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How to cooperate with religious actors on sustainable development – Three tips

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Bonn, 17 February 2016. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) hosted an international conference in Berlin on 17 and 18 February 2016 to explore the potential of religion for promoting sustainable development. The title of the conference, "Religion as a partner for change", suggests that religion has a fundamentally positive impact on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. We agree that religion can be important but it remains an open question how to best cooperate with religious actors.

Religion can contribute to sustainable development. This can be seen, for example, in the successful campaigns by Muslim imams against female genital mutilation, in the provision of humanitarian aid to crisis regions by faith-based non-governmental organisations, and in the Pope's efforts to promote environmental conservation. At the same time, different religious positions can serve to intensify societal and violent conflict. As such, international policy-makers engage in dialogue with religiously motivated organisations or actively involve them in identifying and implementing solutions. Consequently, state and religious organisations may at times need to work together in the global North and South, not least in the context of German foreign and development policy, in order to achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals.

Religion changes the world – and the world also changes religion

All religions, from Orthodox Christianity to Wahabi Islam, adapt to their respective socio-cultural and political contexts. For example, when the German Federal Republic was being established after the Second World War, the Protestant Church of Germany initially opposed the introduction of parliamentary democracy, fearing a repeat of the failure of the Weimar Republic. Once German parliamentary democracy was re-established, the Protestant Church accepted the political system and has since become an important supporter of democracy. In general, the political and social ideals of religions and religious denominations change over time and from place to place. As such, there are no blueprints in international policy-making for cooperation with particular religious groups and organisations within the Christian, Islamic and Buddhist faiths, for example. Nonetheless, there are at least three general criteria to bear in mind when cooperating with religious actors.

Three tips for working with religious organisations

Firstly, religious organisations and their members are only a force for sustainable development and peace if

they are able to pursue a rational-instrumental approach. As well as being compatible with the goals of international cooperation, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015, their values must also be put into practice in a way that promotes the achievement of the SDGs. Consequently, it is not religious values, but rather the potential contribution that spiritual leaders, believers and faith-based organisations such as Islamic Relief can make to sustainable development that takes precedence in cooperation arrangements. How do we know that religious organisations are willing to engage in functional cooperation? One indicator is the existing partnerships and alliances with secular organisations independent of the state, such as NGOs and trade unions. If religious bodies exclusively relate to their own faith community, this may suggest that they do not support universal and inclusive development goals.

Secondly, it is even more essential for religious organisations than for non-religious organisations that partnerships are integrated rather than one-dimensional and functionally focused on a single goal. For instance, religious organisations might promote environmental sustainability but simultaneously failing to observe basic human rights. International policy-makers face the dilemma of lending overall legitimacy to religious actors by collaborating with them on sustainability issues, thereby potentially creating the impression that human rights violations are tolerated. All that foreign and development policy can do in this context is to minimise this (potential) instrumentalisation while also using other policy measures to help strengthen human rights organisations locally. Such organisations may also include liberal streams within existing religious bodies.

Thirdly, successful cooperation with religious organisations implies that political institutions and other partners make up part of the equation of cooperation. Religious organisations do not operate in a vacuum; they are part of a politically organised community. For instance, the campaigns of religious organisations and faith-based NGOs to fight hunger and the services these organisations offer will only make a sustainable contribution to policies geared to the common good if political institutions and transnational networks engage with the ideas and approaches of religious and other NGOs. In countries in which the objectives of religious organisations and the state differ, being financially and organisationally independent of the state is a key prerequisite for these organisations if they are to be effective and promote development in their work.