and other marginalised groups. Many religious communities have an evangelising agenda. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the aid system has sought to keep a safe separation between religion and development.

However, most major aid agencies have recognised the limitations of such a strategy. By ignoring the underlying religious beliefs that shape attitudes in most parts of the world, ‘secular’ development has not had the impact on human behaviour that it hoped for. Further, treating religion as irrelevant has not prevented the emergence of extremism. Increasingly, aid agencies are moving from ‘estrangement to engagement’ with religion.

There are a number of compelling reasons for this shift, some of which are highlighted in the suggested readings:

- Faith-based organisations (FBOs) are already focal points in communities and have a strong track-record of delivering services. Approximately 40% of health services in Sub-Saharan Africa are provided by faith groups¹. FBOs have the capacity to reach the most rural and deprived areas through the extensive networks of religious communities and, unlike many NGOs, have a long-term, sustainable presence. Further, faith groups elicit motivated and voluntary service, making them highly efficient in delivering services such as health and education.
- In many cultures, faith is the foundation of the social and cultural systems that inform people’s worldviews. Embracing human

Dr Rick James has worked with faith-based organisations in development for 25 years largely in Africa, Latin America and Europe. He has been with INTRAC since its inception in 1992 and has consulted for more than 100 international aid agencies and FBOs. His focus is on faith identity, organisational change and leadership development. Rick has published more than 50 articles and seven books including: ‘Inspiring Change’; ‘Capacity building for NGOs: Making it work’ and ‘Demystifying Organisation Development’. He is an Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Management, CASS Business School, London University, where he co-directs an NGO Management Masters course.

¹ World Health Organization. (2007). *Towards primary health care: Renewing partnerships with faith-based communities and services*. Geneva: WHO.

development requires taking these worldviews seriously. The World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' study (2000) found that *religious leaders and institutions are often the most trusted institutions in developing countries*. Support from religious leaders can be necessary to ensure community involvement and ownership in development projects, and also to alter harmful customs and encourage good practices if they are convinced.

- Throughout history *religious groups been at the forefront of advocacy* including in the civil rights movement in the US, the Jubilee 2000 Debt Campaign, and the frequent religion-led resistance to dictatorships in Asia, Latin America and Africa.²

Engaging with religion needs to be handled with care; donors, agencies and NGOs need to clarify non-negotiable, bottom-line criteria before partnering with FBOs or faith groups. For example, supporting terrorism; overt involvement in sectarian politics; using government money for evangelising. The literature below emphasises how critical it is to actively engage with religion on a case-by-case basis, rather than falling into simplistic stereotypes. Effective engagement requires a certain level of commitment. Aid agencies need to view religious groups as equal partners, rather than use them for their own instrumental ends. This also requires a level of understanding or faith literacy as some call it. Different stakeholders need to genuinely seek to understand the other and withhold personal prejudices and assumptions.

In working with religions in development it is important to find shared priorities and to establish shared language and values - but this does not mean agreeing with faith-based organisations (FBOs) on every point. There may be considerable areas of perceived and actual difference, such as the place of spiritual development; the link between religion and politics; attitudes towards LGBT rights; approaches to reproductive health issues, condoms/HIV, and gender. Rather than sweep these under the carpet or treat them as insurmountable obstacles, effective engagement between religion and development requires open, constructive discussion of these differences. And where appropriate, agreeing to differ, but choosing to cooperate anyway.

Key readings

Reading 1: DFID. (2012). *Faith partnership principles: Working effectively with faith groups to fight global poverty*. London, UK: Department for International Development.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67352/faith-partnership-principles.pdf

DFID's own Faith Partnership Principles is a useful starting point. The document aims to strengthen and guide DFID's future relations and collaboration with faith groups on international development. It highlights the benefits of working with faith groups and outlines the nature of DFID's existing partnerships with FBOs. The document is a statement of intent that acknowledges the issues and challenges. It focuses on building a common understanding of faith and development; documenting the impact of faith groups through systematic research; and working through difficult areas such as contraception, gay rights, abortion, capital punishment and gender equality.

Reading 2: James, R. (2011). Handle with care: Engaging with faith-based organisations in development. *Development in Practice* 21 (1).

<http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/625/Handle-With-Care-Engaging-with-faith-based-organisations.pdf>

² Clarke, G. and Jennings, M. (2008). *Development, civil society and faith-based organisations*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

This paper outlines the unique, potential contributions of faith-based organisations to development. It analyses the factors that have contributed to the growing interest of many official agencies in engaging with FBOs, and also highlights the ambivalence of this engagement when they are unable to overcome the inherent challenges of working with diverse religious groups. The paper recommends improved faith literacy so that official agencies and secular NGOs have the necessary understanding to intervene productively in the complex realities of religion and development.

Reading 3: Tomalin, E. (2012). Thinking about faith-based organisations in development: Where have we got to and what next? *Development in Practice* 22 (5-6).
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09614524.2012.686600>

This paper takes stock of current thinking about the nature and distinctiveness of FBOs in development. While many of the available studies portray them as having comparative advantages over so-called secular organisations, this paper concludes that such a generalisation over-simplifies reality, particularly in the absence of convincing evidence. Tomalin recommends further assessments of the characteristics, roles, and activities of all types of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assist in the choice of development partners and to test claims of distinctiveness and comparative advantage.

Reading 4: Karam, A. (2012). *Religion, development and the United Nations*. Brooklyn: Social Science Research Council.
https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/%7BEB4B29C9-501D-E211-BB1A-001CC477EC84%7D.pdf

Discussion section: https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/%7BEB4B29C9-501D-E211-BB1A-001CC477EC84%7D.pdf#page=19

This paper summarises the results of consultations with representatives of various agencies of UN, leaders of FBOs and academic researchers. It details the importance, and the challenges, of working with FBOs. It explores how language and structural differences make engagement difficult and recommends more creative solutions. The discussion section analyses the particular issues of partnership building, women, and research. It concludes that although religion is not to blame for the repression of women's rights, some religious institutions and leaders still articulate positions that reflect lingering forms of repression and sexism.

Reading 5: UNFPA. (2014). Overview. *Religion and development post-2015*. New York City: UNFPA.
<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/DONOR-UN-FBO%20May%202014.pdf#page=19>

Key takeaways when working in day-to-day partnership with FBOs:

<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/DONOR-UN-FBO%20May%202014.pdf#page=68>

This report analyses the relationship between religions and the SDGs. It highlights the necessity of parity between partners and the need to remove the false dichotomy between secular and faith-based organisations – as religion is about society and therefore concerns everyone. It encourages recognising both the potentials and risks of engaging with religion in development and recommends

proceeding on a case-by-case basis that discards simplistic notions of homogeneity between, and within, different religions.

Reading 6: Knowledge Centre Religion and Development. (2011). *Religion and development: practitioners' guide*. The Netherlands: Knowledge Centre Religion and Development.
<http://www.religion-and-development.nl/documents/publications/practitioners-%20guide%20def.pdf>

Know your context: <http://www.religion-and-development.nl/documents/publications/practitioners-%20guide%20def.pdf#page=24>

Know yourself: <http://www.religion-and-development.nl/documents/publications/practitioners-%20guide%20def.pdf#page=54>

This practitioner guide insists that the positive and negative effects of FBOs cannot be viewed as two separate entities, but must be engaged with simultaneously. It advocates: being alert to religion; listening carefully and postponing judgement; and being aware of your own world view, particularly of how your ideas about religion and development influence your opinion of others.

Questions to guide reading

- To what extent does the available evidence support the claim that it is vital for development agencies to collaborate with religious groups?
- What are the main benefits for development agencies to engage with religion? What are the most significant risks?
- When partnering with an FBO does it matter that your long-term visions may not be compatible, even if your short-term goals are the same? To what extent can there be a genuine partnership if there are two different, competing models of development?
- Does partnership with an FBO necessarily suggest the condoning of all their values? What about LGBT rights? Is there a line beyond which it is impossible to find common ground? What are the non-negotiables?
- In fragile states is the case for engaging with religious groups more, or less, compelling? Does the involvement of an FBO in humanitarianism contradict basic principles such as impartiality, independence and neutrality?
- To what extent is the FBO integrity and relationship with local populations at field-level inherently compromised by scaling up and receiving government funds?
- What are your own beliefs and personal experiences of religion that you naturally bring into this topic? How do they influence your response?