



Faith-based organisations and current development debates

Rachel Cooper

University of Birmingham

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Question

Please provide a brief synthesis of the role of faith based organisations in civil society

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1. The emergence of faith based organisations

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) became more prominent in donor agendas, international development and academic research in the 1990s. However, this ‘turn to religion’ within international development policy and research masks the long-standing nature of some FBOs. Charity is a key concept within many religions including Christianity and Islam. In some cases FBOs have been providing services, particularly with regards to health and education, in both their own faith communities and the wider community, and, in both their own countries and overseas for a very long time (Deakin & Tomalin, 2015). For example, in 2008, FBOs accounted for 55% of health service provision in Uganda, 50% in the DRC and 40% in Kenya and Lesotho according to a 2008 UN Population Fund report (UNFPA, 2008).

There has been an increase in the number of FBOs from the 1980s onwards in response to neo-liberal policies in a number of countries, which resulted in the withdrawal of the state from social service provision; the evolving role of diasporas funding service provision in their countries of origin; and also more recently in response to the rise and salience of identity politics (Tadros, 2011)¹. Identity politics have become more salient across the globe and have led to new FBOs associated with particular denominations of Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, some of which are affiliated to organised religious movements, religious-based political parties or institutions, and seek to affirm religious identity among their constituency through their activities, including service provision (Tadros, 2011). FBOs have also emerged in fragile, conflict and post-conflict states providing humanitarian assistance and other services. For example, Hezbollah has developed welfare organisations in Lebanon, whilst after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan some of the first groups on the scene providing humanitarian aid were radical Islamic groups banned elsewhere (Occhipinti, 2015; Tadros, 2011).

Limited engagement between Western donor governments and development organisations on the one hand, and FBOs on the other, in the post-war period was based on assumptions that as societies became more ‘developed’ or ‘modern’ they would become more secular. These assumptions ignored the role of faith in people’s lives as well as how faith was an analytical lens through which the poor experienced and rationalised poverty and richer groups in society empathised with the poor and provided practical support (Clarke, 2009). However FBOs began to receive increasing attention from donors and development policy in the 1990s due to a number of developments:

- In the US, the 1996 Welfare Reform Act and the 2001 Faith Based and Community Initiatives Act allowed government funding of FBOs. Between 2001 and 2005, 159 FBOs received USD 1.7 billion in USAID contracts, grants and agreements. During this period funding for FBOs increased from 10.5% to 19.9% of US government funding;
- In the UK, DFID began to engage with faith communities and FBOs, shifting from treating FBOs as the same as secular NGOs and engaging with religion as an element of development, including special funds for FBOs through the Civil Society Fund. Deepening engagement was partly promoted by the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign;

¹ New Muslim FBOs began to appear in the 1970s due to the oil boom in the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia particularly has funded FBOs operating on a transnational basis in both the Middle East region and in the Balkans and South Asia.

- At the international level, following criticisms of the IMF's Strategic Adjustment Programmes, there was a turn towards more holistic approaches to development. This included the UN's development of its Human Development Indicators, whereby development was no longer simply conflated with economic growth, and the formulation of the Millennium Development goals, which faith groups would play a part in realising². In academic scholarship development also became reframed in more holistic ways that included quality of life. This increased the visibility of the role of religion in people's lives and of FBOs;
- Following a turn to NGO engagement in the 1980s at the World Bank, the organisation began to include FBOs in its strategic planning. In 1998 it launched the World Faiths Development Dialogue as an inter-faith platform bringing together the World Bank and leaders from the world's major faiths to discuss development issues³. The World Bank has argued that FBOs can play a strong role in international development if they focus on combatting material and spiritual poverty and avoid divisive or sectarian agendas (Deacon & Tomalin, 2015; Clarke, 2009; & Tadros, 2011).

These developments illustrate increasing awareness that FBOs can be important agents of social change, whilst the size of the budgets of the four biggest (Christian) FBOs engaged in international development have made them key players in the field (Clarke, 2009). Christian and Muslim FBOs are the most widely studied in the literature, hence this synthesis largely draws on examples from these two groups. However, there is also a tradition of Jewish, Hindu, Buddhism and other faith tradition FBOs.

2. Defining a faith-based organisation

FBOs are diverse and complex. Discussions of FBOs in the policy and practice arenas have often focused on large Western based FBOs, which tend to resemble secular NGOs in terms of their policies and programmes and are engaged in western style development aid and programming⁴. DFID's support for FBOs has largely focused on this type of FBO. However, FBOs can range from:

- Volunteer-based, informal initiatives located within a larger faith organisation and focused on members of that faith community, for example social outreach initiatives connected to a particular congregation. In Nigeria, some research has linked an increase in popularity of Pentecostal churches to the fact that through religious fellowship, followers have established informal faith-based initiatives to help co-religionists survive (Tadros, 2011).
- Organisations with formal structures but that are still subsidiary to a parent religious organisations. For example, NU Muslimat is the women's wing of Indonesian FBO, Nahdatul Ulama (Tadros, 2011).

² Many FBOs offer alternative conceptions of development in terms of what it means to live a good life as opposed to a narrow focus on economic growth.

³ More information about the World Faiths Development Dialogue can be accessed here: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd/about> [retrieved 2/8/2019].

⁴ It is important to note that often FBOs that work overseas or conduct international development programming are transnational, in that the decision-making power is located in a central headquarters in one particular country.

- Formal, independent NGOs with ties (ranging from strong to loose) to a particular religious community or tradition, including FBOS such as Islamic Relief and CAFOD;
- Inter-faith or multi-faith-based organisations that provide services beyond the scope of a particular congregation or seek to increase inter-faith dialogue, for example the Women, Faith and Development Alliance, which draws on FBOs from different religions to advance a progressive gender agenda, or Indonesia's Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, which brings together Christian and Muslim FBOs to discuss common problems, share knowledge and coordinate activities⁵ (Tadros, 2011; Occhipinti, 2015).

Religion can influence the identity, organisation and programming of FBOs in a number of ways, including how it relates to followers or adherents of its particular faith tradition, as well as its beneficiaries and sometimes clients, including who it considers its beneficiaries and clients. It can be expressed through self-identification (mission statements, use of faith symbols etc.), staff and leadership (how staff are hired and relate to each other), financial support (degree of reliance on religious funding sources, discourses used to raise money), and programming (faith is integrated into services and programmes) (Occhipinti, 2015). All of these elements do not have to be present for an organisation to be an FBO. The ways in which faith influences a FBO's organisational structure, institutional policies and process of engagement is contingent on the political and socio-economic context in which it operates (Tadros, 2011). It is important to note that not all FBOs self-identify as FBOs. For example, in Pakistan, NGOs often seek to avoid political sensitivities and do not label themselves either faith-based or secular (Occhipinti, 2015).

Occhipinti's (2015) typology for analysing FBOs includes three elements:

- The degree to which an organisation is faith based with types running from faith-permeated (faith is an integral component and explicitly expressed) through to secular.
- The work they engage in with categories including religious policy, networking and cooperation (e.g. interfaith outreach or representing a faith community at the UN), charitable and development work (e.g. service provision), political activism and lobbying (included within this category could be illegal acts, although these would be an extreme variation as most FBOs carry out their activities ethically and legally), and proselytizing and recruitment⁶.
- The degree of formality and association with official religious structures. As outlined above this can range from volunteer-based initiatives located within a particular faith organisation, through to formal, independent NGOs with ties to a particular religious community and formal, independent NGOs autonomous from a particular faith.

3. Conceptual and programmatic challenges

There are two schools of thoughts with regards to FBOs:

⁵ For more information of Humanitarian Forum Indonesia see <https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/blog/interfaith-partnerships-field-development-way-forward-religious-pluralism-indonesia> [retrieved 5/7/2019].

⁶ A single FBO may carry out a number of different activities. In Kenya there has been an increase in US evangelical mission organisations whose primary goal is individual conversion, that have taken on service provision roles including health services and provision of food aid.

1. **FBOs can play a positive role in relation to transformative change:** they are well-placed to work with and influence communities where religion is an important part of the culture; for many people FBOs are repositories of spiritual sustenance and social networks; their holistic approach addresses both material and spiritual aspects of well-being; and they are more indigenous and grassroots than secular NGOs (Occhipinti, 2015; Tadros, 2011). Related to this are arguments that FBOs have large networks at the local, regional, national and international levels, which they can draw on for fundraising and funding, as well as strong connections at the grassroots level, which means they are trusted by local communities (Occhipinti, 2015).
2. **Critiques of FBOs** include concerns about the nature, scope and politics of funding for FBOs; how relationships between funders and FBOs operating overseas can overlook the dynamics of religion in practice; working at the grassroots or community level is not synonymous with being grassroots or pursuing a grassroots agenda; and, FBOs can promote exclusivist identities, contribute to sectarian practices and in some cases they have been implicated in violent conflict (Occhipinti, 2015; Tadros, 2011).

Two important programmatic challenges for donor governments and international organisations working with FBOs are the potential for differing agendas on important issues including gender equality, and that some FBOs are sectarian and/or have proselytizing agendas. For example, Hindu Aid, a British transnational FBO channels support from British Hindus on a non-sectarian basis, however, others such as Sewa International reputedly support sectarian Hindu nationalism (Tadros, 2011).

FBOs can also reinforce existing power structures or create new ones, which do not necessarily favour the poor. For example, a case study of a village in northwest Tunisia following economic liberalisation policies found that mechanisms for funneling aid to the poor became Islamised (Tadros, 2011). Wealthy landowners chose these channels because they did not challenge class structures or the existing power structures (Tadros, 2011).

FBOs can also influence development policies in ways that can affect gender equality. For example, the USA's so-called 'global gag rule' supported by the Christian right, prohibits government funding for organisations that offer abortion advice or services. This rule has affected women in the developing world's access to reproductive health services. The rise of the Christian right in the US has also led to an expansion in overseas missionary (proselytizing) activity by evangelical and Pentecostal churches, who are also delivering USAID funded programming (Clarke, 2009).

4. Policy Pointers

The range and variety of FBOs means that it is difficult to draw policy recommendations that are applicable to all FBOs (Tadros, 2011). However, some pointers can be offered that donors and development agencies should consider. Often FBOs are working on the ground on the most critical current development issues, including climate change, humanitarian disasters, and fragility. In order to tackle these issues it will be important for aid agencies to engage with FBOs.

Practical recommendations for engagement include, firstly, remembering that Western concepts and language used to talk about religion do not necessarily translate directly into other religious traditions or language (Rakodi, 2012).

Secondly, the religious traditions and types of organisation associated with them differ in many ways. These differences include: the emphasis they place on belief, right practice, spirituality/mysticism, and ritual; how they are organised (e.g. do they have paid clergy or not, what type of welfare services do they provide), and, how they are structured (e.g. how do local congregations fit into wider regional, national and international structures) (Rakodi, 2012).

Thirdly, when working with FBOs, donors should take into account gender implications particularly in cases where they are working with FBOs affiliated with religious denominations where opportunities for women's leadership and women exercising their agency are limited (Tadros, 2011). Limited leadership opportunities for women or defining women in terms of their domestic roles can mean they lack the authority or status to challenge negative attitudes (Rakodi, 2012).

Fourthly, the extent to which FBOs are engaged in proselytising should also be considered. As mentioned above, there has been a rise in proselytising Christian-based FBOs in recent years. There has also been a growth in Muslim FBOs funding local Madrasas throughout Africa. In some settings madrasas also offer non-religious education and provide poor children's only chance at receiving some education. However, there are also concerns that some madrasas promote more conservative forms of Islam that have not been traditionally followed in African societies (Clarke, 2009). Donors may be concerned about the potential for proselytizing when engaging with FBOs due to their aims to minimise social conflict in complex settings (which could undermine potential development gains) whilst also reaching disenfranchised communities (Clarke, 2009).

Fifthly, FBOs operate in a great variety of contexts where religion and culture impact and shape each other (Rakodi, 2012). Whilst much religion is socially conservative, it should not be assumed that all religious actors are opposed to change (Rakodi, 2012). Rakodi (2012) argues that sometimes the principles and social rules derived from religious teachings fit with mainstream ideas about development and sometimes they pose barriers to the achievements of development objectives. FBOs are diverse in their mandates, missions, expertise, services and modalities of work, and a report by UNFPA documenting its partnerships with FBOs in the areas of reproductive health and population demonstrates that some are open to and engaged with family planning issues (UNFPA, 2008).

Finally, international development policy and practice should engage faith-based organisations with issues of global concern such as climate change, displacement and humanitarian relief. Stakeholder mappings, consultations and policy responses should include faith-based organisations where relevant, even when the issue does not seem to directly have a "faith" dimension.

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