

»» Religious organisations as actors in official development cooperation

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Traditionally, all world religions are involved in the fight against poverty. Nevertheless, religious organisations (ROs) and religious actors have so far mostly played a subordinate role in the area of official development cooperation. The causes vary, ranging from open neutrality (protection against accusations of state-sponsored missionary work) to underlying reservations because of the growing number of conflicts fuelled by the misuse of religion. Cooperation with ROs is ambivalent: but precisely where religion is part of the problem, it can also be part of the solution.

Potential and risks of working with religious protagonists

8 out of 10 people worldwide regard themselves as religious. In many contexts, religion is an important socio-cultural force. In its study entitled "Voices of the Poor", published in 1999, the World Bank stated that religious institutions and authorities in many developing countries are met with more trust than their own government.

Moreover, religious authorities often have very good access to the poorest and most disadvantaged people, a good understanding of local conditions and therefore huge impact on opinion formation and local politics. As a result, they are able to contribute to sustainable behavioural changes. In some regions, religious authorities in fact have more power to act than public authorities. Mainly in areas which are of great importance for development cooperation, such as welfare, health and education, they often secure basic care services in regions and situations where government agencies are overwhelmed by the provision of services.

Especially in authoritarian states, religiously motivated organisations

frequently constitute the only effective power in civil society and make an important contribution to social cohesion.

To date there have been relatively few official development cooperation projects in which religious organisations are systematically integrated on an institutional basis, for example as project executing or implementing agencies or decision-making bodies (there are also reservations on the part of ROs in some cases). Nevertheless, consulting religious authorities in the course of project planning is often common practice. As part of the "International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development", established in February 2016, several multilateral institutions (World Bank, UN agencies) and bilateral donors (among others Germany, UK, Sweden, USA) have joined forces to systematically enhance cooperation with ROs in international development cooperation through exchanges of experience and joint activities.

Prerequisites for closer cooperation with religious actors

As observed in almost all of the current flashpoints, religious organisations (often extremist groups) can also contribute to polarising societies, be used to help authoritarian regimes stay in power, and obstruct, endanger or even destroy developmental progress.

To harness the potential of closer cooperation between official development cooperation and religious actors in terms of more effective development cooperation, whilst avoiding the risks involved, certain conditions should be met on both sides, in particular:

- Acceptance and respect for human rights

- Coherence of the pursued objectives (e.g. execution of Agenda 2030)
- High acceptance of the ROs in the target group (conflict-mitigating instead of conflict-aggravating role)
- No hidden missionary objectives under the guise of development cooperation
- Impartiality towards target groups
- Subsidiary support instead of substitution of government functions

"Religious literacy" required

Just like other organisations, ROs are not suitable partners in every context and for every project. Assessing whether cooperation in a particular case is advantageous for all sides – in order to improve the living conditions of the target group – requires a certain religious literacy on the part of development organisations too. This is not about abstract religious knowledge, but rather an analysis of the concrete role and significance of religion in the relevant regional and sectoral context. It also includes the knowledge of relevant religious organisations that come into question when considering a cooperation partner.

More potential than risks

Closer cooperation between official development cooperation and religious actors offers considerable potential but also entails some risks. Through the careful selection of partners, however, these risks can be minimised. ■