

Governmental donor agencies and faith-based organizations

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Abstract

For decades it has been taboo to mention the role played by religious organizations in development cooperation. Today, however, there is growing awareness of the contribution that these organizations can make to sustainable development, just as there is of the risk they pose of abuse and conflict aggravation. Those involved in development therefore have to learn to cope with the double-edged nature of these organizations. Government donor agencies and faith-based organizations should jointly monitor their work in conflict-prone areas to ascertain whether it fosters peaceful settlement of conflict or whether, in fact, it aggravates the violence.

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In 1949, US President Harold Truman launched a secularized missionary idea by giving the go-ahead for the invention of “development aid” by Western governments. Against the background of the East-West conflict, his belief was that political and social change for “underdeveloped” countries should be brought about by the transfer of capital and Western technology. Long before this appeal Christian missionaries had already been working for improvements in agriculture, education and health. Missionary societies were therefore among the first institutions in the 1950s and 1960s to become partners of the newly created

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governmental donor agencies (GDAs). In addition a whole generation of a new type of Christian development NGOs were founded. To this day a considerable proportion of governmental development aid supports the programmes of Christian missionary societies and Christian development NGOs.

Development cooperation by Western governments is strongly influenced by the constitutional framework with its separation of political and religious power. This principle excludes the co-financing of religious and missionary activities of NGOs by GDAs. In reality, however, development projects of given communities can be closely linked with religious activities such as Bible reading and the preaching of the Gospel. Under those circumstances the borderline to proselytism is not easy to define.

It is worth noting that for several decades the role of religion in development cooperation, be it between GDAs and NGOs or between Western NGOs and their local partners, was a taboo subject.¹ This explains in part why the general level of analysis and knowledge of the extent, methods and impact of cooperation between governmental agencies and faith-based organizations (FBOs) is low.²

It was not until the late 1990s that a revival of the debate took place, centred on two fundamental questions:

1. “How should religion and spirituality be brought into global public policy?”
2. “How should better use be made of the potential of religion and spirituality in development cooperation?”

The first question led to the creation of new links for inter-religious and interfaith dialogue with and within the United Nations. In response to the second question, James D. Wolfensohn (then President of the World Bank) and George Carey (then Archbishop of Canterbury) invited in 1998 to a first meeting of Faith Leaders. This led to the establishment of the “World Faiths Development Dialogue” (WFDD) as a platform for consultation with representatives of major faith traditions about issues related to poverty reduction (PRSP). In 2001, WFDD published a paper setting out ways in which culture and spirituality may be taken into account in development processes.³

Meanwhile a growing awareness can be observed that development work is largely inter-cultural work and that religion is a relevant factor in a given cultural setting. Where religion and spirituality are rooted in the everyday life of people and society, they can make an important contribution to sustainable development – but religion can also be misused to enhance conflicts.

A broad research agenda on religious NGOs was recently proposed by the participants in an international conference held in Oslo on 7-8 April 2005,

- 1 Kurt Alan Ver Beek, “Spirituality: A development taboo”, *Development in Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2000.
- 2 Katherine Marshall and Lucy Keough, *Mind, Heart, and Soul in the Fight against Poverty*, The World Bank, 2004, Chapter 1.
- 3 Thierry Verhelst with Wendy Tyndale, “Cultures, spirituality, and development,” in Deborah Eade (ed.), *Development and Culture*, Oxfam, GB, 2002, p. 13.

comprising the following topics for research: origin, growth, impact, role and types of operations of religious NGOs; their relation to the State, as well as to issues of global governance, human rights, health and advocacy; changing socio-political contexts; evangelism & development; and political content of religion.

In contemporary European societies GDAs are confronted with the transformation of their social environment by immigration. The UK Department for International Development (DFID), for example, is systematically enlarging its cooperation with UK-based mosques, synagogues and Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist temples for awareness work in the UK and to build support for development in those communities, both within the UK and beyond.

Similarly, the NGO Division of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Swiss NGOs started a project in 2002 designed to explore the role and significance of religion and spirituality in development cooperation.⁴ The overall objective is to obtain a holistic understanding of the religious factor in the discourse on normative, strategic and operative questions between partners in development, be they GDAs, secular NGOs, FBOs, grassroots organizations or the target groups of development projects. The project is now entering its third phase, with case studies on creative handling of the ambivalence of the religious factor in the development context and with networking between the SDC/NGO Section's project team and international fora.

Thinking about basic concepts

It was mentioned above that "development aid" is a Western invention. Today the international discourse on development is still dominated by Western thinking.⁵ Representatives of GDAs and FBOs that are willing to engage in cooperation with each other should be aware that their partners of non-European cultures may have an entirely different understanding of many of the more basic concepts involved.

One example is the concept of "religion." On account of its history it is Eurocentric in nature. In most languages of non-European cultures the term has no exact equivalent, either semantically or in content.⁶ Thus development

4 The project is conducted by Anne-Marie Holenstein, consultant. For the results in phases 1 and 2, see her study entitled *Role and Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Development Co-operation: A Reflection and Working Paper*. This publication is available in print in English, French (June 2005), German and Spanish from <info@deza.admin.ch> (last visited 27 June 2005) and as a pdf-file on the SDC's website <www.deza.admin.ch> (last visited 27 June 2005).

5 Development is: for the Baha'is: "... laying the foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness" (ICOREC, 1998); for the Hindus: "a process of enabling a sustainable livelihood in harmony with natural resources, as a foundation for spiritual progress"; for the Taoists: "harmony or a right balance must be the key ingredient of any developmental goals, the balance between rich and poor, and between human society and the whole universe." From: Astrid Stückelberger, "The neglected reality of development: New trends and features in the international development debate", paper presented at a workshop held by the SDC/NGO Division, Bern, 9 October 2002.

6 Compare Hans-Michael Haussig, *Der Religionsbegriff in den Religionen*, Philo, Berlin and Mainz 1999, pp. 4 and 18.

cooperation in practice has to contend with a far more complex set of relationships determined by religion and culture than the history and use of language of Western Europe would seem to imply. In their cooperation with partners⁷ and participants⁸ from different cultural settings, Western people should not assume from the start that the religious factor can be isolated from the general context of life.⁹

Partners in development should also be aware that the separation between the institutions of political and religious power – between the State and the Christian churches – is specific to the history of Western Europe and North America. This relationship between the secular order and religious belief developed during centuries of conflict between the popes, emperors and kings and through the Reformation and the Enlightenment. It has formed the framework of the Western social order and secular constitutions. State-supported development cooperation is also interlinked with this constitutional framework.

Yet it is important to distinguish between “secularization processes” and “secular system.” The secular system of a State does not necessarily presuppose a non-religious society or the exclusion of cooperation between GDAs and FBOs. A secular system frees the State from being patronized by religion, but it also frees religion and religious communities from patronization by the State.

Human rights concepts likewise vary according to their cultural environment. Some religious communities derive their canon of human rights directly from their religion. Advocates of universal human rights claim, however, that human rights can never be validated exclusively on religious grounds, and that their universality is instead derived directly from the value and dignity of every single person. There is an urgent need for further consideration of how much consensus on human rights is required, as a precondition for cooperation, in the dialogue between partners and more specifically of how this consensus can be reached.

It would be wrong to conclude that partners from GDAs and FBOs first of all have to reach a general agreement on these very basic concepts. The crucial factor is rather whether they can find a tentative common value base which

7 Partners = partner organizations on the spot, i.e. both NGOs and grassroots organizations.

8 Participants = beneficiaries, target groups of development and humanitarian projects.

9 The following episode illustrates this. In the course of a research project on “Religion and modernization in Singapore,” a specialist on the sociology of religion interviewed a young Indian woman living in Singapore. The Indian woman came from an immigrant Brahmin family with a rich Hindu tradition. At the end, she said:

“You have asked me to tell you how I understand myself as a Hindu. I have responded to this request to my very best. But, please, do not understand all that as if I have talked to you about my ‘religion’. I have passed through a Western system of education here in Singapore, and I think I know quite well how you Western people are used to think about man and God and about ‘religion’. So I talked to you as if ‘Hinduism’ were my ‘religion’, so that you may be able to understand what I mean. If you were a Hindu yourself, I would have talked to you in quite a different fashion, and I am sure both of us would have laughed about the idea that something like ‘Hinduism’ does even exist. Please, don’t forget this when analysing all the stuff you have on your tape.”

From: “Religion: eine europäisch-christliche Erfindung?” Beiträge eines Symposiums am Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Haussig et al. (eds.), Berlin 2003, p. 14.

is sound enough for the implementation of a given programme. The test for its soundness is whether it allows partners to handle problems linked to the ambivalence of the religious factor.

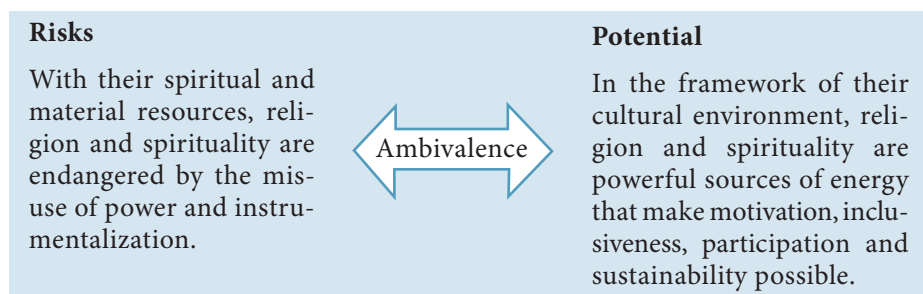
Dealing with the ambivalence of the religious factor

Religions and faith communities can be effective as “angels of peace” and as “warmongers.” This ambivalence of the religious factor has a lot to do with the fact that the relationship of the world religions to violence is equivocal. All great God-narratives are familiar with traditions that legitimize force in certain circumstances, claim victims in the battle for their own beliefs and demonize people of other religions. At the same time there are, however, sources that proclaim the incompatibility of violence with religion, demand sacrifices for peace and insist on respect for people of other religions.

A source of danger lies in the nature of religious conviction:

- religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and thus can easily take on totalitarian characteristics. Monotheistic religions in particular have difficulty in distinguishing between the claims of the absolutely divine and the historical nature of human existence;
- religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence, by reason of the symbolic incremental value that is provided by the sanctification of “profane” motivation and aims;
- religious zeal can also be used by hierarchies within faith-based organizations to legitimize the abuse of power and the violation of human rights. Since these hierarchies are mostly male-dominated, gender issues and women’s human rights need to be kept under careful observation.

GDAs, FBOs and their local partners therefore have to learn how to deal with the ambivalence of the religious factor. This ambivalence can be reduced to the following denominators:



These paradoxes and ambivalences are present in the environment of many development programmes. However, to evade them for the sake of a superficially understood avoidance of conflict means precluding part of the reality of life. There can be no question here of an either/or between potential and risks.

Principles, methods and key questions for cooperation between GDAs and FBOs

There is general agreement that support of development programmes by GDAs has to be based on principles of partnership. They include respect for democratic principles and human rights, forthrightness, transparency and readiness for comprehensive observation of the effects and impact of given programmes.

It is obvious that these principles are also valid for cooperation between GDAs and FBOs. They create the overall framework for the handling of sensitive issues like proselytism and the ambivalence of the religious factor. To that end the Geneva Spiritual Appeal¹⁰ urges strict adherence to the following principles:

- a refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual power to justify violence of any kind;
- a refusal to invoke a religious or spiritual source to justify discrimination and exclusion;
- a refusal to exploit or dominate others by means of strength, intellectual capacity or spiritual persuasion, wealth or social status.

But mutually acknowledged principles are not enough. Quality management must guarantee their implementation. The staff members of FBOs should therefore work with the internationally valid methods of programme/project cycle management. An important factor for building mutual confidence is reporting and financial governance according to international audit standards.

It is advisable that GDAs and FBOs agree on joint observation of what actually goes on in the field. That means monitoring whether and to what extent their programmes contribute to the prevention of violence and the peaceful settlement of social conflicts or whether they – inadvertently – allow violence to escalate. Questions of the following kind might help to guide this process:

- Does the programme contribute to social harmony beyond its own faith community?
- Does the programme strengthen group solidarity exclusively within its own faith community or does it have a socially integrating effect? In other words, do others besides people of that faith community really benefit?
- How is a given local FBO anchored in civil society? Which organizations does it cooperate with?
- How are women represented at the various hierarchical levels? What access do women have to the resources of the respective religious institutions (infrastructure, finance/budget competence, educational and health programmes, etc.)?
- How is a local FBO seen by the local population?

In conflict-sensitive situations it is recommendable to use methods for conflict-sensitive programme management (CSPM) which facilitate the participation of local project partners and players, including beneficiaries.

¹⁰ The Geneva Spiritual Appeal was launched in 1999 and co-signed by several heads of international organizations and religious leaders.

After all, the programmes of GDAs and FBOs have to defend the right of the people to set their own priorities. I should accordingly like to end this section with a quotation taken from Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*: “If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity (as many traditional societies have had for thousands of years), then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.”¹¹

Conclusion

From the above reflections we conclude that it is inappropriate to formulate fixed general criteria or a special checklist for cooperation between governmental donor agencies and faith-based organizations. The essence of cooperation should be understood as an ongoing dialogue and negotiations between partners. Emphasis should be placed on common objectives and the content of programmes. A major objective should be to acquire a better understanding of the given social, cultural and political context. Key questions which are approved by both sides can then serve as points of reference. Capacities for quality management and professional PCM (project cycle management) are required as a precondition for cooperation. Last but not least, it is evident from these concluding remarks that FBOs should not be declared a special category of partner organizations.

11 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press 1999, p. 31.