



Religion and development: what difference does religion make?

In the past, faith-based organisations (or FBOs) were often – and repeatedly – called to account. Various accusations were levelled at such organisations from secular quarters: for example, it was claimed that FBOs operated in a less than professional manner, that their real objective was missionary work, and that they would prefer to preserve systems and structures rather than supporting transformation processes. Furthermore, public opinion often tended to focus more on the abuse of religion rather than on its potential as a resource to bring about social change. Consequently, the FBOs expunged almost all of the religious aspects from their understanding of their own identity – and also, therefore, from their development cooperation work.

Signs that this mindset is changing have only begun to emerge in recent times. Many FBOs are placing more emphasis on the value added by their religious identity as a factor in the quality of their development cooperation work. State development organisations have also begun to address the issue of religion in development cooperation. Despite the risk that FBOs could be instrumentalised by state actors, this process of coming to terms with religion should be assessed as essentially positive. Let us mention two examples here that represent the various processes instigated by state actors: the research programme on religion and spirituality (2002-2009) initiated by the Agency for Development and Cooperation of the Swiss Confederation (SDC), and the process introduced by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) aimed at taking greater account of religion in development cooperation. The BMZ explicitly emphasises the desire *to better harness the potential of religion for sustainable development, because if the paradigm shift toward sustainability is to become a success, we need to combine all forces – including religious communities.* ("The role of religion in German development policy", 2015, pages 3 and 10.)

The work of faith-based organisations such as Mission 21 is guided by the following principles, among others:

I. Faith and spirituality as sources of inspiration and motivation

Religious communities regard faith and/or spirituality as a source of inspiration and motivation for their actions. Faith can generate impetus to take action, and it can determine the direction of such action. For example, many Christian FBOs have their roots in the values of the Gospel – such as justice and compassion – from which their own principles are then derived.

II. Religion as a "value resource"

Life-enhancing values and visions of a "good life" play a key part in all religions. For this reason, they provide a sharp contrast to currently prevalent values such as consumerism, egotism, and growth at

any price. Because religious actors base themselves on values that focus on life, they create scope for socially relevant debates, they contribute to the discussion about values, and they provide guidance for social interaction and coexistence. They often stand up for marginalised people and for peace, for the environment and for political and economic change.

III. The holistic concept of humanity, and religious and cultural sensitivity

The majority of project partners in the South live in environments where religion and/or spirituality are regarded as inseparable dimensions of human life, and where religion is an integral element of their understanding of the world. This ethos is taken into account by holistic development models with goals that are not limited to meeting the material (economic and ecological) needs of the target populations, but which also aim to strengthen them in their social, cultural and religious/spiritual dimensions.

IV. Social anchoring

Religious communities and their representatives are close to the grass roots, and they are often present in places where there are no functioning or credible political institutions or NGOs. In many regions, moreover, the population accords exceptional trust and moral authority to religious communities and their leaders – and this is especially true of marginalised population groups. Because of their proximity to the grass roots and the high regard in which they are held by the population, religious communities and their leaders play an important role in implementing local and regional development initiatives.

V. Networking among religious actors

FBOs and – in particular – religious communities are excellently networked at all levels: not only with one another ("horizontal networking") but also with institutions and bodies at other levels, including (for example) government entities ("vertical networking"). This enables them to engage in advocacy work at regional, national and international levels, to utilise synergies and thus improve the effectiveness of the programmes.

VI. Religion's contribution to resilience

Religion contributes to resilience. This means that it has the ability to strengthen resilience at the individual and social levels: *In many contexts, religions strengthen the resilience of individuals and of society as a whole after natural disasters and wars, because they provide people with the strength to cope with strokes of fate.* (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [German Society for International Cooperation, GIZ], Status-Quo Bericht: Religion und Entwicklung ["Status Quo Report: Religion and Development"], 2015, page 8.)

VII. The relational level

In the South, collaboration with partner organisations of a religious character often aims to establish partnerships that continue for lengthy periods. In recent years, greater attention has been devoted to ensuring that these partnerships are based on equal rights. A partnership that lasts many years can result in cooperation of a particular quality – expressed, for example, through mutual trust, shared objectives and values, and the intention to learn from one another.