

The Faith Factor in Reimagining Development

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Abstract Many faith-based organisations engaging in development are contesting not only the practical implications of reductionist development policies, but also questioning the very political and ideological assumptions behind them. Human flourishing is one alternative reimagining of development, put forward by some faith-based organisations, which seeks to shed light on the limitations of existing mainstream development paradigms that fail to take into account relational dimensions of wellbeing and its non-material aspects. However, knowledge of faith-inspired reimaginings of development is still marginal, and the dynamics behind this have as much to do with the positionality and standpoint of the actors as with the very substance of the agenda being put forward, whether in terms of alternative visions or critiques to existing ones.

1 Introduction

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have been largely excluded from the debates about the nature of the international economic crises and the implications for their practice, their constituency and the broader meaning of development. FBOs have been engaged in a wide range of services – as broad in scale as those delivered by their secular counterparts. These range from education and health to financial assistance and in-kind support to the poor, as well as humanitarian relief in crises, and less conventional forms of services, such as legal aid. While the scale of FBO service provision varies from one context to another, according to a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) report (quoted in UNFPA 2008), FBOs account for 50 per cent of health service provision in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while in Kenya and Lesotho, they account for 40 per cent of health services and in Uganda, they account for more than 55 per cent of health services.

The lines demarcating what constitutes an FBO are in reality blurred because of the fluidity of organisational structures and the diversity in ways in which faith expresses itself through agency. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2004) categorises faith-based organisations as:

- 1 Faith-based and/or faith-inspired development organisations (e.g. Islamic Relief, Christian Aid, Catholic Relief Services and their national, regional and international chapters);
- 2 Inter-faith or multi-faith-based organisations: organisations that come together for a common cause guided by common values derived from different religious traditions and which provide services that are beyond the scope of a single congregation;
- 3 Local congregations: people who worship together and reach out socially (e.g. organising food pantries, clothing donations, in-home visits and assistance to the elderly);
- 4 Ministries of religious affairs (particularly, but not only, in countries where non-governmental organisations may, for whatever reason, find it difficult to register or function).

There are a number of pertinent questions as to how the economic (and security) crises have influenced the work of FBOs and how ‘the faith dimension’ influences their conceptualisations and perceptions of the nature of the current political and economic transformations. In order to gauge some of the parameters of this debate, a roundtable bringing together representatives

from six FBOs was held on 3 June 2010, as part of the Reimagining Development initiative, to allow a sharing of ideas and perspectives on the most significant changes and issues that have influenced their work, organisation and partners. Participating in the roundtable were leaders from three Muslim organisations (Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid and a former employee of Agha Khan) and representatives from three Christian organisations (CAFOD, Progressio and Tearfund). All fit within the first category of FBOs as per UNFPA's definition (see above). While the purpose of the encounter was neither to represent all FBOs in their diversity, nor capture all perspectives, there was still a plurality of perspectives represented in the light of the different denominational affiliations both within and among the Christian and Muslim faiths that participated. There were two common features across the board: they were all international, with local partners working in very different communities and contexts but with headquarters in the UK; and they were all engaged very broadly in development work (including charity, humanitarian assistance and, for some, advocacy). While there are a number of convergences between faith-based and secular-based organisations that are engaged in development, there are also some distinctive ways in which the faith factor influences the terms of engagement in relation to donors, the beneficiaries and the wider communities. The faith-factor ultimately affects an FBO's positionality in relation to the immediate context of engagement but also how development policymakers and donors engage with its vision. There follows a discussion of how faith affects development practice, and how a faith perspective can challenge the assumptions behind development policy and contribute to the development of reimagined paradigms.

2 Faith as an entry point for re-engaging development?

The fact that the impact of the financial crises on FBO's work did not feature at length at the roundtable is significant. One possible explanation is that the question was raised in mid-2010, when the full scope of the crisis on the poor had not yet been fully realised. It is also possible that the experiences of FBOs at the grassroots level are not always systematically documented and do not always make it to the FBOs' offices at their headquarters. There is a paucity of systemic research on how FBOs

responded to the crises, whether on a policy or field level. However, there is a growing movement within some FBOs to present a unified platform rejecting the current economic order, based on the underpinning values that have driven it; identified as greed and disregard for inequalities. One way in which this agency is being exercised to influence the framing and understanding of development by FBOs is in their recent adoption of the idea of 'human flourishing', which is increasingly being used by many Christian FBOs to refer to a more holistic view that seeks to go beyond equating development with economic growth.

The Christian view of human flourishing derives its inspiration from the biblical view of human beings as created in the image of God, and as being essentially relationally oriented (*vis-à-vis* other human beings and the environment), rather than predisposed to acting individualistically. The relational dimensions of how people perceive the quality of their lives, has neither been acknowledged as essential to understanding people's wellbeing, nor has it been captured in the methodological approaches to assessing people's predicaments. It is through this faith-inspired understanding of human flourishing that critiques of current development paradigms are made by Christian FBOs. In a report produced by Theos, CAFOD and Tearfund (2010) on human flourishing as a means of reimagining development, they argue that political and economic thought, particularly as it relates to international development, is founded on an inadequate and ultimately harmful vision of what it means to flourish – a vision that is fundamentally *acquisitive*. 'We desperately need to regain a fuller, more realistic vision of human flourishing – of humans as creative, productive, responsible, generous beings – if we are ever to address the problems of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation that threaten the world', argues the report (Theos, CAFOD and Tearfund 2010: 11).

Conceptualising development in terms of human flourishing is also intended to go beyond a focus on the tangible and/or visible dimensions of wellbeing,¹ which it was argued at the roundtable, obstructed the ability to engage with capturing the dimensions of the human experience, such as faith. The academic approach and methodologies popular in

development theory and practice have, from the perspective of many FBO practitioners, failed to capture how development can be conceptualised, not only in terms of material sufficiency but in a holistic way that encompasses the spiritual dimensions. The spiritual dimension, it is argued, is more difficult to engage with through existing rigid methodological approaches because it is not easy to measure or compare across individuals, communities or countries. For example, changes in the nutritional status of children or educational acquisition are more likely to be captured than changes in hope emanating from faith. Faith, however, is not to be confused with values; the latter is not restricted to FBOs, and are more diffusely prevalent among their secular-based counterparts.

The view above is based on a contestation of development from a Christian faith-based perspective. Other faith-based contestations of development, from a wide variety of faith traditions also exist, yet often, because their primary audience is neither the donor community nor actors based in the West, they rarely feature in mainstream development scholarship and rarer still in Western policy-making circles. Certainly at the roundtable, there were no other alternative contestations of development discussed. This is perhaps a reflection of the nature of the space (London-based) and limited representation of the actors (a select number of actors). What was evident however, is that the source of inspiration for contesting or framing development does matter. There was no evidence that the human flourishing concept was attracting buy-in from non-Christian sources, indicating the power of positionality. The lines within and across faith-based actors are far more fluid than is sometimes assumed.

Yet, what distinguishes many FBOs from their secular counterparts is the faith as an entry point into communities, which often enhances an existing repertoire of relationships which were built on common values. It is often this repertoire that provides access and outreach to groups and communities that enables FBOs to work, where others perhaps find it takes longer to build trust and establish a relationship.

FBOs may indirectly influence the course of responses to the economic crises: some donors are

increasingly searching for value for money in their funding of civil society organisations. However, many participants taking part in the roundtable were highly critical of the way in which they were engaged, i.e. as objects of service deliveries not partners with their own visions of change. Participants criticised the way in which donors engage with FBOs in an instrumentalist manner; wishing to capitalise on their access to communities for the purpose of channelling services or implementing projects, without recognising their actual and potential role as agents or catalysts for change. For example, participants discussed how in some cases, donors engaged with FBOs as distribution outlets for resources or services, while ignoring what these actors can contribute to in terms of discussing the nature and choice policies, the validity of the assumptions behind them and their implications for broader constituency and development practice.

3 Faith and multiple accountabilities

Perhaps one of the common elements of FBOs across the spectrum is that funding often comes from faith communities and the implications of this are many. One participant pointed out that the church, the FBO's principle donor, has come to understand that the way faith expresses itself has evolved in their work in such a way that they are neither expected to engage in proselytising nor work specifically with faith communities. Another participant explained that the faith constituency that supports them expects them to allocate funding in a way that helps communities fulfil the religious requirements of their faith. 'As a Muslim NGO', he said, 'the constituency supports the organisation because it expects the organisation to direct its finances specifically for the fulfilment of religious obligations, such as *korbani*'.² The nature of the faith constituency that supports an FBO and the extent to which it contributes to overall funding, is one of the critical factors in influencing the level of flexibility allowed on the ground.

Accountability to the faith community back home, which supports faith-based development organisations, is not always easy to reconcile with the specificities of the contexts overseas in which they work. One participant pointed out that the second generation of Muslims would prefer that an FBO works in advocacy in order to support structural changes with policy implications. He

would like to see a more politically engaged approach to eliciting change in the countries in which the FBO is working. However, in some contexts, the environment is politically inhibitive and the organisation must keep a low profile in order to continue doing its work.

In order to support downward accountability to the communities with which it works, there is a need for the empowerment of local partners to enable them not to just identify and note complaints but be in a position to respond to them in the most appropriate way. Yet in order for local partners to have the space to forge their own agendas, they must be given decision-making power from the headquarters and there must be a transformation in the relationship associated with how they are held accountable to them: this requires building capacity at both local and headquarter levels.

Several other ‘accountabilities’ were brought to the table in the discussion. For example, one participant pointed out that within his organisation, accountability to God meant that there was a sense of personal responsibility to engage in a particular way that helps fulfil the religious mandate to which the resources were allocated. For example, if the funding was allocated to enable poor communities to perform certain religious obligations (such as the sharing in sacrificial animals), then the organisation is accountable (before God) to ensure that the necessary resources are there at the right time. Accountability to God, however, is a difficult concept to capture because of its invisibility. Some participants spoke of ‘shared accountability’. One participant pointed out that as a British Muslim FBO working in conflict and post-conflict situations, they are often asked to be accountable by local communities for the foreign policies of the UK government – a situation that has to be approached with particular sensitivity.

Many participants agreed that the current development donor frameworks inhibit organisations’ ability to enhance downward accountability. While they are less vulnerable to donor fashion fads because their main source of funding is from members of the religious group, locally or internationally, this does not make them entirely immune from their impact. The increasing focus on ‘value for money’ is being translated into a narrow and rigid approach to

development, particularly in the way in which ‘success’ is determined, and the limitations of the existing monitoring and evaluation tools used to hold recipients of funding accountable for their performance. The problem, many participants reflected, lies at the designing stage, when log frames (logical frameworks) are applied: ‘Log frames don’t work, we all know that, but we haven’t pushed against it enough or created alternatives that are robust and acceptable’, argued one participant. Herein lies a significant challenge: what are the alternatives to existing models, and can the process of developing them be different, namely in the local communities through work with partners? Can the new ‘big society’ agenda create an opening to define the current ‘fuzzy’ but common concept of ‘value for money’ in a way that enables bottom-up accountability?

4 Rethinking the prisms of examining faith and development

Some FBOs have actively sought to influence the framing and understanding of development in their adoption of the idea of ‘human flourishing’. Yet, seeing human flourishing as the goal of development and of FBOs’ engagement with development meets resistance not only within the ‘Western’ developmental model (because it is difficult to measure) but at times, from the local community partners themselves, who may not always see their goal as enabling all peoples to flourish (i.e. they might be more focused on what they see to be their evangelical mission). How the concept of human flourishing will evolve and whether it will be used as a premise for developing an FBO platform for launching a reimagined agenda is yet to be seen. It is noteworthy however, that such a concept is clearly rooted in a Western philosophical tradition, and a Christian theological reading of the purpose of life and the relationship between God, human beings and the environment. Its proponents argue that its relevance extends beyond its original source. At the roundtable, some of the representatives from Christian-based FBOs invited Muslim counterparts to join forces; however, there was no evidence at the time that this was going to happen. Positionality of the FBO will undoubtedly continue to influence how its development vision is received. Other non-Western faith-inspired alternative conceptualisations of development are continuously in the making, yet often they remain

in the margins and inaccessible to the larger development studies/policymaking communities.

Admittedly, there remains a significant gap in our knowledge of FBOs' work on the ground, in all its complexity, diversity and dynamism. Some research geared towards showing that the work of FBOs on the ground has further re-enforced the instrumentalisation of FBOs by focusing exclusively on their service delivery function. The instrumentalisation of FBOs that is prominent among both donors and governments is highly problematic in its reductionism.

Notes

1 The same critique has been voiced regarding the work of development institutions more broadly, see e.g. *Poverty and Development Issues for an Interfaith Agenda*, www.interfaithstudies.org/otherthemes/poverty.html (accessed 26 July 2010).

References

Theos, CAFOD and Tearfund (2010) *Wholly Living: A New Perspective on International Development*, London: Theos

UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) (2008) *Culture Matters. Lessons from a Legacy of Engaging Faith-Based Organizations*, www.unfpa.org/

What is argued here is not necessarily that there will be a paradigm shift from an economics-driven understanding of development to one of human flourishing. However, what is being suggested is that new and old actors are becoming increasingly active in contesting development policy and challenging not just its practice, but also its underpinning philosophical and political bases. Currently, there is not much evidence that there is a convergence across a wide array of different faith-based actors on a more holistic development paradigm, but this does not preclude the possibility of its emergence in the future.

2 Islamic word for 'sacrifice', used in reference to the animal to be sacrificed on one of the two principle *eids* (feasts) celebrated by Muslims.

webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2008/Culture_Matter_II.pdf (accessed 1 July 2009)

UNFPA (2004) *Culture Matters. Lessons from a Legacy of Engaging Faith-based Organizations*, New York: United Nations Population Fund