

REPORT

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Southern Africa Regional Forum on Religion & Covid-19 *Implications for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities*

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Southern Africa Regional Forum on Religion & Covid-19: Implications for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities

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1. Introduction and Background

While the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on communities throughout the world is starting to be reckoned with, there is no doubt that the effects of the pandemic on progress towards Sustainable Development Goals is yet to be fully understood. With the restrictions on travel occasioned by the pandemic, the role of local actors in dealing with the pandemic became particularly important, especially in the Southern African context. Religious and faith communities in particular were key in dealing with the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic and their related lockdowns. This factor further highlighted the importance of religious and faith communities as development partners.

In recognition of the important role that religion and faith play in people's lives, and the importance of religious and faith actors in sustainable development, the [International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development \(PaRD\)](#) brings multilateral entities, governments, civic society and academia into collaboration with religious & faith based actors. The partnership works towards building greater and institutionalised communication, wherein a safe space is created for dialogue, learning and collaboration which is intended to substantially contribute to policy development for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030.

PaRD's Health Work-Stream focuses on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being 'Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages'. While from inception the Health Work-stream has been focusing on Universal health coverage (SDG3.8), the work-stream has from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic conducted research on developments and needs arising as a result of the pandemic and convened exchanges with key partners on dealing with the pandemic. In 2021 the PaRD health work-stream hosted a number of regional forums of faith leaders which provided spaces wherein faith actors could discuss local challenges relating to responses to Covid-19, discuss specific roles of faith organisations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and reflect on the localisation of global approaches and lessons.

In partnership with the [University of Pretoria](#), World Vision, the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at [Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin](#), the [International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development \(IN//RCSD\)](#) and the [Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\) South Africa](#), the PaRD Health Work-Stream organised the *Southern Africa Regional Forum on Religion and Covid-19: Implications for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities in Southern Africa*. The event was hosted at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, on 22 August 2022. The purpose of the regional forum was to update and consolidate key learnings on the role of religious actors in the Covid-19 response within the Southern Africa Region and their implications for the cooperation with religious actors for sustainable development and to make recommendations to policymakers and practitioners.



Facilitators discussing the day's program with participants

2. The Southern Africa Regional Forum on Religion and Covid-19

The Regional Forum was a hybrid event held in August 2022, with participants at the physical location at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and other participants joining virtually. The organisation of the event was itself a cooperative effort. Thirty-nine participants attended the forum in-person, while forty-four participants registered for online participation. The participants consisted of religious and faith leaders and academics from South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Participants represented diverse religious and faith communities, including Rastafarian, several Christian denominations (Pentecostal, Mainline Protestant, Catholic and African Independent Churches), and African Traditional Religion communities.



Participants during plenary presentation

The event was opened with an inter religious prayer from several volunteer participants, after a word of welcome from Dr Tanya van Wyk on behalf of the [University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology and Religion](#). The purpose of the event was explained to participants, including encouraging everyone present to participate to the best of their abilities based

on their own experiences. Participants were keen to share their experiences, and many appreciated the opportunity to be heard, and learn from the experiences of others.

3. Overview of Discussions

Key Challenges Brought about by the Covid-19 Pandemic

Participants were asked in the first break-out sessions to reflect on the impact of Covid-19 in their specific communities. The discussion was based on answering the question of ‘what impacts were seen in your community as a result of the onset of Covid-19?’.



Participants reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 in their communities.

Socio-economic Impact

The impact of Covid-19 in Southern Africa has been felt primarily through the exaggeration of several challenges that were already in existence prior to the onset of the pandemic. Primarily, the key challenges demonstrated and worsened existing inequalities. Religious leaders pointed out that the economic hardships that resulted from the loss of jobs and income for a number of families increased instances of domestic discord and contributed to an increase in instances of domestic violence. In particular, women and children suffered as a result of this. Participants also expressed that, unlike in other crises, the Covid-19 pandemic forced social distancing, which in turn reduced the ability of people to find refuge in their religious and faith communities. As such, religious and faith communities were unable to intervene in instances of domestic abuse.

During hard lockdowns in South Africa there was prohibition on the sale of alcohol. This in itself had ripple effects on society, as there was an increase in the illicit sale and consumption of alcohol in some instances, and in some cases there were cases of people placing their lives at risk through the consumption of homemade alcohol and sanitisers. There was also an apparent increase in experimentation with respect to smoking, as the sale of cigarettes was also prohibited.

In poorer areas such as townships and rural villages, there were informal markets that sustained a fair number of individuals and families. As a result of a great loss of jobs that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the number of people entering the informal economy, which created so much competition that work in the informal economy is no longer as sustainable as it used to be. On the other hand, there was a reduction in the customer pool and amounts spent in the informal economy as many people faced economic pressures. In Southern Africa, the youth were most adversely

affected as they are the groups more likely to be unemployed, and this was exacerbated by the closure of companies that were in any case slow in absorbing young workers prior to the pandemic.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with governments' existing social relief programmes. Further, they held views that funds were redirected by governments from other programmes in order to deal with Covid-19 and for the purchase of vaccines. In the case of South Africa, scandals related to the misuse of funds aimed at dealing with the pandemic further reduced confidence.

Impact on Religious and Faith Communities

Religious activity, and religious communities, were categorised as non-essential services and were not able to operate like they had done prior. This was seen very critically by many participating religious leaders. While the efforts of reducing the spread of the Covid-19 virus was understood, religious communities and faith communities felt that they were not consulted in substantial ways. Because of the lack of consultations, some people were skeptical about social distancing measures, with some initially seeing such efforts as government's attempt to control religious organisations and communities. In the beginning, this contributed to members of some religious organisations meeting against regulations.

Religious leaders also experienced hardships specific to their roles within communities. They expressed at the forum that ordinarily, they would rely on the community of their congregants in their roles, for things such as communal support for bereaved congregations, local feeding schemes for members of the religious community and moral support in counselling members going through hardships. Ordinarily religious organisations relied on financial contributions collected during meetings. As the latter were not allowed, this reduced the ability of religious and faith organisation to provide support to communities. The impact of inequality was also apparent in that some religious communities were able to improvise by moving their services online, while this was hardly an option for the poorer communities. As such in the case where there were no alternative meeting fora, the removal of the ability to meet during lockdowns limited the availability of congregational support.

During lockdown, most faith and religious leaders were expected to continue to conduct funeral services. However, it was not always clear what requirements of lockdown regulations were, and therefore some leaders felt nervous during this period as they were not clear on how to comply with regulations. Religious leaders were at higher risk as they were exposed as part of their roles within communities. As a consequence, religious leaders themselves died in high numbers as they were exposed. A leader of a conference of Bishops of African Initiated Churches indicated that they lost 10% of their members who were

leaders of their own congregations. Religious leaders expressed particular difficulty of leading communities that were dealing with high death rates, while in most instances the leaders were themselves suffering losses at personal level.

Lockdowns effectively led to the closure of alternative medicine practices. This had the further impact of marginalising traditional medicinal and related practices. As a result, religious communities felt marginalised by the approach of governments in regulating healing and medicinal aspects of religious practices in such a way that favoured multinational pharmaceuticals.

The Continuing Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Implications for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities

Death and Burial Rituals

While death is ordinarily a difficult matter to deal with, the inability of community members to perform their ordinary rituals during burial ceremonies, such as gathering to bid their loved ones farewell, led to an inability of many to get closure. The participants in regional forum highlighted the fact that there is still a lot of trauma resulting from the socio-psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Congregating religious communities are struggling to regain pre-covid attendance levels, further reducing the availability of community in recovering from the trauma of losing loved ones.

Technology

The onset of the pandemic necessitated the use of technology in various aspects of life. This is an opportunity for utilisation of information communication technology. However, the inequalities of access exhibited during the pandemic need to be considered, and there needs to be efforts to addressing the adverse impacts for those unable to access technology for a range of services. Religious and faith communities who consist of well-off members were able to mitigate the effects of social distancing by holding virtual services and consultations. In the Southern Africa Region, data costs are still high relative to income levels. As such, this compromised the ability of religious and faith communities to rely on information communications technology during the height of the pandemic. On the other hand, the use of virtual platforms for religious gatherings has continued, resulting in a reluctance by other members to return fully to in person services and gatherings.

Interfaith Cooperation

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic had different results when it comes to interfaith cooperation, in that in some instances there was an increase in cooperation, while in other respects the reduced contact led to various communities keeping to themselves. Certainly, the role of religious and faith communities within localities need to be acknowledged and enhanced. Religious and faith leaders' experiences during the pandemic were that in instances where there had been prior cooperation, it was easier for religious and faith communities to work together. This is because existing relationships could be relied upon in times of need.



Religious leaders representing African Traditional, Rastafari and Christian Religions volunteer to open even in prayer.



Plenary session discussing issues raised by two academics and a leader from local government

Some religious and faith communities held views that in general, while government was focused on regulating movements and enforcing restrictions, faith and religious communities were key in providing various support to local communities. In some instances, religious and faith communities seemed to do more than governments to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.

4. Key Lessons for Development Cooperation and Governments in Working with Religious and Faith Communities

The role of religious communities needs to be properly recognised, especially by government actors. The experience of religious and faith communities in southern Africa was that, during the Covid-19 crisis, governments were keen on regulating activities, but quite averse to cooperation. When it comes to social challenges, religious and faith communities are so involved that it is beneficial for them to be seen and treated as a key partner that they



Participants during a breakout session

are. However, there were instances of best practice, such as the setting up of funds through which companies and individuals could contribute to dealing specifically with Covid-19 in the case of South Africa and Botswana.

Religious actors played and continue to play an important role within local communities. In addition to food parcel projects that were undertaken during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdowns, religious and faith actors have been involved in supporting child-headed households. Faith leaders indicated their own personal efforts in providing substance support to child-headed households. However, the main challenge is the limited resources that need to be relied upon in order to provide assistance to the child-headed households. As it stands, religious and faith communities are not eligible for funding. This is another way in which the role of religious and faith communities is not taken into full account. Although not eligible for developmental work funding, religious and faith community members are involved in activities such as home-based care and welfare calls to child-headed households.

The engagement that religious and faith communities have with governments and other stakeholders was categorised as generally ceremonial. For instance, faith and religious groups would only be engaged during commemorative functions. Other than that, religious and faith communities are not engaged in any substantive manner. Certain religious traditions, particularly African Traditional Healers, also felt excluded from even these ceremonial engagements by Government with religious groups. In future partnerships with religious communities, different stakeholders need to be open to also learning from religious communities, and not be prescriptive in their approaches.

While religious and faith actors were very involved in dealing with the impacts of the pandemic, human rights abuses and gender-based violence were not sufficiently addressed by religious and faith communities. Therefore, religious and faith communities themselves need to improve their role in contributing to the elimination of gender-based violence and human rights abuses, both hidden behind the veil of religious practice and as perpetrated generally within communities.

5. Recommendations and conclusions

After the discussions of their experiences of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants were asked to reflect more on what the implications are for development cooperation with religious and faith communities. Further, they were asked to reflect on key recommendations that they would make to various role players.



Religious leaders sharing a light moment during break.

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- The role of faith and religion needs to be properly understood and supported, through engagement between faith communities, civil society organisations and governments.
- Trauma, resulting from shocks emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic have increased requirements for counselling services; therefore increase counselling services and education services accessibility especially in rural areas.
- In recognition of community development activities of religious and faith communities, training in counselling and related activities should be placed high on the agenda of development partners.
- In general there needs to be training and engagement on preparation for future pandemics and other disasters, and open participation in the development of early warning systems.
- Conduct research and develop knowledge around how the Covid-19 pandemic was managed in African countries, as there might be interventions from which lessons can be drawn.
- Because it became apparent that existing ecclesial networks and relations became important vehicles for interventions and support in communities, it is vital that such networks be strengthened and expanded now that the worst of the pandemic is over, in preparation for future pandemics.
- The experience of increased collaboration between ecclesial and interfaith bodies should be further developed in order to address the ongoing socio-economic crises that have ensued from the pandemic.
- An Interfaith Forum should be established for engagement with governments.

Governments

- Governance practices and programs need to actively take the role of religious and faith communities into account and should strengthen its collaboration with Interfaith Forums.
- Engagement needs to be substantial, with the creation of continuous fora through which religious and faith communities can engage and be engaged by the government. This is necessary in order to create mutual trust and ensure that government efforts are supported by religious and faith communities who are often very active at local level.
- Investment in preparedness for future pandemics and disasters in which religious communities are actively involved as stakeholders, such as engagement in early warning systems.
- Consultations need to be inclusive. Although health bodies are certainly most relevant when dealing with disasters such as pandemics, there needs to be overall inclusion of all stakeholders in order to maximise contributions from each sector.
- Develop systems that allow for dealing with pandemics and disasters in ways that do not themselves cause damage to economies.
- Creation of emergency funds in order to allow for proactively dealing with future crises.
- Clarity needs to be established and sustained, so that cooperation between religious & faith communities and government departments do not become politicised.

Religious and Faith Organisations

- Engagement and cooperation in order to form a unite voice and find grounds of mutual cooperation.
- Sharing of information through various platforms, especially taking advantage of information communications technology.
- Regular engagements and cooperation with stakeholders beyond religious and faith actors, eg. Business sector.
- In order to reduce panic among members, religious and faith leaders need to include teachings related to dealing with natural disasters and pandemics sourced from their traditions and theologies.
- Find creative ways (such as the use of social media) to continue the provision of emotional and spiritual support to members of their communities.

National and International Development Organisations

- Conduct research to develop a full understanding of the role of faith and religious communities at local level, and communicating best practice findings broadly for mutual learning.
- Involve religious and faith communities in activities that increase the exposure of religious and faith communities to work being done by development partners.
- Facilitation of training for religious and faith community members in relation to SDGs and development agenda.
- Support the facilitation of discussions between faith communities, governments and multilateral bodies.

United Nations Organisation/World Health Organisation

- Encourage the production of vaccines within local community/territories where they are to be used.
- Remove monopoly on the production of vaccines, and build confidence in the vaccine by being inclusive of local communities
- The commercialisation of vaccines present a problem, as pharmaceuticals prioritise profit over human well-being.
- Actively engage communities in the conceptualisation of development projects, as opposed to a top down approach wherein specific actions and outcomes are predetermined.

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