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Religion and Sustainable Development: The “Secular Distinction” in Development Policy and its Implication for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities

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Abstract:

Development policy and research increasingly recognize the potential contribution of religious communities to sustainable development. The emerging discourse on religion and development, however, is contingent on Western discursive contexts that operate on the basis of a “secular distinction” between the religious and the secular. Development is located in the secular sphere and the resultant approach to religion is functional. We show this for the case of German development policy by investigating key policy documents on religion and development. The secular notion of development stands in contrast to the perspective of development by religious communities in “developing countries”, which we highlight using the example of African Initiated Churches. In these churches’ view, people’s spiritual and material needs are intertwined, and sustainable development as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be separated from religious dimensions of life. Notions of development, we hence argue, constitute forms of situated knowledge dependent on their discursive contexts. If development cooperation is to engage with religious communities at the level of values, ideas and beliefs, it must also engage with their notions of development as ends of mutual partnership.

Religion and Sustainable Development: The “Secular Distinction” in Development Policy and its Implication for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities

Introduction

The past 20 years have witnessed a “religious turn” (Kaag and Saint-Lary 2011) in international development theory, policy and practice. Since Ver Beek’s (2000) famous description of spirituality as “a development taboo”, much has changed. Various governmental and multilateral development organizations have recognized religion as a relevant factor for development in past, present and future. The World Faiths Development Dialogue jointly initiated by the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1998 was one of the first initiatives in this direction (Belshaw, Calderisi and Sugden 2001). Unilateral engagements with the issue of religion and development followed, for example by the British Department of International Development (DFID) or the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in the early 2000s (Holenstein 2010; Haynes 2009). In 2014, also the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) engaged with religion. While the ministry has co-financed the German Catholic and Protestant churches’ development cooperation since 1962, it now also intends to cooperate with religious actors on a broader level. The ministry inter alia commissioned a sectoral project on “Values and Religion” to the German development agency GIZ, passed a policy on “Religious communities as partners for development cooperation” (BMZ 2016a) and initiated the establishment of the multilateral network “International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development” (PaRD).

At the same time, scholars have engaged with the religion and development nexus as well. Over the past 20 years, a rapidly growing corpus of literature has investigated the manifold relationships and interactions of the two (Swart and Nell 2016; Jones and Petersen 2011). Religion and development is emerging as a whole new transdisciplinary research field, drawing on various disciplines such as political science (Bompani 2010), anthropology (Freeman 2012), theology (Bowers-Du Toit 2016; Heuser 2015) and economics (Beck and Gundersen 2016; Öhlmann and Hüttel 2018). To some extent, the academic interest in religion and development has been driven by the recent policy interest in the issue, as Jones and Petersen (2011) point out. Different development institutions commissioned research projects in order to engage with religion. Examples are the “Religions and Development Research Programme” at the University of Birmingham (funded by DFID), the German Institute for Global and Area Studies’ project “The Influence of Religion on Sustainable Development” (funded by BMZ) and the “Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development” at Humboldt University Berlin (whose research is largely funded by BMZ, too).

While this religious turn has undoubtedly moved the two discursive spheres of religion and development closer together, to a large extent the discourses on their intersections take place within secular frameworks. They are based on a Western-initiated and widespread “secular distinction” (Gräb 2016) between the religious (or sacred) and the secular (or profane). In these frameworks the implicit assumption is that the activities of religious communities can be separated into spiritual and non-spiritual activities. Religion (as spirituality) is seen on the one side, development on the other. Moreover,

to a large extent the discourses follow a commodifying functional approach (Jones and Petersen 2011; Deneulin and Bano 2009). They focus on what religious communities' contributions to a secular development agenda are or could potentially be. The development agenda and imagination, as framed in (inter-) governmental strategies such as the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (UN 2015), remains a secular one. Nowhere in the United Nations resolution on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is religion or are religious communities mentioned explicitly (UN 2015).

Most international development organizations operate on the basis of a secular distinction and conceptually separate religious/spiritual activities from those considered to be development-relevant (Ver Beek 2000). “Both the modernist and Marxist viewpoints which have strongly influenced theory, policy and practice over the past 60 years strongly determined the neglect of religion in Western-driven development”, as Lunn (2009) points out. Bompani (2015) similarly notes, “[m]ainstream development has [...] been driven by a predominantly modernist, Western, secular view of the world”. This holds true even for a large portion of religious, humanitarian and development organizations. They consider themselves as professional development organizations, who only find their motivation in a religious background, but whose religious background does not influence their work. With reference to the African context, Gifford (1994) describes this as the “‘NGO-ization’ of the mainline churches” and sees it as an adaptation to secular donors' requirements. Ver Beek (2000) cites the example of the U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services, while Steinke (forthcoming) highlights this tendency for the case of Diakonie Emergency Aid in the context of Haiti. An international example is the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a global network of churches of Lutheran confession. The LWF has been active in development work and humanitarian aid since the 1940s and recently engaged with issues of religion and development (Mtata 2013). From an outside perspective, this is rather surprising. Why does a religious organization that has been active in development and humanitarian work since the 1940s suddenly feel the need to tackle conceptual questions on religion and development? Should the relationship between the two concepts not be at the core of the work and the identity of this religious organization? The initiative by the LWF can only be explained by acknowledging that the LWF has hitherto subscribed to the dominant, secular view on development. This highlights the influence of the secular distinction even in religious development policy and practice.

The widely used term “faith-based organization” illustrates the discursive secularization and commodification of religious actors: they are not actually identified as religious actors, but as such actors that focus on the supposedly secular issue of development and which merely have an institutional background or history in a religious community. While faith-based organizations derive the motivation for their activities from religious beliefs, tenets and values (Ferris 2011), i.e. from the “religious sphere”, what the organization does is located in the “secular sphere”. In order to fit religious organizations into the secular discourse on development, their (religious) motivation and (secular) activities are linguistically separated, implicitly highlighting that there is nothing “spiritual” or “religious” (and hence supposedly irrelevant for development) in their actions. As Gräb (2016) points out, the secular distinction implies a “compartmentalized containment of religion [...]. Religion is declared to be an affair of those that are religious, of churches and religious communities.” Religion is reduced to its institutional dimension. Dimensions of “lived religion” are left out (Gräb 2016) – even though they are much more relevant in shaping world views and constructing meaning in life (Ver Beek 2000). In the field, it is rarely noted that this political conceptualization and use of religion inherits aspects of the harmful deployment of “civilizing religion” and/or secularism in the context of colonial projects. Reflecting the entanglement of the postcolonial and the post-secular, Lloyd and Viefhues-Bailey (2015) pointedly state:

“The modern provenance of the concept of religion suggests that it is a concept that is epistemically misleading and ethically problematic. “Religion” misleads since it does not refer to any truly universal phenomenon. Instead, religion universalizes a particular parochial configuration and thus imposes an alien and alienating order of knowledge-power onto societies and phenomena under the sway of Western colonial power. [...] scholarship interrogating the concept of religion does not argue that religion is being transformed in modernity. Rather, religion is produced together with the very disciplines that also shape the secular state – the particularly modern invasive state form that Foucault labels governmentality.”¹ (Lloyd and Viefhues-Bailey 2015)

The Secular Distinction in German Development Policy

The secular approach to development has been a fundamental feature of international development policy for decades. It has its roots in the early development theories of modernization (and secularization), in which religion on the one hand was seen as backward-oriented and modernization and development on the other were seen as forward-oriented (see e.g. Deneulin and Bano 2009). In the case of Germany, the continuing prevalence of the secular distinction becomes apparent inter alia in the recent strategy paper on religion published by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, entitled “Religious communities as partners for development cooperation” (BMZ 2016a). In the document, the ministry states that “[w]ithin the scope of our cooperation, no activities are allowed that serve to spread or preach a religion” (BMZ 2016a). This implicitly assumes that such activities can be separated from development-related activities done by religious communities. The secular approach is evident in BMZ’s cooperation with the German churches, too. In a longstanding church–state cooperation on development, the ministry has been funding German churches’ development cooperation since 1962 (Beimdiek et al. 2018). This cooperation is governed by specific regulations decreed by the ministry for cooperation with the Catholic and Protestant Central Agencies for Development Aid (BMZ 2015b). These regulations stipulate that only “development-relevant”ⁱ measures may be financed. While no exact definition of the term is provided, the document further outlines the kind of activities that fall under the term:

“The measures should

- particularly benefit poor and disadvantaged people and groups (Option for the Poor); as a principle no social or religious groups are excluded;*
- create conditions for the development of people’s ability to help themselves and to strengthen their self-reliance;*
- contribute to enabling poor and disadvantaged persons to actively claim their interests and rights in state and society;*
- enable charitable partner structures and local organizations to support the poor in a qualified manner to improve their own situation and to plan, execute and accompany the actions necessary for this end and to learn from these actions;*

¹ This becomes especially clear when the often-used concept of world religions is interrogated more closely (see Masuzawa 2005). As Ziai (2016) and Eckert (2015) argue, the development discourse more broadly carries forward – simultaneously to significant changes – continuities from colonial “civilizing missions”.

- be suitable to strengthen development-relevant interests of disadvantaged groups and to promote their realization at national and transnational level, to increase spaces of action and to contribute to peace and reconciliation.”ⁱⁱ (BMZ 2015b)

Significantly, the reference to the theological concept of the “Option for the Poor” introduced by Latin American Liberation Theology is not seen in tension with the claim that “[m]easures in the area of ecclesiastic proclamation are excluded from financial support”ⁱⁱⁱ (BMZ 2015b). Even though the ministry aims for ideological neutrality, it chooses specific representatives and approaches from different religions coherent with its agenda. Examples of these theological choices are the recurrent use of the “world ethos” theory or a collection of SDG-supportive theological contributions edited by the ministry (BMZ 2016a, 2016c). While these examples demonstrate the inclusion of religious ideas and concepts on a strategic level, thus far it remains somewhat unclear what the actual consequences are for policy and practice.

The approach of German development policy to religion remains within the secular and functional paradigm.² BMZ’s recent policy paper on Africa, the “Marshall Plan with Africa” (BMZ 2017a), specifically mentions religious communities as relevant actors. The perspective on them, however, is purely functional:

“The institutional Churches and faith communities have always played a pivotal role in providing social services, especially in the areas of education and health. They reach people even in places where no public institutions or systems exist. In countries where the opposition or civil society are weak, religious representatives are often the only ones to raise their voice and expose corruption and social injustice.” (BMZ 2017a)

Only institutional aspects of religious communities are mentioned: they are social service providers with extensive networks and they do advocacy. No reference is made to the ideological dimension, to belief systems, values, norms, ideas, aesthetics and spirituality – all fundamental components of religious practices. The development-relevant and the religious remain separate.³

Notions of development in religious communities: The example of African Initiated Christianity

Notions of development emerging from religious communities, we would argue, are quite different from what has been outlined so far. We illustrate this using the example of African Initiated Churches (AICs), i.e. churches founded in Africa by Africans, whose membership constitutes about one third of Africa’s Christianity.⁴ We draw on church leader interviews conducted in various African countries, some of

² Garling (2013) argues that part of this paradigm is the exoticist othering of partner countries and their citizens as highly and essentially religious while the very own position is framed as a neutral and enlightened one, including the ability to properly separate politics from religion.

³ Interestingly, this stands in contrast to the imagery of the ministry’s initiative, which features ritualistic and aesthetic aspects of religious communities in colourful illustrations. See e.g. the ministry’s promotional video “Religion and Development” (BMZ 2017b) as well as the brochures “Religious communities as partners for development cooperation” (BMZ) and “The role of religion in German development policy” (BMZ 2015a).

⁴ We include African Independent as well as African Pentecostal churches in this definition.

which were previously reported on in Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb (2016, 2017), Öhlmann et al. (2016) and Frost, Öhlmann and Gräb (2018).⁵

Pastor Elijah Daramola, coordinator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Southern Africa, encapsulated his view on development in the pointed sentence: “Spiritual development is part of development. A good life includes spirituality” (Interview Elijah Daramola, 2016). This holistic view on development, in which the spiritual dimension features as an integral part, is further illustrated by interview responses to the question “What are the major problems in people’s lives?”, as reported in Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb (2016). Items related to spirituality (such as a “need for salvation”) were mentioned along with items related to material or social needs. Similarly, when asked about how the churches supported the communities, the question was not understood in a purely material sense by many AIC representatives. Spiritual activities (such as Sunday schools, religious programmes on community radio, praying for people, funeral services) were mentioned along with activities like providing scholarships or running schools and hospitals that would be qualified as development-related activities in a secular discourse (Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb 2016). Lastly, especially smaller South African churches’ self-reported priorities in case development funding became available show the construction or expansion of a church as a high priority. Having a house for services and prayer is seen as a development priority at a similar level of importance as economic development activities such as skills development (Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb 2016). This is a recurring theme in the interviews. Most church leaders in South Africa as well as in West African countries underlined the importance of providing both spiritual and material support. A Nigerian church leader explained:

“When it comes to development, we have spiritual development, we have physical and social development. So, so you cannot separate any of the development from each other, because the church provides both the social and the spiritual development.” (Interview 2017/N/14)

Moreover, as Bishop Elias Mashabela, leader of Bophelong Bible Church in South Africa, pointed out, this dimension is the element that provides added value to churches’ activities otherwise similar to the programmes of non-religious development actors:

“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 programmes, but we do more by adding the spiritual level.” (Interview Elias Mashabela, 2016)

Not only are both areas seen to be important, but the quote from the Nigerian church leader shows that they are understood as being closely intertwined and the church is seen to be responsible for both areas. The notion of an added value of the interrelatedness of spiritual and social work for sustainable development is emphasized by Archbishop Daniel Okoh, General Superintendent of the Nigerian Christ Holy Church and President of the Organization of African Instituted Churches: “Actually, the spiritual and ministry work drive the social work of the church. [...] The interrelatedness sustains both” (Okoh 2017). Similarly, Pastor Holymike, another South African church leader, stated: “I believe that if you preach the Word it has to be made practical.” He referred to John 13:35, where Jesus tells the disciples that they will be recognized by others through the fact that they love each other and further elaborated:

⁵ In the following, some interviewees are listed by (their preferred) name and some anonymously. This is done in accordance with the interviewees’ preferences.

“And of course, love is not just love. Love has to be accompanied by actions. So, I think there is an interaction from what we preach to what we do. Because what we do is what we are preaching, yes: love, hope.” (Interview Holymike, 2016)

Material and social support are understood as ways to realize the preached Word. Thus, also activities qualified as non-spiritual from a secular perspective could have a spiritual dimension from the perspective of AIC leaders as they are seen as an expression of, for example, the Christian love for one’s neighbour.

According to these statements there seems to be no conceptual division between religious and development activities. More explicitly, when asked about a possible separation of spiritual and social work of his church, Don Makumbani, leader of Covenant House Family Church in South Africa, explained:

“I see them as one, basically because as much as you are a spiritual leader, you live with people, you live among people. I do not see any divide there. For me being a spiritual person, being a pastor, you have to be socially relevant. That is what, you see, all that I am trying to outline to you. So basically, I see it as one.” (Interview Don Makumbani, 2016)

This view is also shared by George Afrifa, director of the Pentecost Social Services, the social service wing of the Church of Pentecost, one of the largest churches in Ghana. He points both to the work of Jesus and to the understanding of traditional African religions to highlight the need for a holistic development:

“When Jesus Christ preaches, after peaching, he feeds the people. [...] So, it means that it goes together. And then also if you come to African traditional religion, that is how it is, there is no difference between the sacred and the non-sacred. [...] I have body, soul and spirit, my body’s need has to be met, my soul’s need has to be met as well as my spirit’s. [...] It should be the holistic approach to development. When the development approach is holistic, you see that you teach the mind, the soul and the hand.” (Interview George Afrifa, 2017)

These findings seem to be in accordance with Narayan summarizing the results of large-scale participatory poverty assessments done by the World Bank around the turn of the century. One conclusion of this research is that notions of development among those that development cooperation is aimed at encompassing more than just economic and material dimensions:

“Poor people’s definitions of well-being are holistic. The good life is seen as multidimensional, with both material and psychological dimensions. It includes a dependable livelihood, peace of mind, good health, and belonging to a community. It encompasses safety; freedom of choice and action; food; and care of family and spirit. It is life with dignity.” (Narayan 2001)

This also resonates with Adogame’s understanding of “development from below”, which he uses to describe African Christianity’s contribution to development:

“Development from below is the type of development that, so far, sounds unimaginable to big-time development entrepreneurs such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World

Bank and the International Monetary Fund or some NGOs and scholars of development. Essentially, this is grassroots development that is associated with people’s lived experiences. This also has to do with people’s religious sensibilities, how religious bodies or persons imagine and engage in development. It also involves the religious or spiritual, moral and cultural dimensions that are inseparable from other spheres of society. Indigenous cosmologies are sophisticated systems for moral and cultural development, although they are now grossly neglected and ignored.” (Adogame 2016)

It becomes clear that from the perspective of African Initiated Churches and the communities they are embedded in, it is vital to note that spirituality is an essential part of a good life and hence a fundamental dimension in development.

Notions of development as situated knowledge

Notions of development are context-dependent. The notions of development that are dominant in official international development policy and practice are rooted in predominantly Western/European discourses of knowledge. These discourses are marked by the “secular distinction”. A clear but artificial boundary is drawn between the secular and the religious. The category of knowledge (and of development as a sub-sphere of knowledge) is associated with the secular sphere. The secular distinction itself originated in and is contingent on the Western/European discourses about attributions of religion and knowledge – it is a form of situated knowledge, which is embedded in its discursive context.⁶ The notions of development evolving from this context and hence shaped by the secular distinction should also be seen as situated knowledge. The values referred to in the “values-based” development cooperation advocated by BMZ, hence, continue to be values contingent on a German discursive and political context. This is equally true for the mode of potential cooperation with religious actors, which seems to be secularized German Christianity.

AICs are embedded in a specific discursive, material and practical context. They are rooted in a world view in which the spiritual, social and physical spheres constitute various layers of the same reality (Gifford 2015; Masondo 2013; Oosthuizen 1988; Freeman 2012). “[T]hey maintain a magico-religious worldview in sharp contrast to mainstream development’s rational secularism”, as Freeman (2012) notes. In this context, the secular distinction does not hold. In the same way that the dominant Western notion of development constitutes contextual knowledge contingent on a knowledge discourse marked by the secular distinction, views on development of AICs constitute contextual knowledge contingent on a knowledge discourse that is not based on this distinction. Both views on development, development as a “secular” concept (as predominant in the international development discourse) and development including spiritual dimensions (as predominant in African Initiated Churches), constitute forms of situated knowledge. Both forms of knowledge need to be brought into conversation with each other. In particular, contextual knowledge such as the specific views on development by African Initiated Churches needs to be taken seriously if development is to be effective in a given context.

To illustrate this with a very practical example, in an interview with one of the most prominent AIC leaders, Dr Rufus Okikiola Ositelu, Primate of The Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide and Pope of

⁶ Feldtkeller (2014) points out that “‘secular’ discourses, as much as ‘religious’ discourses, are a specific form of pragmatically creating reality through language. From a discourse analytic perspective there is no reason to a priori consider religious language pragmatics inferior to secular ones” (authors’ translation).

the Aladura Communion Worldwide, we posed the question what the added value of a church-owned hospital was. Is it, after all, not most important that there are health services offered regardless of who offers them? With regard to a church-owned hospital in Ogere, Nigeria, Ositelu responded that the added value is precisely in the spiritual dimension:

“[...] the founder of our church said that both school medicine and spiritual prayer are interrelated. They are not to be separated. So if somebody has malaria, yes, let the person go to the hospital for treatment and then help the person also with prayer. Das ist [sic] spirituality [...] one does not exclude the other, it's both inclusive. [...] And most people even wanted a hospital in Ogere. For example, they said [...] they can get the same service in another hospital, but the difference is, they don't get prayer. And in our own hospital you get the service, medical service, and prayer.” (Interview Rufus Okikiola Ositelu, 2017)

This indicates that in the context African Initiated Churches are rooted in, people do not only expect medical treatment in a hospital, but also expect a pastor to come and pray for them. In many African contexts, healing and treatment are to some extent spiritual issues. This is not to say that spiritual healing is prioritized over medical treatment. Pastor Dr Sello Simon Rasemana, founder and senior pastor of Second Chance Word and Wisdom Ministries in South Africa, makes this very clear: “God does not prevent you from getting a pill, no, He doesn't” (Interview Sello Simon Rasemana, 2016). However, in a world view that reckons with spiritual forces, it is of vital importance to also recognize the spiritual needs of the people to cater for them. Only religious communities can do so. This has direct practical consequences for development cooperation if it seeks to be relevant in the local context: should the construction of a hospital include a chapel? Should a hospital pastor and counsellor be financed with development funds?

Going back somewhat further in the history of German development cooperation, the controversy around the construction of a Christian college in the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (ECMY) in Ethiopia provides another illustrative example of a clash between Western contextual notions of development and those of an Ethiopian (Lutheran) church as Günther (1993) and Deressa (undated) describe. The ECMY was constructing a college with financial support from German Protestant development organizations. A conflict emerged when the German church donors refused to finance the construction of a chapel (as long as it was identifiable as such by a cross) and suggested framing it as a cinema instead. The controversy sparked substantial criticism of the German church donors by the ECMY, in the course of which ECMY formulated its view on the relationship of religion and development in its 1972 policy paper “On the Relationship Between Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development” (ECMY 1972). It fundamentally opposed a separation between spiritual and development-related activities, arguing that such separation was a Western one and stood against African and Christian views on humanity: “From the African point of view, it is hard to understand this dichotomy [between development and proclamation of faith] created in the West and reflected in their criteria for assistance laid down by the Donor Agencies.” Only “integral human development, where spiritual and material needs are seen together” was considered the right path to societal development – even in “developed” societies (ECMY 1972; cf. Günther 1993). Moreover, the document fundamentally asserted that the people themselves must be agents of their development processes and that churches, which are rooted in the communities, are well-placed to enable such agency.

This illustrates a fundamental clash between Western (in this case, German) notions of development operating on the basis of the secular distinction and African (in this case, Ethiopian) notions that do not make this distinction. The clash epitomizes the different discursive contexts and highlights the situatedness of notions of development as forms of situated knowledge. Significantly, on both sides of

the dispute were churches of the same confession – ECMY as a Lutheran church in Ethiopia and Lutheran churches as funders of the protestant development organizations in Germany. Hence, the different view on human development was not rooted in doctrinal differences. Moreover, the example illustrates that the notions of development by AICs outlined above are not necessarily specific to these churches but are likely to be shared at least by other churches that are embedded in similar cultural and discursive contexts.⁷ We conjecture that this even extends to other religious communities.

Engaging with values and beliefs in development cooperation

Thomsen (2017) introduces a “Pyramid of challenges and barriers to rights fulfilment” (cf. Figure 1). The different layers represent different levels at which change is aimed for by development cooperation.⁸ He points out that “up to now development actors have engaged mainly with the two top levels of the pyramid (‘policies’ and ‘practices’) and often avoided engaging with the bottom level of ‘ideas’ and ‘beliefs’ – even though this bottom level is one of the most important levels for sustainable change” (Thomsen 2017).

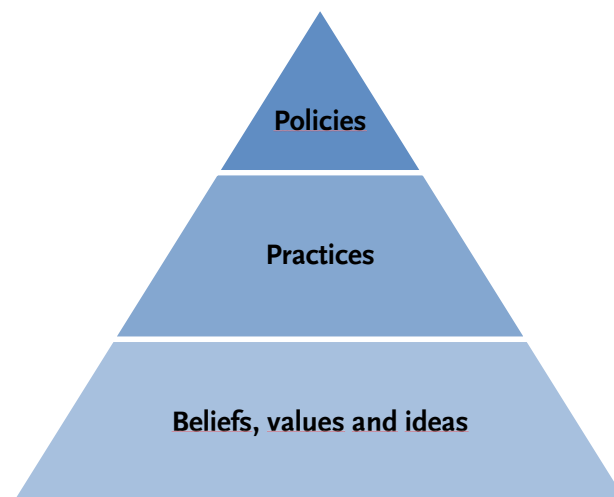


Figure 1: Pyramid of challenges and barriers to rights fulfilment (Source: Thomsen 2017)

Thomsen argues that it is precisely at the bottom of the pyramid, at the cultural foundations of society, that religious communities play a role. They have direct access to these foundations and contribute to shaping them. That is where, in Thomsen’s view, lies the added value of partnering with religious communities for sustainable development:

“[...] the contribution of religion and religious actors to societal change and development goes far beyond the traditional acclaim that FBOs run high quality clinics and schools and are present in the remotest

⁷ The ECMY 1972 document makes a similar point.

⁸ This graphical representation is schematic and does not account for the complex, correlative entanglements of beliefs, values, ideas, practices and policies of the religion and development nexus. It is also itself an expression of a functional approach to religion, asking for the optimal level of engagement with religious communities to the end of achieving – the secular concept of – sustainable development. Nonetheless it is indicative of the approach in official international development politics and brings to the fore the inherent contradiction in any approaches seeking to engage with religious communities on an ideological level on the basis of the secular distinction.

corners. While all that is true, it is still merely a sociological observation. It must be supplemented with the content and identity aspects of religion’s role in development.” (Thomsen 2017)

This is recognized by BMZ’s strategy on religion as well:

“Cooperation with religious communities offers a lot of potential [...] Religion is a key source of values. It provides guidance with regard to ethical and legal norms. [...] Religion can strengthen the resilience of individuals and entire societies because it offers explanations and rituals that help people deal with loss, suffering, failure and disaster. [...] Religious convictions are a major source of motivation for many people to work for comprehensive, sustainable development.” (BMZ 2016a)

However, in many contexts the bottom level of the triangle – the ideological dimension of beliefs, values and ideas – is inextricably intertwined with spirituality in manifold ways. To a large extent it is the spiritual dimension. If development cooperation wants to build on the potential of this dimension and realize the added value of partnering with religious communities as a “key source of values” (BMZ 2016a) by tapping into the value layer of society, it must make reference to spirituality. Otherwise no engagement is possible at the bottom level of the triangle. Thomsen outlines the fundamental challenge in this, from his perspective as Senior Advisor for International Ecumenical Cooperation and Religion & Development at DanChurchAid, a European religious development organization:

“But do international partners also see them [religious actors] as they see themselves – that is, with a spirituality of inclusion, with liturgies to comfort and build self-esteem and hope and with strong fellowships to nurture action and resilience? Do outside partners really respect them as partners, or just as convenient instruments? Are we willing to include in our thinking, intervention, and financing also these elements of their reality and activity?” (Thomsen 2017)

Conclusion

Development policy and research increasingly recognizes the potential contribution of religious communities for sustainable development. Partnering with religious communities and acknowledging their manifold roles as development actors can contribute substantial added value to development policy. Because of their rootedness in the cultural foundations of society, religious communities can have a high “transformative capacity”, as coined by Eisenstadt as “the capacity to legitimize, in religious or ideological terms, the development of new motivations, activities, and institutions” (Eisenstadt 1968). To achieve sustainable development, it is precisely this capacity to shift dominant paradigms which is required. Such transformative potential exists in African Initiated Churches. Without doubt, these churches offer great potential to international development cooperation, as shown inter alia by Turner (1980), Freeman (2012) and Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb (2016). At the same time, however, they fundamentally challenge dominant Western notions of development. Notions of development in AICs are intertwined with spirituality. This stands in stark contrast to the dominant perspective of development originating from a western, secularized knowledge discourse marked by a conceptual separation between the development and spirituality, as exemplified above with the case of German official development policy. The “secular distinction” does not exist in the world view of many African Initiated Churches and the contexts they are embedded in.

While the understandings of development differ, this is not to say that religious communities refute the sustainable development agenda. On the contrary, African Initiated Church leaders are widely supportive of the SDGs, illustrated by frequent statements such as “all of them are very important” when the seventeen different goals were discussed. This common ground is already an excellent pre-condition for fruitful cooperation. Differing notions of development, particularly the question of whether religious dimensions are part of development, do not necessarily mean that there is no possibility of collaboration. While most church leaders interviewed in South Africa, Ghana or Nigeria were sceptical to a possible separation of (explicitly) spiritual and material or social support and underlined their interrelatedness and the importance to provide both, many interviewees also mentioned that they would not necessarily have to take place at the same time. Many churches already use their wide networks to offer for example health-related services or training opportunities also to non-members or members of other religions. Not every development project needs to contain components such as praying or preaching, which would be qualified as being spiritual from the secular perspective. Coming back to Thomsen’s (2017) quote, even though he advocates for a deeper level of engagement, he points to the fact that religious communities do “run high quality clinics and schools and are present in the remotest corners”. At an institutional level, such activities could be entry points for development cooperation. However, without referring to values and beliefs, any engagement will remain constrained to activities and practices. To fully realize the added value of religion for sustainable development, development policy must engage with religious communities at a deeper level. If engagements between official development cooperation and religious communities are to be more than a functional relationship at the institutional level, and especially if development policy wants to engage with religious communities at the level of values and beliefs (in a “values-based” way, as BMZ’s publications stipulate), the various entanglements of beliefs, values, ideas, practices and policies must be acknowledged. Moreover, as Frost, Öhlmann and Gräß (2018) report, a central concern of the church leaders is to be respected in their religious identity. For development cooperation to be at eye level it is fundamental to respect this identity and to recognize the agency of religious partner organizations. This means taking their understanding of development seriously and acknowledging it as a legitimate objective of the development process.

There are many instances when the inclusion of the spiritual dimension has an added value for development policy that cannot be realized without it. In order to produce lasting change in people’s motivations and values – the foundation of Thomsen’s pyramid of challenges and barriers – the religious dimension must be part of the equation. This means questioning the dominant secular notions of development, particularly in many contexts of the global South, where forms of lived religion are much more explicit and intertwined with the material, social and cultural dimensions of people’s lives.

i „entwicklungswichtige Vorhaben“.

ii 2.1 Die Maßnahmen sollen insbesondere

- armen und benachteiligten Menschen und Gruppen zugutekommen (Option für die Armen); grundsätzlich werden dabei keine gesellschaftlichen oder religiösen Gruppen ausgegrenzt;
- Voraussetzungen dafür schaffen, dass Selbsthilfefähigkeit entwickelt und Eigenverantwortung gestärkt wird;
- dazu beitragen, dass die armen und benachteiligten Menschen ihre Anliegen und Rechte in Staat und Gesellschaft aktiv vertreten können;
- gemeinnützige Partner-/ Trägerstrukturen und Organisationen der Bevölkerung in die Lage versetzen, die Armen qualifiziert dabei zu unterstützen, ihre Lebenssituation zu verbessern und die dafür notwendigen Vorhaben zu planen, durchzuführen, zu begleiten und daraus zu lernen;
- geeignet sein, entwicklungswichtige Anliegen benachteiligter Gruppen zu stärken und deren Durchsetzung auf nationaler und transnationaler Ebene zu fördern, Handlungsspielräume zu erweitern sowie zu Frieden und Versöhnung beizutragen.“

iii „Maßnahmen im Bereich der kirchlichen Verkündigung sind von der Förderung [...] ausgeschlossen [...].“

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