

Religious leaders and their contributions to sustainable development



Pope Francis – head of the Catholic church

Pope Francis established the World Day of the Poor in 2016 in which he annually spreads the message to reach out to those in need. His messages instigate initiatives all over the world. In Kenya the Roman Catholic church made acres of church owned land available for commercial farming to help fight hunger for Kenyan's poorest. In India the Archbishop of Bombay set up initiatives to feed those in Need. This year's message was centrally focused on access to affordable health-care due to the pressing Covid-19 situation.

Alternative development actors: religious leaders for sustainable development

By Margaret Wairimu and Roos de Groot

Although often left unmentioned in modern day international development spheres, international development strongly ties to religion. In today's blog we won't go into detail about classical NGO's and CSO's but rather discuss the promising role that modern-day religious leaders can play for sustainable development. While doing so, we formulate two examples of how religious leaders contributed to sustainable development and provide you with a policy framework for constructive dialogue with religious entities in international development.

Only 16% of the world population does not entitle themselves to be religious (source Pew Research Centre, 2012). The potential influence of religion and religious leaders in sustainable development should therefore not be underestimated. Yet the track record of religious-driven development actors is never without controversies. Although religious institutes and leaders positively contribute to development, their activities sometimes come with polarization and division between groups, instigating conflict at times. Partiality is a big problem here, as religious entities sometimes merely focus on providing help for their own specific faith-based communities.

However, we need everyone on board to pass the SDG's by 2030. For these reasons we plead that religious leaders should be involved more in solving sustainable development challenges. Not only because of their enormous reach as they all together unite 84% of the world population but perhaps also because of their enormous fundraising potential. Modern development actors and policy makers should therefore engage in constructive dialogue with religious entities and start identifying and implementing common solutions for universal problems.

But how do you cooperate with religious entities in an inclusive and non-polarizing manner? These questions were likewise raised by GIZ who came up with a practical toolkit for development actors on how to work with religious-driven leaders and institutes (GIZ, 2016).

In their top three they share the following advices:

- 1) Check whether functional cooperation is possible: if religious leaders have no relations with secular and independent organizations this can be a red flag. Organizations as such might only be interested in providing support for their own faith communities rather than contribute to universal sustainable development.
- 2) Work with religious partners in partnerships and alliances which are multi-dimensional and multisectoral to increase overall legitimacy and universality of your efforts.
- 3) Take into account that working with religious entities also has political consequences: these religious entities do not operate in a vacuum. Working with politically represented religious entities hereby differs from working with entities which have no formal political representation or are even oppressed.

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Imam Mahamadou – Islamic clergy from Mali

Imam Mahamadou is a well-respected member of his community in Mali, a country where 50% of all girls are married before the age of 18 and FGM/C rates are high.

After following faith-literate training Imam Mahamadou started raising awareness to prevent gender-based violence and stop child marriage and FGM/C. His weekly sermons are attended by a significant part of the community and have been a success.

Since the arrival of the training incidents of FGM/C in Mahamadou's neighbourhood dropped from 100 to 10% (Islamic Relief, n.d.)

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