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FAITH MATTERS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

International Consultation on Religion and Development

15—18 December 2014

Berlin, Germany

More than fifty international experts from Christian development organizations and churches from twenty-five countries, discussed some leading issues in religion and development during a consultation held 15—18 December 2014 in Berlin, Germany. The consultation, co-organized by Bread for the World and the Lutheran World Federation, included practitioners in development cooperation, researchers, policy makers and key representatives from such government agencies as the German ministry for development (BMZ), the European Parliament and EU Commission. A select number of key representatives from ecumenical partner churches and organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America were also present. The participants raised crucial questions regarding the understanding of partnership and emerging concepts of development and how to strengthen collaboration and the sharing of resources informed by religion in development.

Participants recognized that in recent years major regional and international actors in development cooperation have emphasized the need to reassess and newly appreciate the role of religious ideas, religious communities and religious practices for and in development. Whereas over the past decades the role of religion(s) was sidelined and not taken seriously because of the predominance of the secularization thesis and the modernization approach as the leading development paradigm within Western development discourse following World War II, the intersection between religion and development has today become increasingly important. There is the growing realization that, since the ideas, values and daily practices of the majority of the world's populations and of those for whom development initiatives are undertaken are informed by religion, such an orientation needs to be comprehensively engaged if development is to be sustainable through local ownership.

There was consensus on the central role of religion in development among the participants comprising academics, religious leaders and institutions of higher learning engaged in pioneering work on the interface between religion and development. While the participants are involved in different areas such as research, awareness raising efforts or policy advocacy, all have a clear understanding of the potential of religion for either good or bad. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the work and findings of these leading scholars and the good practices of the development actors from the religious sector to a large extent remain scattered, unconsolidated and often not fully noticed by relevant actors. The potential of local religious institutions for development remains under researched while the added value of religion in development can and should be properly supported by evidence.

It was noted that the recent “religious turn” in development is a mixed bag. Mutual misconceptions and prejudices between religious and political actors persist and in many so-called developing countries, religion, especially in its less critical manifestations, is easily being coopted into service to entrench hegemony or consumerism. Within Western development studies (both theory and practice), religion, when embraced, is often presented as the handmaid to the prevailing economic paradigm that it must endorse uncritically or which it can serve as raw material. Where it is rejected, it is seen as a nuisance that must be removed from the scene if full development is to be attained. Numerous experts affirm that actors in the development field need more “religious literacy” in order properly to understand how religion contributes to human progress and human rights, and that new actors in the religious field have to be more intentionally integrated into development policies and decision making. The consultation therefore emphasized the need to increase the religious literacy of staff in developmental organizations and politics and recommended further dialogue on how to translate factors and indicators of religious life in context assessments (national expertise papers) as well as in project criteria so as to contribute to mainstreaming the insights of the religion and development debates in current project processing.

The consultation underlined the necessity of a balanced and differentiated view of both religion(s) and development. While religion is certainly not the only and readymade answer to eradicating poverty or overcoming global injustices, development actors should intentionally and authentically engage with religion. Religion is regarded as a legitimate partner in development with a great potential for enhancing development outcomes so that these are no longer merely defined in terms of a traditional modernization agenda and primary economic growth orientation. The concept and perception of religion as well as the concept of development need to be redefined, constantly checked and critically reinterpreted; there are “good” and “constructive” concepts and understandings of religion and development as well as distorted, misguided and destructive ones. The participants were convinced that the redefinition of holistic and integral development and transformation that is currently sought by many actors needs vital and strategic input from religious traditions, since fundamental value decisions about the guiding principles of human and ecological developments are at stake today. As the traditional “development” language is disappearing and is replaced by the language of “human dignity for all” it is even more important that

religious organizations articulate their specific understanding of human dignity and a new concept of development.

The consultation took place at a moment when dominant assumptions of the secularization, privatization and regionalization of religion, especially in the West, are slowly giving way. Religion is no longer wholly assumed to be something relating only to the private sphere or a personal relationship to some supernatural deity. Religion both in the past and the present has had immense implications for the value systems within societies as well as actions to alleviate poverty and to promote justice and human rights. With globalization and the rapid migration of people, religion can no longer be seen as something only of relevance for the countries in the global South. It is accepted by many development actors across that in light of the 2015 sustainable development discourse, religion will have a critical function in the future life on this planet both for countries in the global North as well as in the global South. The global North will need to appreciate the value of religion in the process of integrating migrants while relearning the notion of holistic living necessary for sustainable economies informed by the religious concepts of the sacredness of creation. The global South will also need to strengthen the value of critical engagement with faith in order to minimize its potential for excess and the distortion of human dignity. We need to be prepared for a new global, honest, participatory and comprehensive conversation between North and South, East and West, about the critical role of religion for development. In the face of growing religious extremism there is no alternative to increasing the collaboration between all moderate actors in the field of religion and an approach to development which is oriented toward human rights and the dignity of human beings.

Today, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have adopted the institutionalization and professionalization of development cooperation informed by secular results and impact logic. For their own survival, FBOs will need clearly to demonstrate what special contribution they make and what added value they bring with their faith based conception of development as well as their models of cooperation with partners, most of who tend to be receivers of donor funding. Numerous studies have been undertaken on how to redefine the two aspects, but so far no particular system has been identified to consolidate this new self-understanding of FBOs. The new international debate on religion and development also includes the opportunity and need for Christian development organizations clearly to spell out their specific added value and conceptual perspectives in the context and wider global landscape of development organizations.

In light of the special development summits in 2015, the consultation saw this as a kairotic moment to translate religion and development perspectives into global policies on development. The example of the broad-based consultative process in German society on the “Charta for the Future: One World—Our Responsibility” by the German Ministry for Development Cooperation was seen as an important model for organizing a common process of reflection on the actual development goals in a social context in the global North, which can also serve as example for similar processes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As a follow up to the Berlin consultation it was suggested that researchers, scholars,

practitioners and religious institutions be brought together for continued fruitful engagement in issues of religion and development in the period 2015-2017. Major international events with a deliberate focus on development cooperation (climate justice Paris, new SGDs New York) will take place in 2015 and it should be explored how and with what targeted objectives key players in FBOs should raise their voices together on issues that are of strategic importance for the future of humankind. One of the key questions is, Who is at the table? Who invites und who is invited to the table? Who is excluded from the common table?

Participants did substantial work in ten thematic seminar groups which discussed the following areas of interest:

- a) Religion, peace and conflict solution
- b) The interface between human rights, religious identity and moral values
- c) Development and the freedom of religion
- d) Religious resources for sustainable development
- e) Religion, gender and development
- f) Evidencing the intersection between religion and development
- g) Interfaith partnerships in development
- h) New religious movements and their role in development
- i) Religious identities, impartiality and humanitarian aid
- j) Strategic capacity building and leadership training in religion and development.

Several important thematic areas were identified for which religion can be regarded as key and for which further global networking and exchange are needed in order to continue research, dialogue and collaboration. The following were identified as some of the most urgent thematic fields which required further action and reflection:

- a) Religion, conflict and peace building
- b) Religious values and transformation in economics, politics and society
- c) Religious health assets and new thinking on partnership
- d) Religion, gender, childhood and broader personhood construction
- e) Evidencing the intersection of religion and development at national and regional levels (national expertise papers; indicators for religious assets in social transformation; tools to introduce religious and cultural factors in project management)
- f) Interreligious dialogue and the concept and practice of development
- g) Religion and sustainability of life
- h) Religion, human rights and shared life
- i) New religious movements (new churches) and a new terminology of development
- j) Religious extremism, terrorism and the information age

- k) Religion, humanitarian aid, development and institutional capacity of religions
- l) Religion and strategic leadership for churches and nation building
- m) Pedagogies of change, education for transformation in the intersection of religion and development

Furthermore the consultation proposed that a strategic global religion and development collaboration platform be established and appointed a continuation committee of eight persons to oversee the process of establishing this network with the tentative name “International Network of Studies and Action in Religion and Development” (INSARD). The network would be based on the ACT Alliance model of “community of practice” with the LWF and Bread for the World taking the organizational lead. The platform will mainly aim at (a) increasing the visibility and role of religion in development discourse, research, practice and policy; (b) enabling the sharing of information and resources related to religion and development; and (c) establishing collaborative processes among faith-based development academics, actors and institutions in the North and South in order to avoid the duplication of efforts. Some of the most imminent needs and steps proposed for follow up of the consultation were the following.

- a) Establish and consolidate the many scattered efforts of existing information sharing and religion and development networks with some already identified during the conference to plan for issue related thematic conferences as a follow up (possibly one every other year), to focus on certain more specific issues and selected regions (i.e., gender, religion and development; religion, popular movements and development; human rights, religion and development; new churches and development; interreligious dialogue on development)
- b) Plan for an initiative for strategic leadership formation in the area of religion and development/ theology of enough/theology of sustainability (International Institute for Leadership Formation in Religion and Development)
- c) Share resources and course outlines/curricula of training courses on theology and development/religion and development, including an updated annotated bibliography
- d) Share new textbooks on religion and development and guides for developmental staff (like the ones produced by the Church of Sweden).

Participants commended the consultation as a very successful, rich and motivating platform of exchange and mutual learning whose impact will be felt at various direct and indirect levels. Keynote lectures and resources from group work were made available on a common website,

<http://www.globethics.net/web/religion-and-development?layoutPlid=13227594>

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