

HIGH-LEVEL COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUBLIC SECTOR AND RELIGIOUS AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS: FAD OR TREND?

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Progress towards shared Global Goals—the Millennium Development Goals, and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—calls for an inclusive “all hands on deck” approach. The holistic approach of the SDGs offers a common framework for harnessing the distinctive assets of religious and faith-based organizations² (RFBO) in national plans and global collaborations towards their achievement. Despite the challenges associated with forging collaboration across sectors, cultures, and value systems, we see signs of more sophisticated collaboration between public sector and RFBOs. These include a greater focus on evidence and cross-sector dialogue, new coordinating mechanisms, and renewed commitments to partnership.

We hypothesize that the reasons for this shift include: the development of Global Goals, and recognition from world leaders that innovative partnerships will be required to attain them; pressure from the elevated threat of violent extremism—fueled in part by religion and the challenge of integration of multi-faith refugees—leading to demand by governments and civil society for advances in religious literacy and engagement; shifts by donors in the locus and targeting of development financing to co-financing and partnerships with local actors; decades of dialogue and partnership slowly building mutual understanding and trust across faith and sectoral lines; and a slowly growing and increasingly robust evidence base in support of the contributions of RFBOs to community health and well-being.

In our experience, current public sector engagement with RFBOs exists across a continuum that includes: consultation to shape policy or inform project design and implementation; involving religious leaders as influential agents of change around key development goals related social and cultural attitudes and behaviors; and engagement of faith-based actors as implementing partners (or co-financers) of projects financed by development organizations.

Multilateral Engagement with Faith Groups

The collaboration between RFBOs and the United Nations group presents an interesting case example. In the 1970s, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Al-Azhar University—the largest and oldest center of Sunni Islamic learning in the world—signed one of the first Memorandum of Understanding that we know of between a multilateral entity and a major RFBO serving a modern development agenda. The Agreement established the Islamic Centre for Population Studies, which aimed to bridge religious and scientific knowledge and build the capacities of religious scholars, leaders, medical professionals, and government officials to deal with issues of reproductive health. In 1994, this Center played a key role in bridging tensions between human rights, and religious and cultural perspectives. Under the leadership of the UNFPA, the partnership resulted in the signing of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development by 174 nations.

Diverse partnerships between UN and RFBOs in all regions have since emerged, leading to the “Millennium Peace Summit” in 2000, at which UN Secretary General Kofi Anan convened over 1,000 religious leaders, RFBOs, and religious scholars. The participants endorsed the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had recently been signed by governments. This constituted an unprecedented show of solidarity and commitment, by religious and development leaders, to shared human development objectives.

The September 2001 terrorist attacks forced a recalibration of this bridge-building between the secularized development sector and religious groups. However, it also served to galvanize those

within the UN to work with religious partners at a country level and within the UN system, on specific dimensions of the MDGs, most notably health issues.

At the UN policy level, outreach to RFBOs was institutionalized in 2010 with the creation of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with Faith-Based Actors (IATF) as a UN Development Group mechanism. Today the Task Force has over 10 different operational and political UN offices as members, including the World Bank. In 2010, the IATF began convening a series of policy roundtables with RFBOs and religious leaders to provide evidence and policy reflections on religion, covering issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender equality, poverty eradication, conflict transformation and peace building (Karam 2012, UNFPA 2010). The IATF provides an annual Strategic Learning Exchange under the auspices of the UN Staff College, based on a peer-to-peer knowledge and policy analysis between UN and RFBO staffers, and is co-facilitated by UNAIDS, UNFPA and UNHCR. In 2011, the Office of the President of the General Assembly worked with the IATF and the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN to convene a celebration of a historic General Assembly resolution (UNGA Resolution 65/5) declaring the first week of February to be the UN's World Interfaith Harmony Week (World Interfaith Harmony Week 2016). In 2012, the IATF was requested by the UN Millennium Campaign to convene RFBO and UN partners to review the MDGs with a view to the Post 2015 development agenda. In 2016, the IATF was requested to work with the UN OCHA's World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat, to convene faith-based actors for a Special Session on Religious Engagement in Humanitarian work, held in Istanbul, May 2016.

While these kinds of achievements signal improved collaboration at a particular level, challenges remain. These include concerns around mutual "instrumentalization", difficulties of adequate representation of religious communities (whose diversity can rarely be represented by a few bodies), as well as generally diminishing resources for international development cooperation.

Another interesting case example of high level collaboration comes from the World Bank. After a robust period of engagement with RFBOs under the leadership of President Jim Wolfensohn (continued under the auspices of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, see Marshall and Van Saanen 2007, WFDD 2016), the World Bank's religious engagement began to wane. More recently, in 2014, President Jim Yong Kim, inspired by his field experience in Haiti and Peru working with Catholic lay communities to improve health outcomes for the poor, as well as a meeting with Pope Francis early in his tenure as President, decided to revitalize the World Bank's engagement with RFBOs. The new initiative demonstrated a clear recognition that religion matters to development and that RFBOs can significantly advance the World Bank's dual goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. During a 2015 meeting with RFBOs and religious leaders, Dr. Kim committed to ongoing dialogue and exploring ways to strengthen collaboration, particularly in the areas of health, education, social protection and in fragile states, and challenged RFBOs to strengthen evidence demonstrating development impact on a large scale.

Dialogue at a senior level with prominent RFBOs has provided a starting point to building goodwill and bringing about more constructive collaboration with RFBOs (MIE 2015). Due to the decentralized nature of the World Bank's operations, it is difficult to gather a composite or longitudinal picture of its collaboration with and financing of RFBOs (see Bonnel et al 2011). More recent partnerships with RFBOs include: supporting Cordaid in Zimbabwe through the Results for Performance Program; the Faiths United for Health (FUH) Campaign in Nigeria; the South Sudan Rapid Results Health project (RRHP); and in climate smart agriculture with the Alliance of Religion and Conversation (ARC).

However, it has been suggested that this enhanced dialogue has had only limited impact on permanently changing internal operations, and that the only way to further embed and mainstream engagement with faith actors across the World Bank's operations, is to enhance religious literacy across World Bank staff, and provide compelling evidence that greater engagement will be improve

development effectiveness and outcomes. Because of the World Bank's mandate and structure (in which sovereign governments serve as clients and shareholders), the World Bank has traditionally had a very state-centric view of development. However, this paradigm has been changing, for example through a recent commitment to include 100 percent beneficiary feedback in all World Bank financed projects by 2018, and through the 2013 strategy, which places a greater premium on engaging and building partnerships with a more diverse set of development stakeholders—including RFBOs. Nonetheless, some have suggested that many World Bank staff members will be reticent about the prospects of deepening partnerships with RBFOs unless the attitudes and practices of governments toward greater RFBO collaboration also changes.

New Energy and Enthusiasm for Multi-sectoral Faith Engagement

We are currently faced with a (re)surgence of development sector enthusiasm for high level (international and national) engagement with faith actors. In 2015 and 2016 there have been several high-level meetings bringing public and RFBOs together to explore conditions for more effective partnerships relating to development and humanitarian responses. For example, it has been suggested for some time that collaboration is hampered by poor evidence and limited evidence translation (see JLIF&LC and McKinsey 2015, Olivier et al 2015). In response, in 2015 the World Bank Group, and US, British and German governments jointly organized a meeting in partnership with major RFBOs and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIF&LC) at which evidence on mechanisms for partnership were assessed (see JLIF&LC 2015). In addition, there have been a number of new meetings and collaborations between UN agencies, the World Bank, donor governments and international faith-based agencies and networks. These meetings and collaborations indicate promise for new forms of multi-stakeholder engagement. For example, the IATF, The World Bank, and RFBOs worked collaboratively to produce a new Faith-based Action Framework to End Extreme Poverty and Realize the SDGs that provides a structure for the collective engagement of RFBOs (see ActAlliance 2015). In 2016, a new coordinating mechanism known as the International Partnership on Religion and Development (PaRD) was launched, providing a new mechanism for collaboration among bilateral donors and multilateral organizations, together with RFBO development partners. PaRD is being spearheaded by the German and US governments, together with the UK, the Netherlands and other bilateral partners to enhance collaboration on religious engagement, and to increase the effectiveness of development and humanitarian assistance.

Some governments have had longstanding relationships with RFBOs. However, other governments have been constrained by the secularization of politics, resulting in separation of religion and state, and therefore limiting engagement with RFBOs. There are signs of renewed interest (if not outright enthusiasm) at a bilateral level. For example, the British government recently engaged in a re-evaluation of partnerships with RFBOs. As a result, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) produced the Faith Partnership Principles (DFID 2012) which highlight the need to build a common understanding, to document evidence of distinctive, impactful contributions of faith groups, and to create open and frank forums for debate. Based on this, and drawing on a program of DFID-funded research on religion and development from the University of Birmingham's Religion and Development program (see Rakodi 2007), DFID has sought to build a better understanding on how to more effectively partner with faith groups—for example by supporting research with Stellenbosch University (on the role of faith communities and organizations in prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence) and with the British Academy (on the role of religion in conflict and peace building, see Silvestre and James 2015). The challenge has been to identify and engage on areas of difference in a constructive way without threatening collaborative work. Nonetheless, over the last two years, there have been signs of productive engagement on contentious issues such as female genital mutilation, contraception, sexual violence in conflict, early and forced marriage and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.

There are of course other examples of emerging bilateral collaboration (see other articles in this collection), as well as examples of cross-sector networks and platforms established to enhance collaboration, including the JLIF&LC, and the Faith Alliance for Health (FAH)—a new collaborative of US-based international faith-based NGOs—to name only a few (see Duff and Buckingham 2015, for recommendations for more effective collaboration).

However, despite this enthusiasm and action, challenges to collaboration remain. Key challenges include: clashes between the goals and modus operandi of public sector and religious actors, the desire of RFBOs to maintain autonomy, and competition between RFBOs limiting collective engagement and representation (the latter a problem that will only become more acute in an increasingly resource-constrained development context). The lack of an inclusive and widely accepted convening platform for RFBOs also constrains their ability to act collectively.

We have focused here on high level collaboration. Here, there is continued recognition that bilateral and multilateral development organizations need to foster greater religious literacy and competencies for engagement across their institutions. There are continued calls for improved evidence, in particular, evidence on whether these kinds of reinvigorated collaborations do generate added value and impact for global targets such as the SDGs. It is commonly acknowledged that greater knowledge is necessary, but insufficient in and of itself. The RFBOs need to be involved in partnerships from the onset, shaping mutual goals and outcomes. Progress needs to be made within each organization and within each collaborative network. Evidence needs to be translated, and lessons shared across communities and networks, which in our experience will provide momentum, political legitimacy and incentives for these efforts to become more mainstream, effective, and sustainable.

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² The authors note the challenges of terminology. For this article we use "religious" to pertain to congregational infrastructures, their leaders, and adherents, and we use "faith-based" to refer to organizations—often NGOS—and people inspired by faith in their work. When referring to both religious and faith-based organizations we use the acronym RFBOs. When referring inclusively to the collective aspects of religious communities and faith-based organizations, we use the term "religion" or "religious".

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