



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## **Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals**

**FBO Workshop on Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals**

**Islamic Relief Academy, Birmingham**

**Monday February 13th 2017 11am-5pm**

### **Aims of the workshop**

This workshop was the first event of a new research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on the topic of religions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It brought together faith-based organizations and other actors in the UK involved in religions & development practice to examine the new SDGs. The workshop had two aims, one to garner information about the consultation process/implementation of SDGs for UK based organisations and the second to inform our country conferences in India and Ethiopia. We were interested to find out from participants -

- To what extent do you feel that religious voices were enabled to be heard in the consultation process for the SDGs and with what effect?
- In what ways and to what extent do you think religious perspectives were included in the formulation of the SDGs?
- To what extent and in what ways are you now beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs in your work?
- Do you feel the SDGs provide a useful framework to tackle 'sustainable development' globally? What are the advantages and the disadvantages of working within the SDG framework?

We finished the workshop with a discussion in two groups, one for India and one for Ethiopia, that was guided by the following questions:

- What, in your opinion, are the gaps and priorities in research around religion and the 2030 sustainable development agenda?
- How engaged are religious groups/FBOs in policy discourses around religion and sustainable development – how could it be done better – and how might this network facilitate that?
- Who are the key stakeholders to engage at the country level around the SDGs? What networks are you connecting with to talk about the SDGs?
- How best might the network integrate academic and non-academic partners?

## Discussion of General Questions

*To what extent do you feel that religious voices were enabled to be heard in the consultation process and with what effect?*

It was felt that the UN had not specifically consulted FBOs and other faith actors about the SDGs and instead they had/have been ‘knocking at the door’ to have their say. Where FBOs were involved in the consultation this tended to be those who were already ‘at the table’, who were funded and involved in UN networks. Moreover, they were involved more as International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) than as ‘faith actors’ *per se* – i.e. the fact that they were ‘faith-based’ was not the reason for them being included, this was incidental. The questions implicit about how faith based organisations represent themselves to others and where/when they bring their faith voice into the discussion are constant challenges for many agencies. FBOs move in different worlds and take on different identities.

The FBOs present had typically consulted their country offices about the SDG process in order to inform their response. However, the regional consultations organized by the UN did not specifically reach out to faith actors, including religious leaders and organizations.

Participants reported that it was not only faith groups that felt frustrated by the lack of grassroots consultation, but Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) more widely. It was felt that while the SDG process started very consultatively, it ended up state-dominated. CSOs, including faith-based actors, were largely excluded and only allowed 2 minutes at end of day after the states had given long speeches. However, it will be the faith groups and other CSOs who will be largely responsible for implementation.

The religious actors that were involved in the consultation process were mainly Christian; there were very few non-Christian FBOs represented. This is largely due to the fact that other faith traditions lack the religious International NGOs that acted as a gateway into the consultation process. It was also highlighted that the very discourse on the SDGs was highly Christian. The current Pope for instance has had a large impact on debates through his recent encyclical *Laudato si’*.

A special focus of the country conferences therefore will be to what extent the SDGs are seen as a foreign or even inherently Christian imposition by religious actors from other faiths.

*In what ways and to what extent do you think religious perspectives were included in the formulation of the SDGs? If a full range of faith actors had not been sufficiently consulted about the SDGs what are the consequences, and how might the list of goals have been different had they been?*

Interestingly, the discussion of these questions highlighted potential tensions between religious values and development aims and indicators. One participant noted that there had been debate about the input of faith voices in terms of a conservative backlash, particularly against elements of goal 5 that focused on gender equality. Within the global development community, it was seen as a triumph of those promoting equality and justice that reproductive rights had been included despite the objections of many faith actors that this is short-hand for the advocacy of abortion and is detrimental to the sanctity of the family. Another participant noted that if faith voices had been taken into account more fully, then it is likely that there would have been an emphasis on the strengthening of family values, again a discourse that is in tension with many feminist views that would consider this to be a proxy for maintaining gender division and inequity in the family. Another expressed the view that any discourse outside the general 'equality' consensus is side-lined.

There was a discussion about indicators for the SDGs, which are currently being decided in different settings. Participants wondered what 'faith-based indicators' might look like and whether they would be accepted as part of the SDG framework. Perhaps there is a need to have other or additional indicators for the work of FBOs and would this fit with mainstream indicators? This could include tangible aspects such as an emphasis on justice over economics, restorative economics over neo-liberal, but also the intangible dimensions that faith traditions focus on that point beyond the material world. Other things that were raised include the fact that there is no mention of religious freedom and a lack of focus on the 'human heart and the brokenness of relationships'.

Overall, this discussion showed that value discourses are a primary area of concern for FBOs when communicating and implementing the SDGs and thereby deserve close scrutiny in the country conferences.

*To what extent and in what ways are you now beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs in your work?*

Here the discussion reflected a wide spectrum of responses, showing that – like many other CSOs and NGOs – faith-based development actors engage with the SDGs in very different intensities. Some participants reported that so far nothing had really changed since the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda, whereas others were waiting to see what the UK government commits to around climate change before making any greater strategic moves. Some felt that the SDGs did not really offer anything new (e.g. ideas about sustainable development have been around for ages) but that it was just another framework to refer to in funding proposals. Others, however, argued that it did offer something new through a greater focus on inequality and inclusion, and that the focus on universality (i.e. that the Global North are also accountable to the framework) added a new dimension. Compared to the MDGs another participant pointed out that the SDGs allow a shift from a single issue focus to cross-cutting/interconnected issues. Others were full of praise for the large focus on climate change in the 2030 agenda and on sustainability, and that it had brought them into areas of work that they had not previously focused on (e.g. ecology and environmentalism). Another felt that the SDG agenda brings a strong focus to examining gender inequality as a key driver of poverty.

As a whole it will be important for the country conferences to assess the degree in which religious actors actually take note of and engage with the SDGs.

*Which SDGs have you been most engaged with and why? Which SDGs have you not engaged with, or to a lesser extent, and why?*

In this group discussion activity, participants were asked to identify the three most important SDGs for their organization, the three least important ones, and the three most challenging ones for religious actors. The tabulated results can be viewed below. While some results are predictable, it is interesting to note that Gender Equality (SDG 5) was voted both the most important as well as the most controversial one. Partnership was seen as another challenging goal, reflecting that the many complexities of collaboration are equally if not more intractable for FBOs. The most supported goals were people-centred whereas ecological and economic goals received the least support.

No	Title	most important	least important	most challenging
1	no poverty	9	0	1
2	zero hunger	5	1	0
3	good health and well-being	6	0	4
4	quality education	4	2	0
5	gender equality	10	0	14
6	clean water and sanitation	6	2	0
7	affordable and clean energy	0	5	0
8	decent work and economic growth	2	3	5
9	industry, innovation and infrastructure	1	12	4
10	reduced inequalities	6	2	4
11	sustainable cities and communities	4	0	2
12	responsible consumption and production	0	6	3
13	climate action	4	1	4
14	life below water	0	12	2
15	life on land	0	3	1
16	peace, justice and strong institutions	9	2	3
17	partnership for the goals	1	4	8

Several interesting observations and questions arose in discussing this exercise. Prioritizing SDGs was said to be difficult, because many of the goals are very interlinked and difficult to weigh against each other. Many therefore chose to either go by the focus of their organization or to select a goal that seemed to tackle 'root causes.' What emerged here mirrored some of the SDG consulta-

tions: the SDGs seem to work better as an advocacy framework than a policy framework, highlighting once again tensions between development policy and development practice.

In discussing what made an SDG challenging for religion, some participants noted that due to the traditional (Western) focus of religions on personal, intimate aspects of life, it was hardly surprising that gender ended up on top of the list. Others noted that they had explicitly not picked gender, because they felt that the more challenging SDGs are the ones religions do not tend to talk about. Others emphasized that the dominance of the state in development has taken certain dimensions outside of religious discourse (e.g. education or local economies), while still others noted that insurgent religions (such as certain reform movements) might reflect the challenge of global policy clashing with local aspirations.

It became clear that the country workshops will need to include some activities aimed at understanding how local religious actors react to the SDGs: especially how they amplify, reject, or ignore some goals and targets.

*Do you feel the SDGs provide a useful framework to tackle 'sustainable development' globally? What are the advantages and the disadvantages of working within the SDG framework?*

This question was intended to probe more generally what practitioners thought about the programmatic approach of the SDGs and what challenges it poses. Named advantages included: they are more holistic; provide a common narrative which is good; way of holding the UK government accountable; they are universal; they are broader than the MDGs; they focus on 'inclusion' – leave no one behind has now been mainstreamed into programming; they inject global norms into the development agenda; they focus on partnership rather than aid – focus is on capacity building. Others thought they were a positive framework but ambitious and there were questions around how they were going to be implemented. Disadvantages included: there is no reference to context – power, inequalities etc...; they are not realistic; values are stated in preamble but not in goals; measurement doesn't get to the human condition, they are technocratic goals that clash with holistic side of people; doubts that (quantitative) goal setting is the best way to approach development; they don't challenge neoliberalism; reproductive health targets totally disconnected/unrealistic in light of people's lived reality; they disperse responsibility in government – no accountability; there is a very high level of disconnect from local levels; there is no focus on the 'human heart'.

While the main SDG process had been consultative, other related processes had been less so, namely that around financing and that around climate change.

There was also a discussion about who they served. Some said governments, particularly economically and politically strong governments (although accountability might be difficult for governments), others said everyone – they are a 'new normative for all', or civil society. There was no discussion or mention of the private sector, when this is specifically a focus of the SDGs. Related to this, participants weren't clear whether the SDGs are a policy framework or an advocacy framework. This was also raised during the consultation process where some argued that they were a marketing ploy rather than something that could be translated into practice (or that sufficient resources would be directed towards).

We also discussed what difference the fact that they are 'global' makes to people's work. Some mentioned that donors don't want to fund change in their own countries but that the global nature of the SDGs should begin to make organizations work in the UK/Europe. Others praised them for providing a framework to join up work in the North and South, but some worried that this could divert funds from the South to the North.

While this group activity brought out the tension between global advocacy/policy and local work, many religious organizations are no strangers to similar tensions. It will be important for the country workshops to include global and local religious actors alike in order to understand how the organizational dynamics of faith-based organizations will influence the attitude toward and adoption of the SDGs.

## **Country-Specific Discussion of issues to be born in mind for India and Ethiopia conference programming**

In two groups, one for India and one for Ethiopia, discussions were generated, stimulated by these questions:

- What, in your opinion, are the gaps and priorities in research around religion and the sustainable development agenda?
- How engaged are religious groups/FBOs in policy discourses around religion and sustainable development – how could it be done better – and how might this network facilitate that?
- Who are the key stakeholders to engage at the country level around the SDGs? What networks are you connecting with to talk about the SDGs?
- How best might the network integrate academic and non-academic partners?

### ***India:***

A focus on religion and development has only been evidence in India since the last 10-15 years, reflecting its rise globally. But there were also key events in India that contributed to the rise in interest in this area, not least the 2006 Sachar Committee report that highlighted the disadvantages experienced by the Muslim minorities in the country. However, the findings of the report have not been implemented in the way that they should have been, reflecting in part the concern of the previous Congress government that it could be perceived as them favouring Muslims. The socio-political climate in India has shifted once more since the election of the BJP and it is now time to revisit the Sachar Report in the light of this, as well as in the light of the new commitment of the Indian government to the SDG framework. Our participants felt that it was becoming increasingly challenging to carry out work on religion and development in India, but that development discourse was ever more useful to frame discussions of justice and security in a context where minorities were discriminated against, not least in the name of their religious identities, in an era where the Indian state could be seen to have its own 'faith based development agenda'. In India, Christian FBOs have been the most prominent in working on development issues, with many growing out of earlier missionary activity to convert people to Christianity. Faith-Based Development Organisations (FBDOs) do exist within Muslim communities and Hindu communities, but they are much less developed, with the Muslim ones least so and with respect to the Hindu organizations, 'at least 90% are Hindutva focussed', and these are focused on conversion rather than 'development', as with Christian missionaries. There are also Buddhist Dalit organizations, representing another marginalized constituency.

As part of this network project in India, participants felt that it would be useful to map the different types of religious constituencies that work on development from a Hindu perspective, as this has become more complex and diverse over the past decade. In our discussion, we began to map out this terrain:

- The liberal Hindu voice: secular and against religion in the public sphere, anti-Hindutva
- Sangh Parivar (i.e. sphere of organizations linked to Hindutva – e.g. BJP, VHP, RSS – what are the ‘new names’ for the RSS fronted groups that are emerging, also at the international level?)
- Guru led groups – some linked to Hindutva, others nothing to do with Hindutva formally although some may align ideologically – Radhasoamis, Sai Baba
- Caste-based organizations particularly upper caste. Often end up aligning with Hindutva. May invoke Hinduism rather than Hindutva
- New Spiritualities – e.g. modern yoga

### ***Ethiopia:***

Religion and development are both very current subjects in Ethiopia, but are not usually discussed together. The state has put economic development at the centre of its policy and politics for the past decades and exercises considerable control over the development sector through various rules and regulations, especially in the much-discussed NGO law of 2009. Religious organizations are also subject to regulations mandating their registration and certain aspects of their operation, but as a whole most religious groups enjoy more freedom than under previous governments. The resulting increased visibility of religious plurality and certain changes in religious affiliation (e.g. the significant rise of Protestantism) have not been without tensions, especially regarding various reform movements within the Orthodox Church, Islam, and Protestantism. Many religious groups are active in charitable or developmental causes, but the state mandates a strict organizational separation between these initiatives and the religious or spiritual wings of the same community.

There has been relatively little research on the intersection of religion and development in Ethiopia so far. Development studies is an established discipline at Ethiopia’s universities, but Religious Studies is not represented here and rather takes the form of various seminaries or religious training institutions under the auspices of Ethiopia’s faith communities. Therefore, there is relatively little engagement between both fields, and it will be a main aim of the Ethiopia conference to help stimulate more exchange.

Considering this situation and the group discussion stimulus, the participants identified a number of questions that would be of particular interest for the Ethiopia conference:

- What is the position of FBOs in the NGO landscape? Have most religious groups only engaged in development recently? Do they offer alternative approaches to development and do they seek to be involved in policy discussions?
- To what extent have FBOs been consulted in the SDG process? Have they or are they developing their own positions toward individual SDG targets and indicators?
- Given the rules regarding the registration of FBOs and NGOs as well as the strict separation between spiritual and charitable work, how are these different entities organized and what effect has this had on their work and fundraising? In how far does the development wing of an FBO differ from an NGO?

- How do traditional religious communities conform to the registration requirements and have been reformed by them, especially considering their community-based organization and poverty alleviation methods?
- How have the rules governing external funding and advocacy work impacted FBOs? Have they shifted away from advocacy to service provision or have they become more reliant on Ethiopian funds to maintain their advocacy work?
- What is the role of various diaspora religious communities in funding and organizing FBOs in Ethiopia, both with regard to their spiritual and their charitable work?
- How are the various courses on development offered by numerous religious training institutions conceptualized and delivered? What impact have they had on the upcoming clergy and lay personnel of these communities? What measure of collaboration is there between these provisions and the various development studies departments in Ethiopia's universities?
- How are new Religious Councils working out, which were established by the government at regional, zone, and woreda levels in order to discuss and resolve problems? Have they also served as venues for the discussion of development policy and perhaps the SDGs?

## **Main requests/aims for the research network going forward**

*To ensure that the network engages with a comprehensive range of individuals and organizations from different faith traditions*

The participants in the workshop represented mostly Christian organizations but there were also a good number of Muslim groups present. This was noted by a number of those present. While the organizers had attempted to be inclusive and had invited representatives from organizations linked to different faith traditions, this imbalance is itself reflective of the greater number of Christian and Muslim formal FBOs in the UK (and indeed globally) and therefore the likelihood that members of these were more likely to be able to attend, as well as to be already engaging with the SDGs. This signals that this network needs to be aware of as it develops if it is to be able to generate inclusivity around engagement with the SDGs in the UK and internationally. In India, for instance, one of the network's focus countries, Muslim, *dalit* and tribal (*adivasi*) groups are most socially excluded and economically disadvantaged (and women, sexual minorities and the disabled even more so within these groups) and the network needs to pay attention to including these in its activities around the SDGs. Participants working in Ethiopia similarly noted the importance of looking at how traditional religions relate to development issues. and the SDGs. This poses the question as to how far development aims, methods, and discussions still reflect a Western and implicitly Christian ethos, making the SDGs and their teleological process harder to contextualize in other religious environments.

*Ensuring that the SDGs are relevant to communities in the global south, facilitating ownership*

This is another point that emphasizes the importance of strategies to ensure inclusion. Islamic Relief had concern that it would be challenging for some Islamic settings to embrace the SDGs, not least from a suspicion that they are 'secular' and 'western'. To counter this IR has been involved in

a process of 'Engaging Muslim Communities and the SDGs' and have set up a Muslim Platform for Sustainable Development. This has included regional consultations and the establishment of a steering group involving Muslim CSOs. This issue of 'translation' of the SDGs or of making them relevant in settings where people have different social and cultural expectations and experiences will apply to other faith traditions and is something that the network will focus on.

*Where is the challenge to neo-liberal economics?*

Participants were critical that the SDGs assumed a neo-liberal economic model and that this is problematic since there is evidence that it is complicit in creating and sustaining poverty and inequality globally. Moreover, its disjointed approach to development via quantifiable indicators in essence economizes development rather than offering a comprehensive vision. Instead, many participants wanted to see more focus on alternative economic frameworks with social justice and ethics at their core, which would include faith-based visions of society and religious charitable practices. For example, some participants were also critical that the SDGs pay no attention to Islamic social financing (ISF) as an alternative to neo-liberal economics. However, it was mentioned that elsewhere the UN has started to understand the importance of ISF, where flows of *zakat* are in excess of all multi-and bi-lateral aid, and larger than flows of Christian-origin aid. The research network will investigate whether and how these ideological concerns with the SDG framework are voiced by religious actors in Ethiopia and India as well.

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