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Handle With Care: Engaging with faith-based organisations in development

Abstract:

Faith has always had an intense, but uneasy relationship with development. Donors are currently seeking greater engagement with FBOs. This positive shift needs careful consideration. Faith can be a powerful, but flammable fuel for change. FBOs are highly diverse and complex. Donors need to handle FBOs, but do so with understanding and care.

This Viewpoint outlines both the major concerns about faith in development and also the potential value added of FBOs. It charts the growing donor interest yet residual ambivalence towards faith in development. It outlines the practical challenges and suggests ways forward for both donors and FBOs themselves.

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Faith has always had an intense, but uneasy relationship with development. For decades religion has been subject to 'long-term and systematic neglect' by donors (Lunn 2009:937), despite the fact that faith-based organisations (FBOs)¹ historically were at the forefront of service delivery and social movements. Many saw faith as something divisive and regressive – a development 'taboo' according to van Beek (2000). As awareness of the distinctive contribution that FBOs increases, however, so aid donors are now seeking to move from 'estrangement to engagement' (Clarke and Jennings 2008). The latest 2009 DFID White Paper, for example, promises to double funding to faith based groups.

This positive shift, however, needs careful consideration. Faith can be a powerful, but flammable fuel for change. FBOs are highly diverse and complex. They put their faith identity into practice in different ways, with different strength, through different partners, with different visibility and with different results. Funding can do more harm than good. To take advantage of the considerable contribution that FBOs can bring and at the same time mitigate the inherent risks requires good understanding of faith and FBOs. It needs faith literacy.

¹ Clarke defines a faith-based organisation as 'any organisation that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith'. (2008:6)

This *Viewpoint* argues that donors need to engage more explicitly with FBOs, but handle them with understanding and with care. The paper is based on extensive experience of Christian FBOs and some knowledge of Islamic FBOs. To what extent these arguments hold true for FBOs of other faiths is an open question. There may be less donor interest in other faiths and perhaps less interest from other faiths in engaging with the official aid system.

Fear of faith-based development

Official aid donors have traditionally been sceptical about religion. The connections between faith and development were 'fragile and intermittent at best, critical and confrontational at worst' (Marshall and Keough 2004). Many saw religion as a negative force:

- Divisive – a rallying point for division and conflict.
- Regressive – maintaining (if not indeed promoting) injustices such as slavery, colonialism, apartheid, caste and gender inequalities.
- Irrelevant – development being an autonomous technical discipline, about which 'otherworldly' religion has nothing valuable to say.
- Insensitive - exported in culturally highly insensitive ways.
- Proselytising – seeking to convert others to their faith.

Furthermore donor experiences of working FBOs are mixed. There are examples of FBOs who have taken a paternalistic and welfare-oriented approach to development. Some have discriminated towards their members. Others have used their control over resources to manipulate people to convert to another faith. Still others have been implicitly and even explicitly supportive of conservative political structures and dictatorial leaders. In a few cases working with FBOs has encouraged conflict with other faiths and also even between denominations of the same faith.

Furthermore, FBOs (like many NGOs) have often failed to deliver on the accountability requirements of donors. Some FBOs lack skilled personnel, particularly in contexts of poverty, low literacy levels and remuneration levels that demand a level of voluntarism. Few local FBOs have strong financial, human resource and monitoring and evaluation systems.

Value added of faith

Yet the last few years have led to a reassessment of the role of faith in development. Some of the 20th century certainties are being challenged. Instead of the predicted decline in religion, in most parts of the developing world, it is increasing. Many are realising that the past secular materialistic approaches are failing to deliver the hoped for change. Faith is once again under the spotlight.

There is increasing evidence that faith communities make a significant contribution to development (see for example World Bank 'Voices of Poor' study Narayan 2000; ARHAP studies, current work at Berkley Center at Georgetown University and the 'Religions and Development' research at University of Birmingham).

FBOs offer the potential to 'add value' to development in a number of ways. They can:

- Provide efficient development services
- Reach the poorest at the grassroots;
- Have a long-term, sustainable presence;
- Be legitimate and valued by the poorest;
- Provide an alternative to a secular theory of development
- Elicit motivated and voluntary service;
- Encourage civil society advocacy

The extent to which FBOs are able to access and realise these comparative advantages of local faith communities depends partly on how they relate. A close institutional linkage or affiliation between FBO and local faith community means these advantages are easier to attain, but there

are also challenges in working too closely (James 2009). Consequently some FBOs work closely with local faith groups, others operate relatively independently.

While these seven are generally accepted potential advantages of faith organisations, there are three more contentious 'spiritual' advantages from faith itself (that people of faith may point to but others of no faith may discount or react against):

- Spiritual teaching
- Hope, meaning and purpose
- Transcendental power

i. Provide efficient development services

Historically FBOs have been at the forefront of providing vital services to the poor particularly in health and education. Donors are now recognising the extent of this contribution. According to DFID, FBOs provide 50% of health and education services in sub-Saharan Africa (2005:4). Some see that faith-based provision is not only more efficient than state-run services, but because they are often subsidised by the faith community, they cost the state less.

ii. Reach the poorest at the grassroots

FBOs are also in favour with donors due to their grassroots presence. FBOs are found even in the most inaccessible areas where government services do not reach. According to Kumi Naidoo of CIVICUS, 'FBOs probably provide the best social and physical infrastructure in the poorest communities... because churches, temples, mosques and other places of worship are the focal points for the communities they serve (2000).

iii. Long-term sustainable presence

Religious institutions are generally more sustainable than most civil society organisations. As one International NGO worker put it: 'I know that when I go back to Kenya my church will still be there, but I don't know if my development organisation will be' (Chester 2002:12). Faith institutions also build and are a crucial repository of long-term social capital.

iv. Legitimate and valued by the poorest

Poor communities are largely faith-based communities. In most villages there is a mosque, a temple, a church or a traditional healer. The World Bank study (Narayan 2000) concluded that 'religious leaders and institutions were often the most trusted institutions in developing countries', a finding confirmed by a 2008 Gallup poll. Religion is still central to the social, cultural and moral life of these communities. Faith leaders can be the gate-keepers and opinion-leaders in communities.

Faith is a key aspect of cultural identity and well-being (verb Beek 2000, Clarke 2007). Religions are also strengthening in importance, particularly in Africa where 'people are converting in large numbers to Christianity ... and to Islam.' (Commission for Africa 2005:27). Embracing human development requires taking peoples' worldviews seriously.

v. Provide an alternative to a secular theory of development

Religions broaden our understanding of development, back to the focus on human development, not merely income, GDP and economic development. Religion brings in questions of values and meaning. Tyndale coherently argues that faith-based values of inclusion, stewardship, generosity, integrity, compassion and justice provide an essential alternative approach to development (2000).

vi. Elicit motivated voluntary service

Religions have a high coefficient of commitment. They motivate action through emphasis on compassion and service; unity and interconnectedness; justice and reconciliation. As Hilary Benn, the then UK Secretary of State for International Development wrote: 'As I visit communities around the world I am always struck by the extent to which it is faith which inspires people to do something to help their fellow human beings' (DFID 2005). Religious organisations can mobilise large numbers of highly motivated volunteers, who see volunteering as part of their calling (ver Beek 2000).

vii. Encourage civil society advocacy

Religious institutions can have an influential voice in the village and in the nation. They play a big role in political and social justice issues. History demonstrates the church at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the US; in the democratisation process in Latin America; and in the Solidarity movement in Poland. Gordon Brown recently described Jubilee 2000 as the most important church-led social movement in Britain since campaign for abolition of slavery two hundred years ago.

Religious organisations have an enduring and extensive network of congregations, affiliates, organisations, and individuals. These horizontally and vertically organised networks constitute highly effective channels of communication as well as human and financial resources. These large national constituencies (social networks) offer the potential to work powerfully in advocacy and reconciliation.

The difference of faith?

FBOs have both potential strengths and inherent weaknesses through their relationship with religions, but more contentious is the notion that more than just the institutional vehicle, faith provides a spiritual fuel for development. Some potential spiritual advantages may come from:

8. Spiritual teaching
9. Hope, meaning and purpose
10. Divine power

viii. Spiritual teaching

Faith teaching emphasises some critical development principles, such as justice, compassion, reconciliation, and stewardship. Justice is the bedrock of development. Compassion and care for the poor is at the heart of most religions. Forgiveness and reconciliation are central to many religions and are desperately needed in the world today. Stewardship is another key element of religious teaching. Looking at the environmental challenges, stewardship is an essential concept to act on.

ix. Hope, meaning and purpose

Hope is the antidote to the fear, powerlessness, dependence that is at the root of many development challenges today. This is more than just service. Matthew Paris, writing in the Times in January 2009 in an article entitled: 'As an atheist I truly believe Africa needs God':

Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism² makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects

² The word 'evangelism' is a loaded term and means different things to different people. To some it means proselytizing, while two others it means "lifestyle evangelism". This term needs careful definition to avoid the frequent misunderstandings (see World Council of Churches 'Towards an Ethical Code of Conduct for Religious Conversions')

and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.

Values and attitudes must change for development – and values and attitudes are the core business of religion.

x. Transcendental power

Last, but not least, at the heart of faith-based development is faith in a transcendental power. This divine power energises human spirits and many believe goes beyond human effort. For example, many faiths believe that prayer can bring an 'extra-ordinary' power into development.

Increased donor interest in faith

The tipping point for donor engagement with faith in development came with 9/11. It showed in a violent way the power of religion to motivate extreme action. Prior to 2001 Jim Wolfenson the President of the World Bank was unable to interest the World Bank Board in engaging with religions. After 9/11 the Board reversed their decision. Faith was clearly a powerful motivating force, for good or evil. The previous strategy of ignoring faith as irrelevant in aid was defunct.

Since then the climate for faith in development is changing. Active interest is replacing donor scepticism. The World Bank even set up a 'Directorate on Faith', now called the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics. According to Katherine Marshall, its first director, the World Bank now recognises: 'we cannot fight poverty without tending to people's spiritual dimension and its many manifestations in religious institutions, leaders and movements' (Marshall quoted by Barron 2007).

Official aid departments in North America and Europe are now actively trying to understand and engage with the faith dimension to development. Bi-lateral donors also exhibit new interest in engaging with faith in development. In the UK, there is a 'growing interest among DFID departments for a more systematic understanding of the role that faiths play in achieving the Millennium Development Goals' (DFID 2005:14). Consequently DFID launched five-year, £3.5 million research programme on Religion and Development in 2005. The 2009 White Paper promises to double funding to faith based groups (DFID 2009).

Other European government aid departments are also seeking to develop their understanding in this area. The Dutch government created a Policy Platform on faith and recently surprised some church-related agencies they fund by asking them to articulate: "What is the added-value of your faith to your work?" In 2004 SIDA convened a workshop to explore the 'Role of Religion in Development'. The USA has gone the furthest, though perhaps for more controversial electoral reasons. Under President Bush US foreign aid dollars going to faith based groups almost doubled from 10.5% of aid in 2001 to 19.9% in 2005. Under the Obama administration, this is likely to continue.

Ongoing ambivalence in practice

But while European governments are more supportive in their thinking, their funding practice remains largely ambivalent. Most governments still view development as a secular enterprise. They want to engage with the institutional forms of faith (the religious institution), but remain suspicious about the spiritual dimensions of faith (belief in God). Not surprisingly secular donors still would like a sanitised separation between the institutional and spiritual elements. Interviews at DFID revealed 'significant concerns about the erosion of DFID's traditional secularism...They fear donor entanglement in sectarian or divisive agendas.' (Clarke 2008:262).

Integrating faith brings undoubted dangers. As Father Sjeff Donders says: “We should realise that there is good religion, bad religion and very bad religion” (quoted by Hope and Timmel 2003). Pearson and Tomalin sound ‘warning notes about the ways in which the new-found enthusiasm of development organisations to engage with FBOs could jeopardise hard-won commitments to gender equality’ (Clarke and Jennings 2008:65). Many faiths do not have a good track record in promoting the equality of women (Tyndale 2000).

Furthermore while some Islamic FBOs have received increased official aid funding from agencies like DFID, others have been targeted for heavy scrutiny and some been blacklisted for alleged links with terror groups. So on the one hand, official donors are attempting to engage more with some Islamic NGOs, while on the other hand ‘Islamic NGOs figure amongst the global casualties of the war on terror, particularly Saudi ‘Wahabi’ organisations’ (Kroessin and Mohamed in Clarke 2008:206).

Practical challenges for engaging with FBOs

It is certainly not easy for the aid system to engage productively with FBOs. These need to be considered and addressed if we are to move forward.

FBOs are clearly highly diverse. The single label ‘FBO’ may conceal more than it reveals. Currently a wide diversity of organisations fit within the term FBO. There are clear differences between FBOs of different faiths, whether looking at Christian and Islamic FBOs as this paper has done, or Jewish, Hindu, Baha’i, Sikh FBOs... There are major theological and cultural differences between FBOs of same faith, whether we are talking about the Catholics, Mennonites, Methodists, Baptists, Anglicans, Reformed, Lutherans or Adventists in Christianity or Sunnis, Tablighis, Shi’as, Sufis, Wahabis/Salafis in Islam. These can lead to profoundly different views of what development means. There are obvious cultural differences too between US and European Christian FBOs or Islamic FBOs from the Middle East, Africa or Asia. Furthermore there are major differences in how FBOs choose to operationalise their faith identity. The INTRAC paper ‘What is distinctive about FBOs’ (James 2009) highlighted ten major areas of choice and difference.

Some FBOs themselves prefer to keep their faith identity vague and ambiguous. They downplay their faith to appeal to as wide a funding base as possible; to recruit and retain a diverse staff team; and to work easily in a variety of faith contexts. They fear that clarifying their faith base will alienate, exclude and surface conflict. There are considerable and subtle challenges in managing an FBO where staff and major stakeholders come from a variety of positions on faith (James 2009).

The resulting lack of clarity can maintain internal tensions. It also can cause problems for outsiders studying, funding and making policies. The failure to recognise varieties of FBOs can lead to misunderstandings and simplistic judgements (such as one word in a mission statement). There is a need to build on and develop some of the initial work undertaken by Sider (2004) and Clarke (2008) in developing useful typologies that differentiate FBOs.

Working with FBOs can be complicated because it is not easy to separate out the spiritual from the material contribution of FBOs (although this does not mean that funding cannot be clearly delineated). But for many FBOs, spiritual faith provides the fuel for action. They seek to meet people’s needs holistically, spiritual as well as physical and emotional needs. The line where this becomes proselytising is not always clear. For example, is a Nun’s prayer with someone dying of AIDS ‘invaluable comfort’ or ‘taking advantage of a vulnerable patient’? It may be a matter for individual interpretation. The distinction between spiritual development and proselytising obviously depends on who makes judgement. At the moment discussion appears to be limited to black and white statements; there appears limited appreciation of the many shades of grey (or indeed colour) in the middle.

Many secular donors (and some FBOs) would like a convenient and clear distinction between development and 'mission' or 'dawa'. A review of Norwegian FBOs, however, concluded that any attempt to separate out the spiritual was an 'exceptionally theoretical exercise' (Hovland 2005). Even if such a distinction were possible, it may not be productive. Hovland goes on to say that attempts to separate the spiritual from the material have meant that Norwegian FBOs "are splitting the very integrated value base that arguable gives them their added value... NORAD throws them into a somewhat schizophrenic mode" (2005). It is as if some secular donors expect FBO vehicles to run without accepting they use their spiritual fuel (such as prayer). It is not possible to remove the contentious faith dimension to FBOs (expecting them to be just like NGOs), while simultaneously expecting them also to deliver the distinctive contribution of faith.

Experience also shows us that attempts to support FBOs with major aid funding can also be counterproductive. Ill-considered funding for FBOs can do more harm than good. Local faith communities often do not have the structures and systems to absorb large aid flows. Accountability is frequently an issue. The short-term, donor project funding mechanisms tend not to fit the slower pace of religious institutions. Furthermore too much funding can create artificial structures far removed from the grassroots.

A final practical challenge is the highly personal nature of any discussion of faith. We all interpret what we see and hear through the individual lens of our own personal set of beliefs. This makes faith can be flammable. In discussions of faith, feelings can run high.

Ways forward

Greater donor engagement with FBOs should be positive for long-term development. But it needs to be done well. To engage productively with FBOs requires a highly developed understanding of the complex world of faith. The more contentious faith elements cannot be artificially extracted from FBOs, which makes engagement messy and complex. It is not easy to mitigate the risks and at the same time support the comparative advantages of FBOs. The way forward involves greater attention to faith and to understanding of FBOs.

FBOs themselves have a responsibility here. They need the courage to clearly define for themselves and to outsiders what their faith identity means and how it is operationalised in their work. But this is not an easy process. If done badly it can surface latent conflict and differences. Clarifying faith identity needs to be done sensitively and inclusively. The benefit of doing this will be the opportunity to ensure coherence between what an FBO believes (their theology of development) and what they do (their organisational behaviour and programmes). Coherence between identity and action is vital for any organisation, faith based or not. Increased funding from secular sources may not necessarily be positive.

Donors too need to continue to develop their understanding. Donors need to develop a positive engagement with FBOs without being afraid or dismissive of the spiritual dimension. But they need to think through the terms of engagement with FBOs. Not all FBOs are the same. They need to become faith literate. There may be some FBOs that government donors can work with and others they cannot. Donors should take a considered and nuanced approach to FBOs.

Engaging with more FBOs will not be neat and tidy. It will challenge secular desires for a clear division between faith and development work. But just because it is challenging does not mean it should not be done. Faith in development has always been around. It is here to stay. Faith is a vital fuel for development. But like all fuels, it needs to be handled with understanding and care.

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