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African Initiated Churches and sustainable development in South Africa – potentials and perspectives

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Abstract:

Zionist/Apostolic/Ethiopian Churches and Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in South Africa are increasingly active in development activities. They offer counselling and mediate intra-family conflicts; they offer savings groups and business trainings and they build schools and provide university scholarships. Nonetheless, while it has been acknowledged in the literature that many of these churches provide coping mechanisms in adverse environments, support in social transformation and social capital, little attention has been paid to their role in sustainable development. Consequently, they are under the radar of international development cooperation.

This paper seeks to investigate the potential of AICs as agents of sustainable development. Sustainable development can refer to development that takes into account ecological considerations and limitations of natural resources (ecological sustainability). On the other hand, it can refer to the long-term impact of development programmes (sustainable effects). The former is a special case of the latter: lasting change can only be generated if long-term ecological limitations are respected. Both notions have in common that they require a transformation of mind sets, ethics and knowledge. Ecological sustainability depends on a culture of sustainable use of natural resources. Sustainable development impacts likewise depend on changes in people's consciousness that result in different actions. Such comprehensive transformation of the individual and the community is at the core of the doings of the AICs. This raises the question on what their potential for sustainable development, as outlined in the post-2015 agenda, is. However, it should be noted that sustainable development is only one aspect in the wider transformation agenda of many AICs, which seeks to liberate the individual from life's adversities and to fundamentally affirm their agency.

Hence, the paper first reflects on the notions of development and sustainability from the perspective of the AICs themselves. It explores how this situated knowledge shapes the churches' development priorities and how they relate to dominant western notions of sustainable development as ecologically sustainable development. Second, it investigates the interrelation of their spirituality and sustainable development, particularly with respect to the holistic and spiritual world views of these churches. Third, it outlines the contribution different churches are making to a culture of sustainability in their local communities, what motivations, values and world views they produce. The paper concludes with an exploration of the potential of AICs as partners of international cooperation for sustainable development, highlights possible fields of collaboration and outlines the added value of such partnership.

African Initiated Churches and sustainable development in South Africa – potentials and perspectives¹

Introduction

African Initiated Churches² (AICs) in South Africa are increasingly active in development activities. They provide counselling and mediate intra-family conflicts; they offer savings groups and business trainings and they build schools and provide university scholarships (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). However, unlike many Mission Churches they have not been recognized as relevant actors by international development cooperation. While it has been acknowledged in the literature that many of these churches provide coping mechanisms in adverse environments, support in social transformation and social capital, little attention has been paid to their potential as agents of development and most notably of sustainable development.

Sustainable development, as coined in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, refers to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 43). The quintessence of the report was that economic and social development need to take into account the ecological framework they operate in – and its limitations. Consequently, in current development discourses sustainable development is often used to describe a mode of development that takes into account ecological considerations and limitations of natural resources. This link of development and ecological sustainability is one of the pivotal points in the post-2015 development agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Jüttner 2016).

In more general terms, sustainability refers to “the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level” (Oxford Dictionary 2017). Sustainable development interventions, hence, are such development programs or projects that produce sustained, i.e. lasting, changes beyond any given project lifetime. Ecological sustainability is a special case thereof: lasting change can only be generated if long-term ecological limitations are respected. Both notions have in common that they require a transformation of mind sets, values and knowledge.

A fundamental prerequisite for such transformation is the cultural and social embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) of any development activities. Only if development is locally grounded, contextually relevant and makes reference to local cultural knowledge systems it becomes sustainable. This embeddedness in local cultural frameworks (essentially including all forms of religious knowledge), which produces continuously maintained processes of change, is cultural sustainability.³

¹ This discussion paper is a shortened version of the article ““You need to change the whole person” – African Initiated Churches and sustainable development in South Africa” presented at the conference “Does Religion Make a Difference? Discourses and Activities of Religious NGOs in Development” in Basel, November 2016. It draws on the research project “Are African Initiated Churches adequate partners for future development cooperation?” at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The project was commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged. A comprehensive overview of the project’s results is provided in Öhlmann et al. (2016).

² We use the term African *Initiated* Churches to denote all churches founded by Africans, in Africa and without direct links to “Missionary ‘Godfathers’” (Pobee and Ositelu 1998, 55). This includes Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian Churches as well as Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.

³ For an overview of the different applications of the term in the literature, see Soini and Birkeland (2014).

This paper aims to investigate the potential of AICs as agents of sustainable development in relation to the above outlined semantic field of sustainability in its ecological, social, economic and cultural dimensions. It explores how their situated religious knowledge shapes the churches' development priorities and how they relate to notions of sustainability and development. It emerges that sustainable development has to be seen in the context of the churches' wider transformation agenda, a key feature of which is a strong interrelatedness of spirituality – situated religious knowledge – and development.

We draw on church leader interviews and focus group workshops among various AICs in northern South Africa conducted by the authors.

Notions of sustainability: from sustainable development to transformation of life

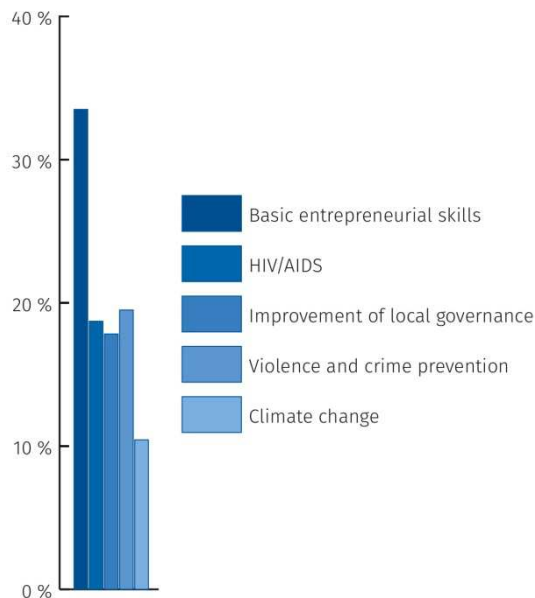


Chart 1: Percentage of church leaders considering the respective area most important (multiple selections possible; average across four focus group workshops). Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)

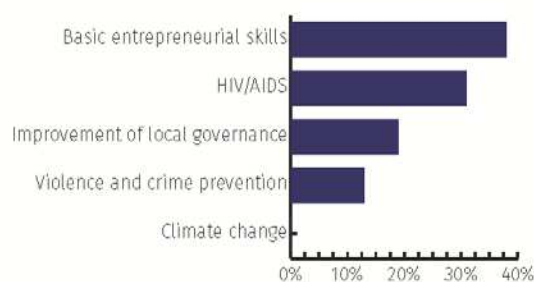


Chart 2: Percentage of individual church leaders considering the respective area most important (multiple selections possible; data from 14 individual interviews). Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)

When investigating development priorities of AICs, it emerges that issues related to ecological sustainability play a marginal role. Participating church leaders were presented with five program areas of German development cooperation in South Africa and asked to select the one they considered most important. Charts 1 and 2 show the church leaders' valuation of the program areas in individual interviews and focus group workshops, respectively. Climate change was consequently ranked last – not once being named most important in individual church leader interviews.

Moreover, when asked about their opinion on what constituted the major problems in people's lives, a long list of issues emerged, from unemployment and teenage pregnancies to the need for theological education (cf. chart 3). However, not a single item was mentioned relating to ecological sustainability or broader environmental issues.

While ecological sustainability seems to play a subordinate role for many AICs in South Africa, it is worthwhile to scrutinize the AICs' potential with respect to the broader notion of sustainability related to lasting change. One church leader highlighted that it is precisely this type of sustainability that is pivotal in the development work of his church: "You need to change the whole person" (Interview 2016/1, all following quotes in this paragraph from the same interview). He explained that it is not sufficient to provide a person with skills in the framework of development interventions, "because it will be a waste of time and money if you train people without their lives being changed".

If the acquisition of a technical skill was the only change a development activity produced in a person, one would not know what she/he used this skill for. Ideally the person would use it for the communal

good or at least individual improvement, but the skill might also go unused or, in extreme cases, even be used for destructive purposes. The sustained transformation of people's lives is the recurring and central motif in the interview: "The best thing you can give is Christ. Wherever they go afterwards they can continue with Christ. [...] That is why their lives will be transformed. Training alone is not enough."

Another church leader points to transformation of life as the major challenge:

Interview question: "What are the major needs in people's life?"

*Response: "The major need... the people's life needs to be transformed. People's life needs to be salvaged; people's life needs to be educated. [...] It takes a lot of movement to activate and actualize that. People need to know about Christ more and I think that is the fundamental beginning of salvation."
(Interview 2016/V)*

Transformation of life and notions of salvation seem to mutually superimpose each other. It is precisely this intersection of the spiritual and the material that breaks the ground for lasting change and cultural sustainability. By transforming people's lives in their material and immaterial, i.e. spiritual, dimensions AICs provide the basis for sustainable development.

Elements of transformation

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, people face numerous adversities. Physical violence, poverty and death are personal realities in a person's everyday life. In this context, religious communities are important sources of psychosocial support. Due to their contextual world view and the large and growing number of their adherents, this is particularly true for AICs. By providing "spiritual endurance" (Cilliers and Wepener 2007) they increase individuals' and communities' resilience against adverse shocks.

Due to the rapid political, social and economic changes taking place in South Africa, social structures transform and identities are re-shaped. In his study on witchcraft in post-1994 South Africa, (Ashforth 1998, 507) describes how these transformative processes lead to an increase in the belief in and fear of witchcraft in peri-urban township contexts and diagnoses a general "spiritual insecurity". It is in this framework of insecurity that AICs play an important role. They are moderators of social change in the sense that they enable people to deal with the fundamental transformations of their environment and with perceived negative forces (Masondo 2013).

More than 20 years after the end of Apartheid black people in South Africa continue to experience what Linda Thomas terms "systemic dehumanization" (Thomas 1997, 23), a continuing marginalization because of the persistent adverse social and economic structures they find themselves in. Hence, Masondo's statement possesses validity even for the post-Apartheid era.

The comprehensive transformation of individual and communal lives fostered by AICs does not exhaust itself in a problem-solving strategy. Once the person is liberated from her/his problems, she/he acquires the ability to shape her/his own life. Through the stabilization, believers gain the ability and the motivation to transform their lives, a process that is fostered and promoted by AICs. (Schlemmer 2008, 80) calls this "spiritual capital": "What their faith does give them is confidence that they can succeed – in other words abundant spiritual capital."

It is important to note that a separation between the stabilization (dealing with one's challenges, or, eliminating the negative) and the transformation (actively changing one's life, or, adding the positive) is only conceptual. In fact, they are one transformative process expressing itself in stabilization and

improvement. Already the stabilization is part of the long-term positive transformative process. Moreover, the process is indefinite. In the view of the churches, one does not reach a point where the transformation is complete. As one member of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and chairperson of this church's local business owner forum describes:

“Where I am now, I never went to school, meaning I only passed matric, but in me there was that thing, saying you are an entrepreneur. You are an entrepreneur. You have something inside you which can lead the world, which can help the world. [...] So the only way to get that thing, so that I can take it to the world, was through the spirit which was guiding me. [...] So, with the church, the church which was guiding me. [...] ZCC was the one which I chose, because of the leader, the one who is saying he always encourages us to follow your dreams. He is saying you must follow these dreams, I will guide you. I will teach you. [...] It's a journey.” (Interview 2015/1)

Closely related to the transformation of life is the notion of entrepreneurship, also mentioned by the interviewee and one focal point of the literature on Pentecostal AICs. The transformation of life has strong material components. Salvation, which is “here and now” (Anderson 2000, 48), includes the absence of poverty (Heuser 2013). As shown in charts 1 and 2, the area of basic entrepreneurial skills was constantly ranked as the highest priority both in individual interviews and focus group discussions. This is in line with the results of the large-scale research project on Pentecostalism in South Africa reported on by (Schlemmer 2008), whose central conclusion was that the greatest potential of Pentecostalism is entrepreneurship. Our own results confirm that this does not only extend to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, but to AICs in general.

Engaging transformation

Healing and world view: transforming the individual

The manifold processes associated with overcoming one's problems and dealing with insecurities are commonly described as a process of healing. Healing can be understood as a process to overcome adversities, be they spiritual, material or social – in short, all aspects that can affect the quality of life in a negative way (Schoffeleers 1991; Pretorius 2004). While the specific rituals and activities differ from one church to another (often substantially), healing plays an important role in most South African AICs. Already when asked to describe their churches and why people come to the church, 5 out of 14 church leaders explicitly referred to healing or transformation of people's lives as central feature of their church.

The churches' healing activities possess high contextual relevance, since they are embedded in an African spiritual cosmology (Ashforth 1998; Pretorius 2004). In this world view, material, social and spiritual spheres are not separated, but constitute layers of the same reality. They are mutually dependent and in constant interaction. Positive and negative spiritual forces, in many cases ancestors and, most importantly, the Holy Spirit are seen to influence social interaction and the physical world. Healing, belief in witchcraft and spirits and divine material blessings all have to be seen against this background.

Some scholars consider this world view problematic and as a hindrance to development in all its social, economic and ecological aspects (for example, Gifford 2015; Ndhlovu 2015). The spiritual world view proliferated by the churches, so the argument, fosters fear and passivity.

But the belief in positive and negative spiritual forces, easily dismissed as superstition from a western perspective, plays an important role in the lives of many Africans (Ashforth 1998). Therefore it needs to

be taken seriously. It is explicitly because AICs – other than Mission Churches – do not reject this set of beliefs that they reach so many people.

Not all AICs subscribe to every single element of spiritual cosmology, nor do they relate to it in the same way. They rather incorporate this general world view in their belief systems as a form of religious knowledge production. Far from producing passivity and fear, AICs enable their members to deal with any negative spiritual forces (Oosthuizen 1988). In the framework of comprehensive healing, the churches empower believers to solve their spiritual, material and social problems through spiritual, material and social means.

Transformation in action

At the institutional level, AICs prove to be surprisingly active in development-related activities (cf. the more comprehensive description in Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). The church leaders interviewed by the authors were asked to name the major problems in people's lives. Chart 3 shows all items mentioned during the individual interviews and/or workshops. With unemployment and poverty manifesting themselves in the lack of basic goods such as food and clothes, the interviewees mainly pointed out material needs. But also social problems like alcohol and drug abuse or teenage pregnancies are mentioned along with specifically spiritual problems such as stagnancy in life and the need for healing.

Consequently, the answers given to the question “How does your church support the community?” show that AICs do not only see people's problems, but are very active in different areas to improve the lives of their members and the wider community. Even though often on a small scale and in an informal way, nearly all surveyed AICs run support and development activities. Even smaller and poorer churches collect food, clothing and/or money for school fees for people in need – often also regardless of their membership in the congregation. Larger AICs often run their own crèches, schools or skills training centres. In general, there is a strong emphasis on education and training with a clear focus on entrepreneurial skills (as evident from charts 1 and 2). Five out of 14 church leaders underlined the need for education and two of them suggested adding education, especially for young children and teenagers, to the five areas presented. Their reasoning was that education, like skills training, is a prerequisite enabling people to improve their lives sustainably and out of their own power. Education and (entrepreneurial) skills enable people to become self-sustainable – to become agents of their own transformation. One interviewee underlined: “Don't give me a fish, teach me how to fish” (Workshop Minutes 2016/II). AICs' engagement in this area also shows that they directly target the major problems identified: unemployment and poverty (cf. chart 3). In many ways, church leaders noted, their work is similar to that of non-religious NGOs: “We are all aiming at achieving the same thing, which is human development. The difference could be the platform from which we are standing; we are doing it as a church” (Interview 2016/IX). Hence, on the one hand, the development-related activities are seen in close relation to those of NGOs. On the other hand, the churches' activities are considered to have an additional, distinctive dimension: the spiritual. It is precisely this dimension that provides added value to the activities otherwise similar to the programs of non-religious development actors. As one church leader elaborated:

“The NGOs are taking care of people but they do not take care of the spiritual part of the human being. So we are taking care of the people, [...] but we go beyond. We also look at the spiritual well-being of the persons [...]. We run similar programs, but we do more by adding the spiritual level.” (Interview 2016/XIV)

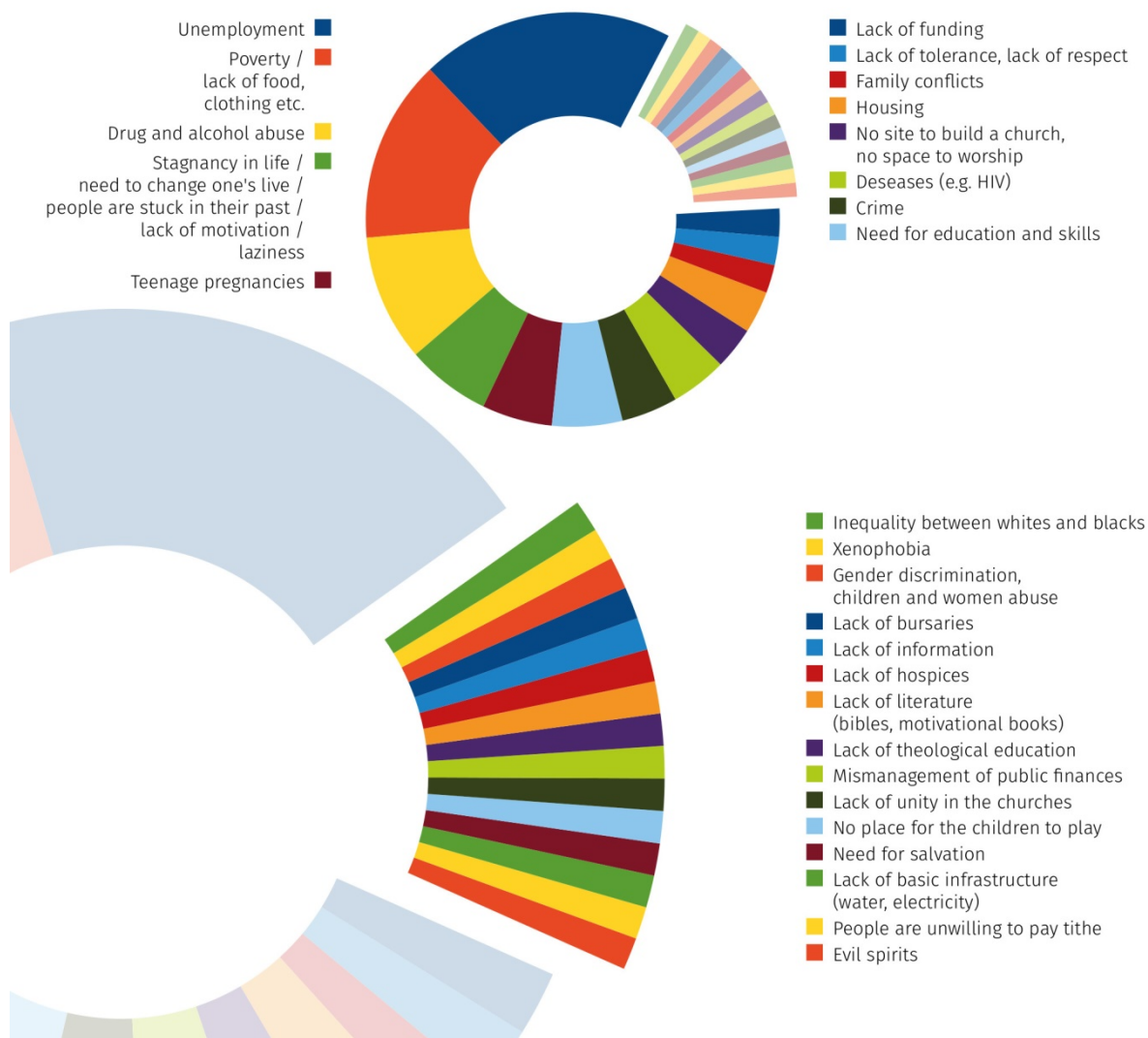


Chart 3: What are the major problems in people's lives? Responses from focus group workshops and individual interviews. Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)

Many church leaders underlined the importance of providing both spiritual and material support. The two areas are seen to be closely intertwined also at an institutional level. As one church leader put it, “You cannot teach the Word to an empty stomach” (Interview 2016/VI).

Development-relevant activities (in a secular sense) and spiritual activities are mutually complementary and strongly interrelated. This interrelation is highly important to the AIC leaders. It stands in contrast to the understanding of many international development organizations, which operate on the basis of a secular distinction between spirituality and development that has been a key feature of international development policy for decades – even of most faith-based development actors.

Hence, this point was further discussed with church leaders in the interviews. The main argument against such a separation was that people need both sides to lead a good life and for their transformation to be long lasting. However, on a practical level there seems to be room for manoeuvre. Seven out of the 14 interviewees considered such a separation possible. Some welcomed the idea, as it would permit them to reach more people with their development-related activities. However, several church leaders noted that, while the activities do not have to happen at the same time, it is still important to have both. But it has to be taken into account that many AICs do not have facilities aside from the church building itself (if the congregation has one at all) to host their activities. A complete separation would thus already be difficult because of spatial restrictions.

Conclusions

A comprehensive cultural, social and economic transformation is at the core of the doings and ideologies of many AICs in South Africa. Their activities and beliefs are strongly geared towards the improvement of individual and communal lives in multiple dimensions. Against the background of a holistic vision of the material and spiritual world as well as human society, their concrete intentions and activities of transformation start at the micro and meso levels of society. Coherent with their immediate concept of salvation (“here and now”) they are less concerned with developing larger ideological and political concepts for the transformation of society in general. Based on their faith, their aim is to transform people’s self-understandings, notion of life, attitude to life and life itself.

Two points are crucial: first, that AICs operate within contextual belief systems of spiritual world views – a dominant form of religious knowledge in many African contexts – and second, that they see the person and the world in a comprehensive way, in their physical, social and spiritual dimensions. The manifold material, social and spiritual hardships experienced can be dealt with through material, social and spiritual means: healing, ethical codes, mutual support and development activities. In all these dimensions, AICs operate within a highly contextual framework. Their beliefs, ethics and actions are deeply embedded in contextual social and cultural structures and cosmologies.

Spirituality and development go hand in hand; they are seen as complementary and intertwined. This is also reflected in their activities. The AICs’ transformation agenda is wider than sustainable development as defined by the SDGs. Where the international development community is recognizing that “religion is part of development”, from the perspective of the AICs one could respond with “development is part of religion” – i.e., for many AICs development is only one aspect in a wider transformation agenda.

In order to produce lasting changes it is vital that any development intervention affirms the agency of individuals and communities and takes into account their social and cultural embeddedness as a frame of reference (Gräb 2014). Because AICs aim to change the whole person and make reference to a contextual spiritual cosmology, their development activities have the potential to be highly sustainable. By comprehensively transforming lives (instead of merely providing skills) they produce lasting impact. Their activities are locally grounded, contextually relevant and operate within accepted cultural and contextual frameworks. Hence, they bear high potential for sustainable development as outlined in the post-2015 development agenda. What they offer to sustainable development is cultural sustainability.

As agents of culturally sustainable development, they bear great potential also for ecological sustainability in the long run. Questions of ecological sustainability have a close proximity both to the AICs’ world view and biblical scripture. The AICs’ spiritual world view is often cross-fertilized with traditional African religious notions of the overlap of the spiritual and material world. Notions of the sacredness of places and nature resonate well with ecological sustainability. This is also the case for the biblical notion of integrity of creation. While our results indicate that ecological sustainability plays a subordinate role in the churches’ concrete development priorities and activities at present, they are vital stakeholders that can contribute to the “cultural acceptance [...] to promote the successful implementation of development schemes to reach environmental goals or to improve the quality of life of local people” (Soini and Birkeland 2014) in the future. Due to their ability to culturally embed and promote new values, mind sets and concepts of life, they have the potential to create a consciousness for the limitations of natural resources as part of their comprehensive vision of transformation. Hence, ecological sustainability should be one point of conversation between AICs, established religious development organizations and international development cooperation.

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