



Development Cooperation, Religion and Conflict

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In Africa – as in other regions of the world – political, economic and social upheavals often fracture society along cultural and/or religious lines. Whether such scenarios escalate into violent conflict or can be managed peacefully depends on many internal and external factors.

The existence of a democratic and well-functioning state is undoubtedly a key prerequisite for non-violent change. Peaceful transformation has good chances, too, when recognised legal mechanisms for conflict management are available. A further factor is the presence of values, traditions, experiences and actors that facilitate a constructive debate between different groups, interests and opinions about ways of shaping society's future. Development policy and civilian conflict

transformation are therefore increasingly focussing their attention on the role and significance of religion(s) in this context.

Religious beliefs and faith communities can help individuals and groups understand the changes occurring in their social environment and encourage them to examine and redefine ethical and social norms. They can also provide guidance for social relations. But in some cases, this guidance may be oversimplistic, denying the individual the opportunity to deal with change, reinforcing the status quo and perhaps even heightening tensions. In most societies and conflict scenarios, both these tendencies exist in a variety of forms.

Religion can thus be both an opportunity for and an impediment to the constructive management of development blockades and peaceful conflict transformation. This raises various questions about the relationship between religion(s), development, violence and peace, and between faith communities and development organisations.

In the context of Africa, development cooperation organisations are currently considering whether, and in which situations, religious (especially Islamic) actors offer untapped potential for promoting development cooperation. They are also exploring the role of religious differences and identities in inciting or resolving political crises. Four interrelated aspects are discussed in this briefing paper in order to facilitate discussions on religion and international cooperation.

The cooperation potential of religious actors

Due to the disappointing outcomes of efforts to reduce poverty, build democracy and encourage sustainable and peaceful development, attention has focussed to a greater extent on other social structures – beyond the state – as potential partners in bi- and multilateral development cooperation in recent years. They include "religious actors", who often enjoy greater public confidence than the state or non-government organisations. As religious groups often have a tradition of providing social services at grassroots level or performing a mediating role in

political processes, efforts are now being made to increase their involvement in development cooperation too.

However, it is almost impossible to make generalised statements about the "cooperation potential" of religious organisations in development and the management of conflict scenarios. In situations where the term "faith communities" does not include all the people who profess these beliefs or feel part of a particular faith or religious culture, the only organisations available for consideration are "institutionalised" forms of religion or bodies which are affiliated to these structures to a greater or lesser extent (e.g. faith-based civil society organisations).

It must also be borne in mind that the "church" in a Christian context has taken on many different forms of (self-)organisation and that religious bodies within Islam are even more polycentric. It is therefore essential to consider whether these various structures are genuinely representative and wield legitimate authority, and to look more closely at the religious and public activities of their representatives and their specific interest in cooperating with development cooperation structures.

This requires an understanding of these actors' positions on social issues and their willingness to regard development policy engagement as part of their religiosity or action motivated by religion. Both derive from an understanding of faith and from historical experiences of the relationship between the formation of religious identity and social development.

These religious actors' relationship to the state or other power structures may be close and uncritical (in some cases, religious leaders hold both spiritual and public offices, especially in more traditional regions), or it may be critical, confrontational and distant. Their social responsibility may extend only to members of their own faith community, or it may be directed at the community as a whole regardless of religion. "Religious actors" may also reflect the values and principles of a politically dominant group, camouflaging power-political interests and differences.

The German church development organisations are familiar with most of the socially engaged Christian structures in Africa through their network of contacts. They participate in international networking and discussions and thus have the opportunity to engage in a – sometimes contentious – exchange of views with their church partners on Christians' role and responsibilities in development, peace and justice. But it is less clear whether Islamic religious structures in Africa are involved in similar Africa-wide or international debates or, indeed, whether they focus explicitly on issues relating to the social dimension of religion.

Germany's official development cooperation (DC) must consider how it would justify cooperation with local religious structures to a foreign government and what effects such cooperation has on the social position of the religious group(s) concerned.

Questions arising while relating to religious actors include the following:

- Official DC, NGOs and church development agencies emphasise that access to development measures is not dependent on membership of a specific religion. Must this principle be broadened in cases where DC seeks to operate in both a culture- and conflict-sensitive way?
- Is the international development agencies' interest in cooperating with African religious bodies based primarily on their socio-cultural potential? Is it primarily driven by an interest in a) expanding DC to new target groups or b) boosting its legitimacy through contacts with organised forms of religion? Are there any specific social issues which explicitly necessitate the involvement of religious structures in development processes? Should

a distinction be made between Islamic and Christian structures in this context?

- Is there a need for more specific discussions between official DC and the German church development organisations about relations between Christians and Muslims and the significance of religion and faith communities in development processes?

The cooperation potential of governmental and semi-autonomous actors from the Arab region

The rising influence of Islam is apparent in many African countries. Organisations and companies from "Islamic" countries (Arab or North African oil-producing countries) not only exercise economic and political influence. The Arab influence is also evident in some manifestations of African Islam and in the self-perception of African Muslims in relation to their social status in formally secular states. Young Africans are being offered the opportunity to study on the Arabian Peninsula, and the construction of mosques and Koranic schools is being funded from abroad. Symbols of Islamic devoutness are more visible in the public arena than before. In crisis situations, emergency aid is delivered via the mosques (with financial support from the Arab countries), which also provide healthcare and education.

As these social measures tend to take the form of relief or subsidies provided on a more or less ad hoc basis, they rarely fulfil the criteria for closer cooperation with African development agencies or the German DC organisations which support them. Little information is available about the instruments, range and, most importantly, the principles governing the development activities and programmes undertaken or supported by Arab organisations in Africa, and the extent to which they conform to the OECD's definition of ODA is unclear.

In light of the obstacles to development which exist in the Arab countries themselves (including the close link between widespread religious homogeneity and national identity on the one hand and the relationship between the state and religion on the other), it may be assumed that Germany's official development strategies and programmes differ from those pursued by governmental and semi-autonomous development and funding agencies from the Arab countries. But if these differences do exist, they are more likely to be the outcome of the dominant development and modernisation concepts in Arab societies or governments or specific political and economic interests than Islamic traditions.

Questions arising while relating to Arab actors include the following:

- Does German official DC – both bilateral and multilateral – have any experience of working with government agencies or representatives of the Arab countries? What inferences can be drawn about their understanding of development processes in Africa and a conflict-sensitive role for DC? Is a dialogue about differing concepts necessary and possible? Who should be involved from Germany and Africa?
- Similarly, do any German NGOs working in development (or their African partners) have any experience of working with non-governmental or semi-autonomous agencies from the Arab countries?
- What opportunities does closer cooperation with organisations from the Arab countries offer in order to avoid conflicting development processes in Africa?

The manipulation of religious beliefs for political purposes

As long as the hopes which Africa has pinned on independent statehood, democracy and material and social prosperity from development remain unfulfilled, as long as traditional safety nets break down and the state remains too weak to guarantee a balance of social interests, there is a risk that religion or ethnicity will become a key factor determining access to public services or resources.

In some countries, it is apparent that in the struggle for power and influence, cultural and religious identity is deliberately being manipulated in political conflicts. The more anxieties are stirred up about the future or about other social groups or the loss of beliefs and values, and the more religious divisions are drawn in politics and other areas of life, the greater the risk that conflicts will escalate into violence.

If conflicts of interest (e.g. over the distribution of power and resources) mutate into conflicts of identity, it becomes even more difficult to resolve them peacefully. Unlike divergent social and economic interests, intra- or inter-religious differences are not open to negotiation. If a functioning nation-state is still in the process of being established or if state-building strategies are reversed by group interests, a willingness to make religiously motivated sacrifices and degrade other groups perpetuates instability and makes it more difficult to negotiate a peaceful solution to conflicts.

Three strategies are commonly discussed to prevent or neutralise efforts to manipulate religious differences as a means of gaining or maintaining political power:

- strategies to contain, control or intimidate in order to weaken the capacities of political actors who present themselves as religious, thereby reducing support for their aims and actions in milieus dominated by religion;
- strategies to mobilise groups which reach across identity-based divisions and work for peace and mutual respect (strengthening actors in all religions who clearly reject violence and seek cooperation);
- democracy-building strategies (if distribution conflicts lose momentum or become manageable, the potential for violence is reduced. Discussion of the relationship between politics and religion).

Questions relating to the instrumentalisation of religious differences in conflicts include the following:

- Which strategies are being pursued in DC in order to prevent or contain conflicts based on dualistic distinctions and cultural values? How can they link in with strategies aimed at (re-)building statehood in failing or failed states?
- Which experience has been gained in international DC or in the development work undertaken by the political party foundations in scenarios in which political actors manipulate cultural differences for political purposes? Do the church development organisations have any experience of strategies aimed at mobilising different religious groups for peace and mutual respect?
- Where are the dividing lines between legitimate debate about positive religious freedom and its open or veiled use for power-political purposes? Can the European model of "democracy, a secular state and religious freedom" be transferred to other contexts? Should this issue be raised by

DC in discussions about good governance and the relationship between government and civil society actors?

The reaction of religion(s) to social upheaval

In many places, the public is increasingly responding to the globalisation process by rejecting "change" that it perceives as a threat to individual survival, social and cultural values, and traditional community networks. This being the case, can intra- or inter-religious conflicts and the ensuing fragmentation of society be explained solely in terms of political instrumentalisation?

At present, religion is often seen as a source of conflict in processes of radical social change. This may be partly due to the impacts of globalisation, which has created a need to redefine identities, not only at global and nation-state level but also within religions. The question of how to deal with the differentiation or restructuring of politics, society, the economy and culture can create conflicts within cultures and religions as well.

Islam appears to be more affected by this modernisation conflict than Christianity, for example. Over the centuries, Christianity has explored issues of self-determination and external control, the relationship between the individual and society, and the role of religion in society and the state. In Africa too, respect for differences and a recognition of pluralism (which are now taken for granted in Europe) are more likely to be accepted in Christian milieus than among Muslims.

In some ways, Islamism – viewed in the West as fundamentalism rooted in unbending traditionalism – is a response to the failure to modernise which, in the 20th century, distinguishes Islam from the West. A desire to revert to the ethics of early Islam as the basis for a modern political, legal and economic system has created fundamentalist or extremist movements which derive every aspect of the Muslim lifestyle and social system directly from Islam as the will of Allah. But Islamic theological debate has also produced movements which interpret the religious sources in their historical context and accept the complexity of modern societies. Some of these movements champion a separation of religious authority from the state, or seek to define new relationships between religion and secularism and between democracy and a cultural identity based on Islam.

So how should development cooperation respond to dynamic religious and cultural change? Key questions arising in this context are as follows:

- DC should not openly or covertly strengthen specific religious or theological groups or involve itself in discussions about religious differences. But should it explicitly promote a debate about human rights, the management of violent conflict or respect for others' beliefs, especially in regions where external and internal problems lead to marked cultural lines of conflict? Should it encourage the practice of peaceful coexistence by more indirect means?
- If cultural differentiation is assumed to be integral to the development of a modern society, which intercultural skills are necessary for workers in the field, especially in situations where value-based conflicts between traditionalists and modernists have an impact on DC?
- How should development cooperation that aims to promote peaceful coexistence between social groups respond if the concepts presented by faith communities (e.g. on the rights and responsibilities of women and men, attitudes to education, conflict management, different citizenship status for Muslims and non-Muslims) are likely to cause conflicts?

Links & Literature

Qantara: www.qantara.de – Internet portal to "Dialogue with the Islamic World"

BBC: www.bbc.co.uk/religion - Portal to "Religion & Ethics"

Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World: www.isim.nl/

Life & Peace Institute (Uppsala): www.life-peace.org – "New Routes" journal

United States Institute of Peace: www.usip.org/muslimworld/

World Faiths Development Dialogue: www.wfdd.org.uk

World Conference of Religions for Peace: www.wcrp.org

World Bank: www.worldbank.org – Follow link from "Topics in Development" to: "Faiths and Development" (dialogue on a range of value and ethically-related issues)

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