

A SYNTHESIS REPORT

WORKING WITH FAITH-BASED ACTORS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Whether they are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or any other confession; whether they are devoutly practicing their faith or believing in private; today, over 80% of the world's population identifies as being religious. And while religion is on the wane in western Europe, elsewhere, particularly in the global South, it is still growing (1). Donors – including governments and multilateral bodies like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) – and large development organisations are usually based in the global North – i.e. in a largely secularised context. Yet, the fact that religion constitutes a social and political reality for the vast majority of people and communities these organisations are seeking to assist, must have implications for the way in which they approach development efforts. Given the importance of religion across the globe, it is hardly surprising that faith-based organisations abound, and they are playing an important role in many sectors – and the development sector is no exception. That said, it seems that the secularisation Western Europe – where decision-making power and (financial) resources are still concentrated – is affecting the position of faith-based actors and the collaborations between those actors and secular bodies. Collaborations with religious organisations for sustainable development do occur, but they are often pigeon-holed to operate in specific areas (see section 2.1) and are watched with suspicion by secular actors due to concerns related to inclusion and human rights and freedoms (see section 2.2).

What we are faced with is a paradox: On the one hand, most of the major development donors acknowledge the relevance and importance of faith-based organisations (FBOs) for development cooperation. Similarly, in the academic sphere attention for the role of FBOs has soared over the last decade; a trend that finds translation in the sheer volume of publications. On the other hand, collaboration with FBOs is not high on the political and development agendas, and endeavours to establish partnerships are laced with (real and perceived) barriers. As the role of faith-based actors is increasingly recognised and has come to receive greater attention in development debates over the last decade, it is imperative to discuss and unpack these remaining barriers to faith-secular partnerships and identify the preconditions that make for effective collaboration. The report you have before you seeks to achieve just that.

Why this research? Why now?

This research was commissioned by Prisma (the association of Dutch Christian NGOs in international development) and four of its members – Woord en Daad, Tearfund, Dorcas, and World Vision Nederland – driven by the conviction that religion and religious actors can and do play a positive and significant role in achieving sustainable development. Together, against the backdrop of growing attention, they initiated this research spurred by two recent encouraging developments. First, the Civic Engagement Alliance published the report 'Moral leadership in times of crisis' which was presented to Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

The report, not in the least because of its highly accessible nature, was very well received. Second, in July this year (2021) then-Minister for Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag answered a number of parliamentary questions submitted by Member of Parliament Don Ceder (Christen Unie) about the collaboration between Dutch ministries and religious actors. Kaag, in her reply, confirmed that religious actors can play an important role in achieving sustainable development. Yet, she noted, “in some areas, like Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), including safe abortion, viewpoints can be very far apart and collaboration may not be self-evident.” The Minister emphasised, however, that she has generally experienced the collaboration with religious actors as positive and recognises that “for effective, context-sensitive policy-making, being in close contact with religious actors is important, especially because of their wide societal influence and knowledge of the local situation”.(2)

As the foregoing shows, at the international level as well as in the Netherlands, momentum has gradually been building for a thorough investigation of the importance and relevance of working with religious actors. To make use of this momentum, Prisma and its four members have approached the knowledge brokering organisation, The Broker, to carry out a research project on this topic. In this project, The Broker, as a distinctly independent partner with no religious nor political affiliations, will collect, synthesise, make better available and translate into actionable output the evidence already available on working with religious actors for sustainable development. As the replies of Sigrid Kaag also show, an independent and in-depth investigation of this topic cannot be limited to a mere literature study. Her answers, reflecting the views and approaches of the Dutch government, also point to the importance of delving into questions of moral values, worldviews, ideas, perceptions and preconceptions. This report, therefore, reflects not only the knowledge available in academic literature; importantly, it also incorporates the knowledge, experiences and opinions of religious as well as secular actors and experts operating in the development sector.

Goals and research-process

Importantly, this research project does not start from the premise that there is a lack of collaborations between secular and religious actors per se; nor does it try to convince the reader that such collaborations are a necessary goal to be pursued. What it does do, however, is try to fill existing knowledge gaps about the role of religion and of faith-based actors – particularly among ‘western’ secular development actors – in sustainable development efforts. Various sources, which will be used throughout this report, have drawn attention to the fact that secular development actors, including development organisations, institutional funders and governments, do not always know how best to engage with Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) or how to do so in a consistent manner. Additionally, sources as well as conversations with development experts tell us that misperceptions and (perceived) barriers exist that stand in the way of potential collaborations. With more knowledge and understanding current partnerships can deepen, shared objectives can be pursued more efficiently, as yet unseen potential may be tapped into, and, conversely, barriers and differences may be adequately recognised, reflected on, and navigated.

This synthesis report is the result of the first phase of this research project. The goal of this report is threefold:

- Unlock the evidence: collect and synthesise knowledge about the importance and effect of collaborating with religious actors for sustainable development, as well as about the challenges such collaboration may present. This includes scientific knowledge as well as the insights and experiences of stakeholders.
- Present obstacles, advantages and opportunities: based on the evidence, an attempt is made to identify the most important obstacles that hamper efficient collaboration between religious and secular actors, as well as present the benefits of current, and the opportunities for future collaborations.
- Identify remaining knowledge gaps: reflecting on the evidence collected from literature and interviews, remaining questions and knowledge gaps are pinpointed, forming the foundation for the following phases of the present project, as well as providing input for a future research agenda.

The research-project of which this synthesis report is a first outcome, is divided into three phases. Phase 1 (November 2021 – January 2022) consists of a literature review and two rounds of interviews and serves to lay the groundworks for the remainder of the project. The first round of interviews consisted of five conversations with representatives from the organisations contributing to this project – Prisma, Dorcas, Tearfund, Woord en Daad, and World Vision. Based on their input, and combined with the insights gathered in the literature study, a second round of interviews was initiated, this time engaging four external stakeholders – including academics, practitioners and policy-makers – who were selected in collaboration with the aforementioned organisations. The findings of the literature study and the eleven interviews have been analysed and brought together to form this synthesis report. To conclude phase 1 of this project, the report's main findings have been shared in an interactive workshop on 10 March 2022, titled 'Working with faith-based actors for development'. During this workshop representatives from policy, academia, and secular as well as faith-based NGOs provided feedback on the findings, after which they entered into a fruitful dialogue; sharing their insights and experiences about collaborations between secular and faith-based actors in development. (You can find a short report on the workshop [at this link](#)). Participants' feedback and questions, as well as the fruitful conversations held during the workshop, have also been incorporated in the final version of this report. Additionally, their input will inform the direction and focus of the second and third phases of this project.

Organisation of this report

This report is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter can be seen as laying the foundation for the two chapters that follow. It seeks to provide a clear definition of Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) as well as an accessible overview of their distinctive features. Chapter two moves beyond the descriptive and discusses in more detail the various barriers – perceived or real – that stand in the way of collaboration between faith-based and secular development organisations, and between these FBOs and government agencies. In the third chapter attention is shifted to the added value of working with FBOs for sustainable development, also highlighting opportunities for future collaborations. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the most important insights are summarised, knowledge gaps identified, and key questions for future research – both within and beyond the confines of this project – presented.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S IN A NAME?: FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

How can such a broad category as faith-based organisations (FBOs) be defined and what are its distinctive features? This chapter aims to tackle these two questions in an effort to set the scene for a better understanding of the role played by FBOs in international development cooperation. Given the Christian identity of the commissioning bodies of this report and, as one of the interviewees reported, the fact that the larger faith-inspired organisations in the development sector are predominantly Christian, this and subsequent chapters focus primarily on Christian FBOs. This report, however, aims to cover a broad range of beliefs which is why, where possible and relevant, examples and experiences from non-Christian FBOs are incorporated as well. The first section considers questions and issues surrounding the definition of FBOs, which have been considered in-depth particularly in academic literature. In the second section, attention shifts to the distinctive features of FBOs.

1.1 Defining FBOs: the role of faith and the relevance of self-definition

Taking a panoramic view, religious or faith-based actors are a broad category, not least because of differences in denominational affiliation, purpose and mission, and organisational structure. Amidst the wide variety of religious actors – ranging from faith-based representative bodies, socio-political organisations and missionary organisations, to development, activist or extremist organisations – this report specifically focuses on faith-based development or charity organisations, which display two key characteristics: 1) they are explicitly linked to and/or contribute to the development agenda, and 2) they self-identify as faith-based.⁽³⁾ To sharpen this definition, scholars have created have created different typologies, most of which categorise FBOs based on either the role faith plays in different aspects of the organisation (i.e. mission, staffing, programming, etc.) or the geographical level on which they operate.⁽⁴⁾

Sider and Unnru (2014), for example, have created a typology that differentiates between four 'spectra'; namely faith-permeated, faith-centred, faith-affiliated and faith-background organisations.⁽⁵⁾ Yet, as individual FBOs rarely fit neatly in a single category, development scholars and practitioners are now moving away from such typologies. Instead, FBOs are being placed on a continuum or spectrum, doing justice to the vast heterogeneity they display. This heterogeneity becomes apparent when looking at the role faith plays in FBOs' work. For such organisations as Samaritan's Purse or World Help, faith is central at all levels; from origins, mission and staffing to governance, programming and support. Contrastingly, for organisations like Tearfund, World Vision and Woord en Daad faith is evidently at the heart of their work, but they do not pursue an evangelistic mission and tend to have many similarities with secular development organisations. (6, 7) Another dimension that shows great diversity is FBOs' differential organisational structure: World Vision, for example, is a federated partnership of semi-autonomous entities, while Woord en Daad follows a project-based organisational structure. What can be concluded, in short, is that FBOs should not be looked at as a monolith, but rather as a complex and heterogenous category.

In addition to debates on typologies, categories and the many big and small differences between FBOs, the picture is further complicated by a multitude of acronyms used to describe the various organisations, including but not limited to: international faith-based NGO (IFBNGO), local faith actors (LFA), local community of faith (LFC), community-and-faith based organisations (CFBO). The acronyms showcase how contested 'FBO' has come to be as a term and raise questions as to whether there will ever be enough acronyms to describe all the specific subcategories of FBOs. To illustrate this point, think of the following example: how could we define "a local community association in Jordan, in a Muslim majority community that has one of the hadith written on the wall? Would that single writing on the wall make it a faith-based organisation?"⁽⁸⁾ This example also illustrates the importance of self-definition, which allows individual organisations to transcend labels and define their specific relation to faith. While different acronyms and sub-categories may be helpful; in many cases the way in which organisations define themselves provides the most useful information.

1.2 The distinctive features of FBOs

The foregoing paragraphs established the internal diversity of FBOs as a category and showed their – more or less intimate – links to faith as an element distinguishing them from secular development organisations. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the distinctive features displayed by FBOs as these emerge from their links to faith, namely: 1) their holistic vision; 2) working with or involving local faith actors; and 3) alternative sources of funding. These features are identified through a literature study and informed by the interviews conducted with the aforementioned respondents. It must be noted here that the following features are not necessarily exclusive to FBOs. Secular actors may, for examples, also adopt holistic approaches. The below-listed features are, however, found in practically all FBOs and are informed by and stem from their religious foundations.

Holistic vision

Focusing on the first distinguishing feature, most FBOs espouse a holistic vision or approach that places equal importance on the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of human and community wellbeing.⁽⁹⁾ For many societies in the global South, religion is not simply a private matter. Rather it touches upon every aspect of life – public and private. The idea that ‘religion is everywhere’ contributes to the holistic approach of FBOs. This approach enables them to transcend a narrow focus on economic growth, technical problems, or select thematic issues, and motivates them to concentrate on transforming society as a whole.⁽¹⁰⁾ FBOs’ commitment to a holistic approach manifests in the ways in which they operationalise it. Tearfund, for example, assesses most of its development initiatives through its ‘light wheel evaluation tool’ (see image 1). The wheel, which includes such dimensions of wellbeing as living faith, physical health and social connections, allows the organisation to understand and measure the impact of its initiatives on all aspects of human wellbeing.⁽¹¹⁾ At World Vision, the holistic approach is visible in the organisation’s community development approach. In its child sponsorship programme World Vision pools sponsorship donations for kids living in the same area together to address not one aspect of children’s lives, but all of the most pressing issues children are facing in their community.⁽¹²⁾ While the programme has a concrete focus on child wellbeing, donations are utilised at community level; not handed to the sponsored kids directly, but rather seeking to improve the children’s environment as a whole.



Working with local faith actors

As already evident from the foregoing analysis, FBOs have a deep appreciation of faith and its added value in development cooperation, which naturally prompts them to seek out local, faith-based stakeholders and leaders as partners.⁽¹³⁾ According to the interviews conducted for this report, international funders and secular INGOs often shy away from partnerships with local faith actors (LFAs) – including local faith leaders and congregations as well as grassroots FBOs. For one thing, as our interviewees reported, local actors (including but not limited to faith actors) . For one thing, local actors (not limited to faith actors) are often seen as more vulnerable to amateurism. Additionally, LFAs’ religious affiliation is considered another ‘risk-factor’ or obstacle for effective partnerships. Despite the shortcomings of LFAs – whose capacity has, in various cases, indeed proven to be lacking ⁽¹⁴⁾ – FBOs often do choose to partner with LFAs, recognising the latter’s potential to transform cultural and societal norms as well as induce behavioural change. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Additionally, LFAs can provide FBOs with much-needed connections to the grassroots level, which allows them to reach remote and often marginalised communities.⁽¹⁶⁾ International Care Ministries (ICM), a Philippine-based FBO, for example, has been running a community-based poverty alleviation programme, titled Transform, for over a decade. A cornerstone of the programme is partnerships with local pastors, who organise communities, identify programme participants and maintain connectivity with extremely poor households in the community, thus enabling ICM to reach the most vulnerable.

Christian FBOs have developed different approaches to collaborating with LFAs. Tearfund, for example, has devised the Church and Community Mobilisation (CCM) process, which envisions the local church as the main agent of community transformation. CCM’s starting point is bible study through which the church and the local community identify pressing issues and eventually take action towards resolving them.⁽¹⁷⁾

This process has been most successful in areas where there are not many other activities monopolising people's time as well as in homogeneous communities.(18) World Vision's Channels of Hope methodology also explicitly seeks to partner with LFAs, focusing specifically on faith leaders. These leaders are provided with workshops aiming to transform their attitudes on such sensitive issues as HIV/AIDS, maternal health and gender.(19)

Partnerships between LFAs and FBOs, however, often showcase similar power imbalances as those observed in secular North-South partnerships, provoking debates on the decolonisation of aid and the localisation of humanitarian action.(20, 21) Yet, conversations in the wider development sector rarely account for or even look at FBOs' experiences with regards to the localisation agenda. While that might be the result of FBOs' different jargon and networks, or the lack of systematic evidence that evaluates the effectiveness of FBOs' mobilisation methodologies at the local level, secular development organisations might be missing out on a learning opportunity.

Alternative faith-based sources of funding

FBOs can enjoy access to alternative faith-based sources of funding, because, unlike secular NGOs, they are usually fully embedded in (inter)national faith-based networks.(22) While they are eligible to receive institutional and government funding, they often limit this source of income in an attempt to safeguard their independence. FBOs usually secure the bulk of their funding from private donors, which largely comprise of (Christian or other) faith networks such as churches and congregations, diasporas, and entrepreneurs. At Woord en Daad, for example, only 30% of income comes from government funding, while the rest is derived from the organisation's religious constituency, private donors and its own programmes.(23) For World Vision, its child sponsorship programmes constitute a major non-governmental source of income.(24) Internationally, a similar picture emerges: World Vision USA received 23% of its funding from the government in 2001, while the French secular NGO Action Contra la Faim, by contrast, obtained 70% of its income from government sources. (25)

Although private donations, and the sponsorship programmes in particular, ensure that FBOs are not viewed as an extension of the state, they also lead to questions regarding accountability. (26) For example, child sponsors (people who are donating money for the development of a specific child or specific children) care to see that their kids are doing well, but beyond that it is doubtful whether they are interested in how exactly the organisation – in this case World Vision – is spending the sponsorship donations.(27) This is a situation radically different from institutional funders and the strict, external accountability mechanisms they enforce. To address accountability issues in sponsorship programmes, World Vision has set up its own, internal monitoring and evaluation systems, which entail a faith-based element, grounded in the idea that “before God, we need to make sure we are doing things right”.(28) Woord en Daad follows a similar route: the organisation has set a number of compulsory indicators according to which they monitor and evaluate each of their development projects.(29) Additionally, many FBOs (including, for example, Dorcas and Tearfund) adhere to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

As a representative from Dorcas noted, the organisation subjects itself voluntarily to CHS audits, which add an external accountability element to the organisation's work. Yet, while most FBOs might have robust, internal – and, at times, external – conditionality and accountability mechanisms, their success ultimately hinges on how they are implemented by field officers in the various projects.(30)

BOX 1

BEYOND DICHOTOMOUS LANGUAGE AND THINKING

The foregoing has shown that FBOs share some distinctive features that set them apart from secular actors. At the same time however, it is clear that FBOs constitute a very heterogenous group with greater differences within this broad category than often assumed.

While this report looks at FBOs across the globe, making few explicit distinctions between organisations operating in the global North or in the global South, it is important to note that large western FBOs (especially Christian ones) often have a lot in common with secular, western (I)NGOs. Smaller FBOs in the global South and FBOs of non-Christian denominations, by contrast, share fewer commonalities with Western (I)NGOs. Considering that the differences between large, Western FBOs and local faith actors may be more considerable than the differences between large FBOs and secular (I)NGOs, the question arises whether the distinction between faith-based and secular organisations is helpful.

As multiple participants to the workshop on 10 March 2022 emphasized: The dichotomous thinking and language employed in this debate is not only unhelpful; it also creates a clear-cut distinction that does not exist. While dilemmas and difficulties should not be denied or shied away from – “There is no silver bullet or clear solution for our differences,” one participant argued – our differences are not a matter of black and white. There is a great grey area within which FBOs and secular actors overlap and collaboration can be found. But this area will stay hidden if dichotomous language and thinking continues to dominate our dialogue.

CHAPTER 2

PERCEIVED OR REAL? BARRIERS TO COOPERATION BETWEEN SECULAR AND FAITH-BASED ACTORS

The previous chapter provided some clarity on how to define FBOs, their distinctive features, and their approach to development work. What became clear is that, despite some commonalities, FBOs are neither a homogenous nor a static category.⁽³¹⁾ In fact, they display great diversity in terms of their organisational structures, the importance and role attributed to faith, and their geographic reach. Similar to many secular organisations, FBOs are subject to change as well. Take Dorcas, for example, which started out as an advocacy organisation for the rights of Christian and Jewish minorities in the former Soviet Bloc. Since then, Dorcas has transitioned to development work, with a special focus on providing relief during humanitarian crises.⁽³²⁾ Experience shows, however, that non-religious actors – like governments, international donors and secular development organisations – often lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of FBOs to appreciate their wide diversity and dynamism. As a result, they tend to perceive FBOs in an overly simplistic and reductionist manner.⁽³³⁾ At the same time, some perceptions held by secular actors about the role, values and norms of FBOs are, at least partially, true.

Persisting (mis)conceptions – in the context of this research among policy makers and practitioners in the development sector – about religious organisations are often based on prejudice and sparse knowledge. Given the dynamism of and wide variety among FBOs, many opportunities could arise for effective collaboration if both secular and faith-based actors are better informed about one another and able to look beneath the surface. What is needed, in other words, is a critical reflection 1) on existing views about FBOs held by secular actors, and 2) on views held by FBOs about their secular counterparts, especially because FBOs sometimes seem to assume the views of secular actors about them are more negative than they really are. This chapter seeks to provide some clarity, by moving beyond the descriptive and delving into various barriers – perceived or real – that stand in the way of collaboration between faith-based and secular development organisations, and between these FBOs and government agencies. In the following sections, we will discuss three categories of conceptions about FBOs and their role in development work. The findings result from both the literature review and from the interviews with religious and secular actors. For each of the categories, we have tried to determine to what extent current conceptions hold true and whether the barriers to effective collaboration are real or mostly perceived – either by secular bodies or by the FBOs themselves. The central goal is to bring to light current misconceptions and provide a better starting point for collaboration and partnerships – based on mutual understanding and free from bias and prejudice. At the end of this chapter, attention will briefly shift to the Dutch context, discussing the impact of the barriers identified in this chapter as well as how they have been overcome in various exemplary cases.

2.1 FBOs as partners for specific thematic issues

According to interviews with faith-based stakeholders, FBOs have traditionally been considered and selected as development partners for specific thematic issues – predominantly defending and promoting the rights of religious minorities and the freedom of belief.

Pigeon-holed: Freedom of belief and health-care

This idea is not entirely unfounded. For example, in a 2016 strategy paper the German Federal Ministry for Economic cooperation and Development (BMZ) explicitly identified ‘rights of religious minorities and the freedom of belief’ as the main basis for collaboration with religious actors.⁽³⁴⁾ There is, however, an increasing number of faith-to-secular partnerships on an array of development issues, most specifically focusing on education, health care and poverty eradication. The joint initiative of UNAIDS and the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is a good example of such partnerships in the field of health care. Recognising the key role of FBOs in health care through their networks of hospitals, clinics and community systems, in June 2020 UNAIDS and PEPFAR launched a programme to leverage global and country leadership by FBOs in the HIV response. The UNAIDS-PEPFAR faith-based initiative is designed as a consortium of longstanding FBO partners – including, for example, Caritas Internationalis; Islamic Relief Worldwide; and the World Council of Churches – all working together to “build and combine their strengths, promote evidence-based policy and practice and strengthen advocacy efforts”.⁽³⁵⁾ At country level, activities are now being rolled out. In Côte d’Ivoire, for instance, UNAIDS-PEPFAR and Caritas are working together on a project to strengthen the involvement of faith-based organisations in accelerating early diagnosis and treatment of children living with HIV in the country.⁽³⁶⁾

The partnership between the World Food Programme (WFP) and World Vision is another example. As David Beasley, Executive Director of the United Nations WFP wrote in 2017, “faith communities are vital partners in the global effort to respond swiftly and effectively to the threat of famine. During times such as these, people turn to the most trusted organisations rooted in their communities – often the local mosque, church or temple”.⁽³⁷⁾ This is why the WFP has a longstanding record of partnering with FBOs in its efforts to eradicate hunger. The collaboration with World Vision, now going strong for over 30 years, is proving highly successful. In 2020 alone, the WFP-World Vision partnership reached more than 12 million vulnerable people, over 50 per cent of which were children, and most were living in the top 10 fragile contexts where World Vision works.⁽³⁸⁾

The public-private barrier

While various examples from practice show that FBOs and secular actors are effectively collaborating on a range of development issues, still, faith-based actors are most often considered as partners for religion-related development topics.

This continued bias is further fed by a general difference in understanding of faith and religion in the global North and global South. In the global North's largely secularised context, religion is seen as a private matter, constituting a domain that is and should be separate from the public sphere. (39) In the global South, conversely, faith and religion are often seen as something transcending the personal, able to have an impact on society, and a force that constitutes a motivation to develop and realise one's goals. In other words: for many societies in the global South, religion is not simply a private matter. Rather, it touches upon every aspect of life – public and private: religion is everywhere. For European secular actors – be they governments, donors, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – the 'private' understanding of faith implies that religion does not have a place in realising societal and public goals beyond the religious realm. Hence, for secular development stakeholders, working with FBOs on non-religious topics can become problematic, as it runs the risk of crossing the public-private divide. However, from the perspective of the regions where development programmes are usually implemented – where this divide does not exist – working with FBOs on non-religious topics is not an issue at all. In fact, from this vantage point, it is only logical as religion can act as a motivational driver and is intertwined with every aspect of society.

BOX 2

A CONTEMPORARY FIGHT: CLIMATE CHANGE

Beyond religion-related topics and issues of healthcare and poverty eradication – two specialty areas for many FBOs – faith-based actors are playing an increasingly prominent role in the fight against climate change. This focus on climate is, as argued by Fatima Arkin, ‘a natural fit’(40); a sentiment that is also echoed by Norwegian Church Aid: “The imperative to care for creation is strong across all faiths and worldviews.” Similarly, Rebecca Root’s recent article ‘Harnessing faith for climate action’ shows that certain faiths and religious principles automatically lend themselves to a greener way of life. There are several religions that encourage (permanent or temporary) vegetarianism, and Islam, for example, discourages excessive consumption of planetary resources.

Experiences of the last decade have shown that FBOs have indeed been engaged in every step, “from delivering immediate relief after natural disasters to building the long-term resilience of climate-vulnerable people in the global South”. When it comes to effectively combating climate change, a concerted effort, from members of all layers of society, is needed. That is why FBOs appear to be such a valuable actor: what sets them apart from their secular counterparts, Arkin argues, “is their strong moral voice and vast networks throughout the global South”. Not only do FBOs have widespread, and often very rural, connections with local religious actors; they also have religion as a strong motivational force. Faith principles guide them to be stewards of the earth. Thus, thanks to their connections and the fact that religion can be employed as a source of motivation, FBOs are able to reach members of the remotest, rural villages in the global South and move them, for example, to adopt more climate-friendly agricultural practices.

Some inspiring examples of FBOs working on climate change showcase clearly the effectiveness of their engagement in this work, mobilising communities to work on climate change. Big international network organisations like the Hindu Bhumi Project and Green Muslims, are drawing on their faith principles to mobilise believers for environmental action. And local FBOs, inspired by a host of religions, are doing their part by encouraging sustainable practices like tree planting, rainwater collection and recycling, and initiating awareness campaigns about environmental issues through churches and local faith leaders.

2.2 FBOs' negative role in certain thematic issues

As the foregoing section shows, organisations whose operations are based on or guided by religious principles are often seen as particularly suited to address a select set of issues. Additionally, as representatives of Prisma shared in their interviews, secular stakeholders tend to see FBOs as unsuitable for addressing certain other issues, especially pertaining to gender equality, issues of family planning, and LGBTQI inclusion. With respect to these topics, FBOs are seen as a repressive, restrictive force. Indeed, examples abound of FBOs working to oppose or restrict rights related to gender equality and the freedoms of LGBTQI communities. There are, however, also examples of FBOs that use their faith as a motivation to fight injustice and inequality, including injustices against LGBTQI communities.(41)

Repressive and exclusive

Building on the argument made in the previous chapter that FBOs constitute a highly heterogeneous group, it logically follows that a nuanced view of their role in addressing sensitive gender- and LGBTQI-related issues is needed. At one extreme there are FBOs that actively hurt or hamper inclusion, acceptance and equality. At the other extreme, by contrast, there are FBOs that fight for these goods. And between these two a great diversity exists.(42) Some FBOs may, for example, not support same-sex marriages based on their understanding of biblical teachings about this; but at the same time make sure LGBTQI-people have equal access to their services.

Secular actors working on these sensitive issues would do well not to dismiss working with FBOs from the get-go. Rather, taking each FBO as a separate entity with its own identity, views and mission, will open opportunities for highly impactful partnerships to achieve positive change. In fact, given the widespread networks of FBOs and the fact that their religious background can lend credibility to their actions among local communities, it is worth seeking collaboration with them on sensitive or controversial topics. For example, changing the mindset and behaviour of local communities to accept and include LGBTQI groups may not be attainable for secular NGOs. FBOs, by contrast, may be able to realise such change given their religious foundation and connections.

Family planning

What the positive role of FBOs on sensitive issues can look like, becomes clear when zooming in on examples from practice. With regards to the issue of family planning, for instance, it is a commonly held conception that FBOs are, by definition, hampering family planning initiatives. As Karen Hoehn's 2019 brief written for FP2030 (a global partnership centred solely on family planning) shows, in many countries in the global South FBOs are central actors in delivering healthcare information, services and supplies – including for family planning. "These FBOs are seen as credible and trustworthy [...] and help contextualise family planning concepts and interventions by using language and approaches that resonate with the cultures and beliefs of the communities they serve."(43) The example of the NURHI Interfaith Forums in Nigeria (see box 2) provides an insight into how FBOs can be highly effective in promoting family planning in a context- and faith-sensitive fashion.

The conversation around FBOs and family planning, however, does warrant a critical and nuanced view. Research in Malawi, Kenya and Haiti reveals that family planning services offered by FBOs, although not without any merit, were often incomplete or harming efforts of private or public providers with regards to contraception and women's empowerment. (44) In 2008, the Malawian government initiated a campaign to address the AIDS epidemic, conveying messages on abstinence, fidelity and condom use. FBOs working in Malawi have played a pivotal role in providing badly needed infrastructure for this endeavour – making them both popular and influential in the campaign. In practice, however, their outreach in local communities undermined the government's objectives by actively opposing the use of condoms.(45) Similarly, in Nepal the impact of FBOs on family planning services is a double-edged sword. When President Trump reinstated the Global Gag Rule in 2017, many family planning clinics in Nepal were forced to close down as they lost their main source of income. The gap that emerged was rapidly filled by FBOs, who took up much of family planning service delivery and were able to provide women with important care that they would otherwise be lacking.(46) While this care delivery is of course of great value, the FBOs have also been found to actively condemn and prevent abortions, and spread ideas against women's reproductive rights. This has greatly affected women, especially in more rural areas. The FBOs' position not only resulted in an exacerbation of the social stigma on abortion and an explosive rise in abortions conducted by unlicensed personnel, it is also deterring women who do have access to authorised clinics from visiting those places, for fear of societal ostracisation.(47)

BOX 3

THE CASE OF INTERFAITH FORUMS IN NIGERIA: CONTEXT- AND FAITH-SENSITIVE FAMILY PLANNING

A study conducted among 95 FBOs operating in the field of family planning by FP2030 found that various FBOs are very successful in approaching the topic in a context-specific and faith-sensitive way. In Nigeria, with the support of the Nigerian Urban Reproductive Health Initiative (NURHI), Interfaith Forums were set up: self-driven forums that promote faith-based advocacy for family planning. These forums are providing resources on family planning with a faith-perspective; training Islamic as well as Christian clerics to integrate family planning into regular activities, public gatherings and events; and seeking to improve media discourse on family planning on the radio and online. Little by little, these FBOs are realising change that matches with the local context; and increasingly getting support from fellow religious leaders who are sharing the message in their communities.

In October 2017 a meeting was convened in Kaduna, bringing together religious leaders from both Christian and Islamic faiths around the topic of family planning and childbirth spacing. A core outcome of this interfaith gathering was “consensus that efforts of religious leaders to promote family planning have the potential to save lives”. Dismissing the role of all FBOs in this regard as merely repressive or counteractive thus seems like a missed opportunity. Or, as Hoehn writes in her report “faith and family planning interact in complex ways and [...] a better understanding of this by all stakeholders will allow secular actors, faith leaders, and FBOs to more effectively advance family planning”.

Ideology as full stop

As the foregoing shows, when it comes to the role FBOs are playing in contributing to LGBTQI inclusion, gender equality, family planning and women's empowerment, we are left with a rather mixed bag. Development priorities often stand in contrast with theological positions on the aforementioned issues and these ideological differences can become a real barrier for faith-secular partnerships.(48) The 'sensitive topics' become fundamental sticking points for collaboration while, as Olivia Wilkinson – sociologist of humanitarianism and religion – points out, there are possibilities to negotiate around ideological differences. (49) Secular actors often perceive FBOs – the entire category of FBOs – as a repressive force. So, when they enter the conversation about a prospective partnership, they are likely to disengage from the collaboration if FBOs stick to their theological standing – as this would risk 'repression' in programme implementation. FBOs, in turn, often feel that secular actors – again, as a homogenous category – impose 'western' values and fail to be sensitive to the needs, cultures and beliefs of local communities in the global South when it comes to the sensitive issues this chapter deals with.(50) While a number of secular and faith-based actors do indeed subscribe to these narrow understandings of each other, there are also examples of stakeholders successfully navigating their ideological differences. There is a vast group of organisations – secular and faith-based – that can be placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum: not clinging to one extreme of the ideological spectrum. It is in this 'grey' zone – a very dull colour for an area with such promise – where fruitful synergies, collaborations and partnerships can emerge. Such partnerships can enable the rise of context- and faith-sensitive approaches that will effectively generate progress on issues of inclusion, equality and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

2.3 Proselytising

A third notion that often stands in the way of collaboration between secular and faith-based actors is the assumption that in FBOs' projects and activities there is always an element of proselytisation – that is, an attempt to convert beneficiaries to their own religious faith. Whether or not this assumption holds true – and in some cases it will, in others it will not – it is forming a real barrier to faith-secular partnerships.

What is proselytising

Many western European governments – including the German and British – as well as international organisations such as the UNDP, draw a red line when it comes to proselytising.(51, 52, 53) Interestingly, the non-proselytising principle is also embedded in the Red Cross Code of Conduct, which is signed, among others, by Dorcas, World Vision and Tearfund.(54) There is, however, no clear consensus about what proselytising entails as a concept or in practice. This, as a 2015 report by Theos – the UK's leading religion and society think tank – explains, is problematic: "The word, which traditionally simply meant the attempt to persuade someone to change their religion, has come to imply improperly forcing, bribing or taking advantage of vulnerabilities in the effort to recruit new religious adherents."(55)

The lack of clarity about proselytising activities, their prevalence and impact, should be resolved. While an outcome of FBOs' development or humanitarian activities, especially those carried out in partnership with local faith actors, may result in new worshipers, this does not mean they are coercing, bribing or taking advantage of programme beneficiaries. Moreover, for many FBOs their faith is simply the driving force behind their efforts and the fabric that binds them and the communities they serve together. Looking at a few examples from practice, it becomes clear that, indeed, there is wide variety in the extent to which and how FBOs put their faith centre stage.

Tearfund, for example, is explicitly opposed to forced conversion but does regard its faith and the gospel as central to its work and mission. With its Integral Mission the organisation seeks to attain a 'holistic transformation', pertaining to all aspects of life – the spiritual, social, economic, physical, emotional, environmental and political. Similarly, at World Vision, missionary work is explicitly not pursued either. Yet, looking more closely at its programmes and strategies, it is possible to regard World Vision's interventions as including a missionary element nonetheless. Impact indicators for its child sponsorship programme, for instance, include "the number of children reporting an awareness of God's love". Additionally, World Vision's strategy, Our Promise 2030, includes a commitment to ensure that all children can "experience the profound security of the love of God and others". Does the aim of ensuring that children 'experience the love of God' constitute a form of proselytising? It does not necessarily imply that the children have to believe in God, or convert to Christianity. It can simply mean that these children feel loved and supported – a feeling that for religious people is the result of God's love.

Written objectives and strategies may be open to multiple interpretations and the critical reader may see attempts to convert beneficiaries where there may be none. In practice, it is the actions and attitudes of FBOs' implementing staff that provide most insight. Some staff members may practice restraint when it comes to missionary ambitions, even though the organisations they are working for hold explicitly missionary objectives. Conversely, employees working for FBOs that do not actively pursue proselytising, may be driven by their Christian ideals to share with – or, in some cases, even impose on – communities their faith and love of God.(56)

The zealous, the extreme, the terrorist?

For the larger, professionalised Northern and international FBOs, the barrier formed by the proselytising assumption seems to be waning. As a result of their long-standing experience in the field of development, international FBOs are well aware of the reputational damages proselytising can induce.(57) Similarly, for the secular development organisations interviewed for this project, proselytising was not recognised as an immediate barrier for collaboration. More specifically, secular stakeholders struggled to see how FBOs could pursue missionary activities within the framework of their faith-secular partnerships at all, as these are built on shared and mutually agreed-upon objectives.(58) For many national and local faith-based organisations, understanding the risks of and staying away from proselytising is a key part of their training when they are seeking to establish fruitful partnerships in the humanitarian and development sectors.(59) That said, given the ongoing evangelistic zeal of some FBOs – those at one extreme of the continuum – and the fact that local churches and mosques are also active in the development field, the proselytising assumption continues to find affirmation and, hence, may still constitute an active barrier to collaboration.(60)

BOX 4

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: RELIGION AND TERRORISM

In chapter 1 of this report it became clear that religious actors are a highly heterogeneous group, with differences in practically all characteristics: in terms of religion, size, objectives, location, and so on. Among these actors is a very small minority of faith-based terrorist organisations. Yet, as the impact of these groups is very grave, threatening, uncertain, and not seldom disastrous, they receive relatively much more attention than the large majority of peacefully operating religious actors.

Motivated by religious extremism and/or conservative religious politics, such terrorist groups usually employ violent methods and tactics, which they justify through instrumentalist interpretations of holy scripture and texts that are developed to fit their specific objectives.⁽⁶¹⁾ Since 9/11, conversations around religion and terrorism have overwhelmingly centred around Islamic faith-based actors, unjustly equating them to violent extremism.⁽⁶²⁾ As a result, many Islamic FBOs have come under increased scrutiny from donor agencies and governments for alleged links to terrorist groups. While Islamic terrorist organisations do exist – with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Hamas being some prominent examples – religious terrorism extends beyond Islam and is present in most of the world's largest religions.⁽⁶³⁾ Think, for instance, of the American, white supremacist Christian terrorist groups such as the Army of God which conducts anti-abortion violence;⁽⁶⁴⁾ of radical Jewish messianic terrorist movements; and of the extremist Sikh movements like Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) – a terrorist entity aiming to establish a fundamentalist independent Sikh state.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The idea that religious actors operating in the development field may, perhaps, have linkages to terrorist organisations that share their faith, casts a dark shadow over development FBOs. Even though connections to terrorist groups are exceptional, and secular actors may not identify this threat as an actually existing obstacle standing in the way of collaboration, in practice it seems that the very possibility – however small – does constitute a barrier. Making this barrier explicit, talking about it in an open and honest dialogue, may go a long way in bringing development FBOs out from under the shadow and create more opportunities for fruitful collaborations.

Secularism, neutrality, impartiality

Yes, it is true that some FBOs have an explicit mission to evangelise their beneficiaries; and others, without such a mission, still do so in practice. Yes, this is a problem and a certain vigilance regarding religious proselytising is warranted – on the part of secular actors, but also on the part of those religious actors that oppose the practice. That said, we should not close our eyes to the fact that 1) many FBOs do not pursue and explicitly oppose proselytising; and 2) secular stakeholders should not be regarded as ‘neutral’ actors: they too bring certain worldviews and a set of beliefs to the table. According to Alice Wilkinson, the ideas and practices of secular organisations have been actively shaped by secularism and (a set of) secular ideologies such as neoliberalism, feminism, humanism and others. Secular organisations, thus, have their own missions and visions as well. As Lynch and Schwarz (2016) argue in their article Humanitarianism’s Proselytizing Problem, they also seek to impart on their beneficiaries certain beliefs and practices that match with their own worldviews and notions of progress, development, and ‘what is a good life’.(66)

The values of secular development stakeholders are, in most cases, informed by neoliberalism and secularism and/or other worldviews that are widely accepted and shared in the global North. As a consequence, and because secularism is often equated with neutrality and impartiality, these worldviews and values are viewed with less criticism than those of FBOs.(67) As will be explained in the following chapter, however, critical reflection is called for. The set of values secular actors bring to the table may not align with or even run counter to local beliefs of development recipients, thus potentially undermining sustainable impact. All development actors, whether faith-inspired or secular, hold a certain worldview and set of beliefs. Understanding that all actors have a certain positionality that affects their work and the communities they engage with, could lend much-needed nuance to the proselytising conversation.

2.4 The state of faith-secular collaboration in the Dutch context

The aforementioned obstacles have affected faith-to-secular partnerships across the globe, and the Dutch context is no exception. However, as an interview with an expert on the matter showcased, over the past few years the quality of partnerships in the Netherlands has greatly improved (though not so much the quantity, as the bulk of programming still happens with secular development NGOs). This improvement implies that some of the barriers have been, at least partially, overcome.

Looking at the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, programmes have been initiated that, compared to earlier ones, are less technical in nature and incorporate a moral component, manifested in such goals as mobilising and empowering local communities. (68) These types of programmes are a better fit for FBOs as illustrated by the Power of Voices Policy Framework, which seek to reduce inequality, combat corruption, and amplify citizens’ voices. A number of FBOs, including ZOA, Mensen met een Missie, and Woord en Daad, are the lead parties of programmes funded under the Power of Voices Framework, focusing on such diverse topics as food security, the freedom of religion and belief, and climate adaptation and mitigation.

With regards to partnerships between FBOs and secular development NGOs, similar positive developments can be observed. Formerly, in the pillared Dutch context, mainstream secular and faith-based NGOs could both count on almost guaranteed contracting under the co-financing scheme (medefinanciering). Later, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started tendering contracts and the civil society context became largely secularised, FBOs tended to view themselves and were viewed by others as relative outsiders, leading to fragmentation and (self-)marginalisation.(69) Over the past 20 years, however, FBOs and secular development NGOs alike have made increasing efforts to reach out to each and create more partnerships.(70) The collaboration between Partos (the Dutch membership body for organisations working in international development), Woord en Daad and Both ENDS to compile the report, “Ready for Change?: Global Goals at home and abroad”, is a testament to this positive development. Closer relations have also been facilitated by the lobby and advocacy efforts of Partos through which it seeks to identify shared interests and common needs between its faith-based and secular members.

Divergences, however, are still present, especially with regards to some of the aforementioned sensitive topics and in terms of development cooperation financing.(71) As FBOs are perhaps the only actors with strong ties to their respective constituencies, they have access to alternative sources of funding, which gives them both more freedom and less. That is, while they are less dependent on government funding, in partnerships they cannot compromise too much, as this might undermine the support from their constituents.

CHAPTER 3

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES AND ADDED VALUE: COLLABORATION WITH FBOS

The previous chapter identified and discussed real and perceived barriers to development cooperation between faith-based and secular stakeholders, as those were iterated by FBO representatives and secular actors. While clarifying misperceptions and identifying barriers are useful first steps, they are not enough in and of themselves to foster greater faith-to-secular collaboration in the field of development. What is needed at this stage is to show more clearly the added value of working with FBOs as well as pinpoint specific opportunities for increased cooperation. The third chapter of this report seeks to do just that. Based on interviews with FBO representatives and secular actors, which were complemented by desk research, three areas of opportunities are addressed here, namely: 1) practical benefits; 2) religious sensitivity and context specificity; and 3) synergies and mutual learning.

3.1 Tangible outcomes, practical benefits

This section looks briefly at the more practical benefits of working with FBOs and the opportunities for harnessing the strengths of FBOs for more such advantages in future. It will be argued that working with religious actors, and with FBOs in particular, generates practical benefits because 1) such cooperation yields motivation, trust and legitimacy; and 2) it allows for efficient use of the infrastructure, networks and resources of FBOs.

Motivation, trust and legitimacy

As Ter Haar and Ellis (2006) as well as Jan Henningsson, Senior Advisor at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, point out, religion and religious principles in development interventions may act as a motivation for people to invest in their own development, even if their outlook is very bleak.⁽⁷²⁾ Regardless of their veracity, religions – their principles and champions – “equip many of the world’s people with the moral guidance and the will to improve their lives”.⁽⁷³⁾ Thus, when development programmes are implemented by a consortium of organisations which includes religious actors, motivation to participate and the hope that the programme will indeed yield positive outcomes, are likely to increase. Following a similar logic, it is argued that working with FBOs can enhance the trust in and legitimacy of development programmes. That is, the involvement of FBOs may contribute to people’s faith in the effectiveness of an intervention as well as generate support for the implementing organisations and their causes. Evidence from Nigeria shows that, compared to secular NGOs, FBOs are seen as having greater legitimacy and are valued higher by the poorest.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Many FBOs do indeed claim that “they are better placed to gain legitimacy and confidence in traditional religious societies than a secular body”.

According to Mr Frank Ubachs, Policy Advisor for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, such claims should be treated with care. Rather than accepting that ‘all FBOs enjoy greater legitimacy’, one should look at this matter case-by-case because, according to Ubachs, “it is all a question of context”.(75) In fragile states – in which many development organisations operate – where trust in and legitimacy of secular leaders is often low, FBOs may be seen as gatekeepers and opinion leaders, and are trusted by local communities.(76) Yet, in conflict-affected regions, religion may also be part of the problem, which can undermine the trust in and legitimacy of FBOs.(77) In such contexts, however, sidelining religious actors or ignoring the religious dimensions of conflict can potentially exacerbate it further. Thus, while trust in and legitimacy of a programme may benefit from the involvement of faith-based partners, careful reflection is needed about the specific context and (religious) sensitivities of local communities (see section 3.2 on religious sensitivity for more on this topic).

Networks, infrastructure, resources

As the foregoing shows, working with FBOs may have some significant benefits in the implementation of development programming, because programmes may be embraced by local communities more easily. When looking at the practical side of development practice – i.e. the tangible and material aspects of development programmes – more benefits become obvious. First, FBOs are often part of large (inter)national religious networks, whose spread and high social penetration remains largely unmatched by secular NGOs and their respective networks.(78) In the words of the UNDP, “these networks of congregations, affiliates and individuals constitute remarkable channels of communication as well as human and financial resources”.(79) Thus, these networks do not only provide access to a wide array of people and organisations, including those living and operating in very remote areas; they also come with their own infrastructure. When partnerships with FBOs are established, the use of these existing channels can greatly improve development projects’ efficiency, reach and, consequently, impact.

When discussing the practical side of development cooperation, the issue of financial resources cannot be left unmentioned. For the Dutch context, it was found that a great added value of working with FBOs is their monetary capacity. “For every Euro the government spends on a [project], the FBO brings in an additional Euro through private funds and the use of volunteers.”(80) While this financial capacity does not apply to all FBOs – specifically those based in the global South – it is undoubtedly true that the ‘backing’ of religious networks and groups increases the likelihood of material support. Although monetary gain should not be the prime motivator for partnering with FBOs, pooling financial resources for a common goal is a real practical advantage of such collaborations.

3.2 Religious sensitivity and context specificity

Beyond the practical benefits, one of the most important reasons for collaborating with FBOs in the development context has to do with the place of religion in the countries where development projects are mostly implemented. Given the fact that, in the global South especially, religion continues to play a fundamental role in people's lives, adopting a purely secular model to development interventions runs the risk of bypassing, ignoring or even going against the basic values of large groups of beneficiaries⁽⁸¹⁾ – a risk that runs counter to the basic premises of the 'leading from the South' agenda. As Ter Haar and Ellis (2006) argue, this does not imply that all interventions should include or conform to religious principles. Rather, they argue, "it is necessary to take people's own understanding of the world as a point of departure".⁽⁸²⁾ And to realise this, a degree of religious sensitivity is indispensable.

Religious sensitivity as a concept

Religious sensitivity, a concept often conflated with religious literacy⁽⁸³⁾, refers to one's "ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place".⁽⁸⁴⁾ This requires a firm understanding of how religion is embedded in and shapes the local context where development initiatives take place. FBO representatives interviewed for this report all emphasised this importance and relevance of religious sensitivity for the development sector. They highlighted three main reasons:

- Beneficiaries of development initiatives are more often than not religious themselves;⁽⁸⁵⁾
- Religion can be among the real or perceived drivers of conflict;
- Religious actors, including and beyond FBOs, play an instrumental role in service provision as well as humanitarian relief.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Despite the strong arguments for operating in a religious sensitive manner, a 2017 research by OXFAM revealed that, among secular stakeholders in the development sector, religious sensitivity is very low.⁽⁸⁷⁾ For Western European development and humanitarian workers in particular, religious sensitivity and a deeper understanding of local religious beliefs and practices do not constitute a prominent part of how they carry out their projects.⁽⁸⁸⁾ In those cases where religious sensitivity was visible in the design and implementation processes, the importance attributed to this sensitivity was generally very limited. This becomes visible, among others, in tools that serve to guide a 'religion-sensitive approach', which usually do not go much further than a standard stakeholder mapping of local faith actors. When religious sensitivity is incorporated more prominently – for example by engaging with local religious theology – it is often in the context of selected thematic topics that are deemed as difficult or controversial in a religious setting, such as gender issues and LGBTQI inclusion.⁽⁸⁹⁾

Incorporating religious sensitivity for context specific programming

Over the last decade a gradual change in the attitudes of secular development organisations, humanitarian agencies, and policymakers has become visible through more coordinated efforts to increase religious sensitivity. Zooming in on the Dutch context, this trend seems to be reaffirmed, at least at the level of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. More specifically, in 2019, the Ministry established the position of Ambassador and Special Envoy for Religion and Belief, which was motivated by two objectives: 1) create a better understanding of the interaction between religion and foreign policy; and 2) put a greater emphasis on the freedom of religion and belief against the backdrop of a deteriorating international situation.⁽⁹⁰⁾ The role and responsibilities vested in the position allow the Ambassador to play a key role towards promoting religious sensitivity. The Ambassador routinely engages heads of departments in the Ministry as well as ambassadors in discussions about what religion means to them and what role religion(s) play in their respective offices.⁽⁹¹⁾ Apart from the Ambassadorship, there also exist structured dialogues within the Ministry on the topic of religion and foreign affairs. Most importantly, according to interviews with Prisma representatives, the new generation of civil servants entering the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually receive training on the role of religion in international politics.⁽⁹²⁾ Yet, according to the same interviewees and confirmed by other Dutch FBOs, they have had minimal or no involvement in formulating these learning programmes. Incorporating their expertise and experiences, however, would be of great added value and potentially make the offered training more nuanced and successful in realising mutual understanding.⁽⁹³⁾

Beyond the Dutch context, religious sensitivity training is increasingly being offered to organisations' staff members around the world. While the offering of such training is, in essence, a good idea, one should also be aware of the fact that religious literacy – and activities that seek to promote this literacy – can easily become 'instrumentalised'. That is, according to academic research, some secular organisations are treating 'religious literacy' as a means to tap into the resources and capital of religious actors.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Rather than promoting religious sensitivity as a moral good, these organisations are simply paying lip service to the process by claiming religious literacy.

The idea that religious sensitivity is 'a means to an end' is not necessarily bad, however. In fact, religious sensitivity can be seen as instrumental and even indispensable to design development programmes that match with the local context in which they are to be implemented. Whether, as a development actor, one regards religious belief as itself 'true' or 'untrue' is hardly the point here. What matters is that religion, whatever form it takes, constitutes a social and political reality for the people and communities organisations seek to assist.⁽⁹⁵⁾ Being aware of and sensitive to local religious beliefs can only enhance the match between programme and context and, hence, improve effectiveness of interventions. As evidence from the Dutch context shows, the added value of FBOs' religious sensitivity cannot be underestimated. Their approaches are often regarded as better aligned with the pace and physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs of the beneficiaries.⁽⁹⁶⁾

Bridging FBOs

If operating in a manner sensitive to local religious beliefs is likely to improve a programme's effectiveness, it logically follows that cooperation with FBOs could be of great added value. FBOs, having an intimate knowledge of religion and an intrinsic commitment to religious sensitivity, are not only able to share their knowledge; they can also ensure that secular stakeholders meaningfully engage with the religious beliefs and practices that shape local reality.⁽⁹⁷⁾ For one thing, with regards to the above-described training around religious sensitivity, the input and active involvement of FBOs would be of great added value. Moreover, in development practice, FBOs can form the 'bridge' between secular actors and local religious leaders and communities. This bridging function is of particular importance when it comes to addressing controversial socio-political issues – including, as also discussed in the foregoing chapter, issues of gender equality, LGBTQI inclusion and SRHR. Religion often plays a big role in shaping societies' attitudes towards such issues and because FBOs occupy a position at the intersection of development and faith, they can prove an invaluable resource. Addressing the controversial issues in a context-sensitive manner, respecting local beliefs while at the same time promoting and respecting core human rights principles is a challenge that FBOs can help mitigate.⁽⁹⁸⁾ Additionally, as was shared during the workshop on 10 March 2022, international FBOs have proven to be particularly well-placed to function as intermediaries between larger secular stakeholders (including governments and multilateral organisations) and local communities and faith actors in humanitarian response contexts. They can play this role because they are familiar with and part of the more secular humanitarian space – and, therefore, familiar with secular values and language – and at the same time maintain good communication and are well-versed in building relations of trust with local faith actors. In humanitarian crisis settings, when things often need to move fast and efficiently, this intermediary function can be of vital importance.

The great added value of this bridging function of FBOs is also apparent in more practical matters. This is illustrated by the example of Muslim Hands, a UK-based FBO with a large international presence, focused on eradicating the root causes of global poverty. It was found that Muslim communities, especially in the context of fragile states, have been sceptical about accepting food aid from secular organisations, unsure of whether halal traditions and other religious practices have been respected when the food is sourced.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Muslim Hands has been brokering improved relations between secular organisations and Muslim communities, ensuring religious-sensitive food aid. Fostering trust within the Muslim communities and improving religious sensitivity among the development organisations, the quality and efficiency of food aid was greatly improved.

3.3 Synergies and mutual learning

In addition to improving religious sensitivity, closer cooperation with FBOs can also create opportunities for mutual learning on an array of development topics. If secular and religious development organisations manage to better recognise one another's respective strengths and identify synergies and complementarities, not only will efforts on both sides become more effective; most importantly, communities organisations seek to assist will be better for it.

Complementarity and mutual learning in health care

One area that has much potential for mutual learning and complementarity is the provision of healthcare services. While focusing on this particular area of expertise runs the risk of perpetuating the 'pigeon-holing' of FBOs in the health sector – while it is by now clear that these organisations can be very effective in many different fields –, historically, FBOs have played a critical role in health care and have filled the gaps created by state providers in many countries. The figures provided by the African Religious Health Assets Programme confirm this claim: 40% of national health services in Lesotho and 30% in Zambia are provided by religious actors.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ While evidence on the impact FBOs have as health service providers is scant and for the most part anecdotal, literature tends to agree that FBOs – in comparison to public, non-governmental, and other private providers – enjoy:

1. A larger and better-established presence in fragile and post-conflict states, where their role is of particular importance in the absence of other stakeholders;
2. Higher beneficiary satisfaction rates;
3. The ability to reach poor and vulnerable individuals at a lower cost (although this trend seems to be in decline).⁽¹⁰¹⁾

While the comparative advantages of FBOs as health care providers are significant, at the same time evidence also suggests that FBOs are less professional⁽¹⁰²⁾ and not as well managed⁽¹⁰³⁾ as state and private health providers. It thus seems that both parties – secular and faith-based actors – stand much to gain from pooling their strengths and working together. Through increased collaboration, secular stakeholders can improve their interventions in terms of reach and magnitude, beneficiary satisfaction, and cost reduction. FBOs, in turn, could improve their efficiency and administrative/managerial capacity with the help and knowledge of secular partners. This way, the actions and initiatives of diverse stakeholders involved in health service provision can be improved and better aligned, thus creating an overall stronger system of service provision.

The localisation agenda

Another topic ripe for increased collaboration and mutual learning is the localisation of development and humanitarian aid. Conversations around shifting the power, a current hot topic in development and humanitarian circles, centre around the question how to rid North-South partnerships from their inherent power imbalances and enable local actors to take the driver's seat in development initiatives. So far, secular and faith approaches to localisation have developed in parallel without significant points of convergence: mainstream conversations on the topic have hardly looked at FBOs' experiences. Yet, to further the discussion and formulate pathways for change, much can be learned from the experiences of FBOs. These organisations have historically worked with local faith actors as part of larger, usually transnational religious networks and structures. Thus, localisation is not a new phenomenon in the practice of many FBOs.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Yet, as an interview with a Tearfund representative showcases, FBOs' comparatively longer experience with localisation does not mean they do not struggle with it and the ethical questions it raises. For example: How localised are faith-based approaches to development, when money usually flows from larger FBOs based in the global North to local actors?⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ As secular actors are asking the same questions, more collaboration and faith-secular exchange could enrich and deepen the discussion, facilitate mutual learning on best practices, and lead to progress for all involved.

The evidence base

Finally, collaboration between secular and faith-based actors can also help address the lack of robust evidence on the impact of FBOs' interventions. As has been pointed out throughout this report – and confirmed by Jill Olivier in her insightful reflection on future research on faith and health in the development sector – at present, and in accordance with the standards of institutional and governmental funders, the evidence base on the impact and role of FBOs in development efforts remains limited.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Building a more comprehensive evidence base could enable FBOs improve their programmes and better showcase their impact – specifically regarding the role religion plays in this impact. This evidence would not only benefit FBOs themselves. More and better data on impact and 'what works' will also contribute to the development sector as a whole. Moreover, better data on FBOs impact – and the role religion plays in achieving their impact – will enable secular actors to make better informed decisions about working with FBOs. Similarly, policy making with regards to FBOs will become less driven by ideas and preconceptions but based on evidence. In other words, exchanging data, pooling resources, finding synergies and collaborating in the field of Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL) would be worthwhile for all concerned. ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

CONCLUSIONS

This report has sought to collect, synthesise and present relevant knowledge on the impacts and importance of collaborating with faith-based organisations (FBOs) for sustainable development. This concluding chapter is separated into three interrelated sections: Firstly, the authors will reflect on their positionality and their own implicit assumptions they brought to this project. After that, key take-aways are presented as well as recommendations for both faith-based and secular development actors for improved collaboration. The chapter finishes with questions for further research.

Reflections on positionality

Considering that religion and development can still constitute a contentious issue, we thought it necessary to make explicit and reflect on our own positionality in relation to this topic. The Broker, as a knowledge brokering organisation, is an independent entity, with no religious or political affiliations. This research, however, brought to light the relativity of the idea of 'independence'. The Broker as an organisation, as well as both authors individually, are part of the secular development establishment and based in Western Europe. These markers have, to a large extent, shaped our worldviews; including our understanding of religious organisations, religion, and their role in public affairs. In other words, while at the beginning of this project the authors felt they were coming at the topic with an open mind, their own biases and preconceptions soon surfaced, as they not seldom overlapped with those held by secular development actors. Over the course of the last months, we have had many enriching conversations with both religious and secular actors, as well as amongst ourselves. Throughout this process we have tried to keep an open mind, kept checking our own positionality and found that, along the way, some of our assumptions regarding the role and identity of FBOs were challenged, others confirmed, and many placed into new perspective and, consequently, nuanced. For the authors of this report, the first phase of this project has been an interesting and enriching journey. We hope and trust that in the phases to come, we can add even more depth, nuance, and useful recommendations to what is already captured in this report – undoubtedly finding ourselves reflecting on our own positionality and being confronted with our own preconceptions in the process.

Key takeaways

FBOs have historically played a prominent role in the field of development. As the foregoing chapters have shown however, collaboration between secular and faith-based development actors is not as widespread as this role might warrant. To provide a solid foundation for more fruitful collaboration, a better mutual understanding – between the secular and the faith-based actors – as well as recognition of existing barriers and opportunities are indispensable preconditions. In this section the key take-aways of the preceding chapters are summarised, thereby providing a starting point for better understanding, more research and, possibly, a springboard for more effective collaboration:

- **Faith-based actors constitute a very heterogeneous group:** there is wide variety in denominational affiliation, purpose and mission, and organisational structure.
- **It is helpful to place FBOs on a continuum** rather than thinking of them in terms of several clearly distinguishable types or categories.
- **A holistic approach, strong connections with local faith actors and networks, and alternative faith-based sources of funding** are features that set – Dutch or ‘Northern’ – FBOs apart from their secular counterparts.
- **Several barriers stand in the way of collaboration and partnerships between FBOs and secular development actors.** These barriers result from real differences in worldviews, approaches and objectives, but are also informed and augmented by biases and preconceptions about ‘the other’.
- **Biases and prejudices play an important role in keeping barriers to effective collaboration in place.** Fostering mutual understanding and open dialogue, without avoiding sensitive topics, is therefore of critical importance.
- **FBOs operating in the development sector are often pigeon-holed to work on issues of freedom of religion and health-care.** While FBOs do indeed have long-standing experience in these fields, they can and do make significant contributions in other domains of development as well.
- **Looking at FBOs on a case-by-case basis and judging each by their individual strengths** rather than assuming that ‘religion and health’ are their niche, would open up many opportunities for collaborations.
- **FBOs may be a repressive and restrictive force with regards to particular issues, but this is not necessarily the case.** With regards to some topics – most notably gender equality, family planning and the freedom and inclusion of LGBTQI-communities– it is assumed that FBOs are, by definition, repressive and restrictive. Some key principles – respect for human rights and freedoms as well as promoting inclusive societies (including LGBTQI communities, for example) – should be at the heart of all development interventions and the partnerships underpinning them. Given that there are FBOs which, based on their religion, hold views that go against these principles, it is of vital importance to check and have open and honest dialogues.

- **The assumption that FBOs' development activities entail a proselytising element should be critically reviewed.** This reflection is warranted because 1) most Northern development FBOs no longer pursue and are often explicitly opposed to proselytising; and 2) secular actors should not be regarded as 'neutral' either – they too bring their own worldviews to the table.
- **Open and honest dialogue between secular and faith-based development actors is a vital precondition to realise meaningful collaborations.** Ideas and preconceptions about 'the other' exist on both sides. In practice this may lead to avoiding collaboration altogether which, in many instances, is a missed opportunity. Yet, when collaboration is sought, not talking about controversial topics and prejudices creates fertile ground for future conflict, unequal relationships and distrust.
- **Increased development cooperation with FBOs can yield several tangible outcomes and practical benefits.** These include greater trust and legitimacy for development programmes and access to alternative networks, resources and infrastructure.
- **FBOs can contribute to religious-sensitive and context specific development programming.** FBOs can fulfil a bridging function, facilitating meaningful engagement of secular stakeholders with local communities regarding their religious beliefs and practices.
- **Closer faith-secular collaboration can create opportunities for mutual learning and knowledge exchange** on a host of issues, ranging from the localisation of aid to healthcare service provision.
- **For secular development actors there are clear benefits as well as potential risks to collaborating with FBOs.** Risks may be real or perceived; differences in worldviews may or may not be insurmountable; and benefits may or may not outweigh the disadvantages. As the collected chapters show, there is no one-size-fits-all answer and each actor, faith-based and secular alike, should be judged on its individual merits and qualities.

Recommendations for FBOs and secular development stakeholders

The main conclusion that stems from our analysis, which development literature also seems to confirm, is that, overall, thoughtful and strategic engagement with religious actors, and FBOs in particular, can bear several advantages for sustainable development. (108) This thoughtful and strategic engagement implies that FBOs are taken seriously in their role and not regarded as mere implementers of an agenda already set, nor seen just as financial partners or as a substitute to state service provision.(109) The 'thoughtful and strategic' nature of the engagement implies that both secular and faith-based development actors clearly iterate their worldviews, objectives, approaches, and methodologies, on the basis of which they can establish a shared agenda. Additionally, the term 'engagement' should be understood as referring to a long-term relationship. The sustainability of such relations hinges on mutual respect and understanding. In short: When the terms of the partnership are clear to all concerned, when differences in worldviews are made explicit, and there is an atmosphere conducive to open and honest dialogue,

then fruitful and longstanding collaborations between secular and faith-based actors can emerge. These collaborations, as was shown in the preceding chapters, can be of great added value. To help realise the establishment of partnerships that benefit the secular development actors, FBOs and, most importantly, the communities they seek to support, the following section presents some key recommendations:

Recommendations for all actors in the development sector:

1. In pursuing strategic partnerships, work towards identifying shared priorities and establishing a common set of values and language. As the process is bound to bring up a host of real or perceived differences, rather than viewing those as unassailable obstacles, it is imperative to address them through open, constructive dialogue. If a shared starting point is respecting and promoting human rights, freedom and inclusive societies, then this dialogue can result in agreeing to differ on some issues, but opting for collaboration nonetheless.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Thus, in conversations about and with FBOs on collaboration move away from dichotomous language and thinking and look for overlap and convergence.

2. Even if, after efforts to find common ground, differences cannot be overcome, keep an open line of communication. If at all possible, make sure the dialogue keeps going as new opportunities for complementarity and collaboration might arise in the future.

3. Reflect on your own positionality and preconceptions vis-à-vis other actors operating in the development sector whose worldviews and objectives differ from your own – due to religion, political affiliation, geography, or other factors. This critical self-reflection is a vital precondition for engaging in the open dialogue that forms the start of a partnership.

4. Make room for difficult, sensitive, uncomfortable conversations, even in volatile conflict settings. Such conversations – e.g. on the religious elements contributing to gender-based violence – will foster social cohesion, which will greatly help effective humanitarian interventions. The conversation allows for the recognition of connections and similarities; it will enable people to look beyond their differences.

For secular stakeholders:

5. Consider FBOs as partners for development issues beyond the protection of religious minorities and the freedom of belief. Apart from religion-related topics, healthcare and poverty eradication – which have historically been FBOs' specialty areas – faith actors are increasingly specialising in issues of sustainability and climate justice; the localisation of aid; and the inclusion of marginalised groups, which could constitute new thematic grounds for collaboration.

6. When FBOs are deemed as relevant partners that can add value to a development programme, they should be included in the early stages of a partnership, ideally at the agenda-setting phase. Jointly identifying and setting common objectives can safeguard against instrumentalist approaches to faith-secular partnerships.

7. Work toward improving and mainstreaming religious literacy and sensitivity within your organisation and across projects. To build this knowledge, engaging with religious actors – learning about and from them – is an obvious first step. Providing internal training to staff, developed in collaboration with religious actors, is a promising approach as well. Finally, to encourage religious literacy and sensitivity at project level, analysing and understanding what role religion and religious actors play in the context where you operate is imperative.

For faith-based stakeholders:

8. Do not assume that secular actors in the development sector – be they development NGOs, ministries, bilateral organisations, or otherwise – enter the dialogue with an a priori negative view of religion or FBOs. This research has shown that, while some secular actors do indeed hold negative views about, or are at least wary of, FBOs, for many this does not hold true.

9. Be open and honest about your religious worldviews and the extent to which they affect your work. This also includes addressing potentially difficult issues that, based on religious principles, may not be in line with secular actors' views – including issues of family planning, gender equality and LGBTQI inclusion. Putting these topics on the table in the very early stages of the dialogue will help 'clear the air' and create a sound basis for exploring opportunities for collaboration.

Questions for further research

As already stated throughout this report, religion has the power to touch and affect every aspect of development and humanitarian work, giving rise to countless research questions. Some of these questions have been addressed here and in the rapidly expanding number of publications on the topic of religion and development. The final section of the conclusion identifies some remaining questions that have not been answered or have arisen from this research project:

1. Proving the impact of development programmes with hard evidence is a challenging task. Despite there being smaller-scale, qualitative studies on the impact of FBOs' projects, there is still a relative lack of longitudinal global impact research data. Is the lack of such data the result of FBOs' differential forms of accountability (i.e. internal accountability, accountability to God, etc.)? Or can it be attributed to a lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms? Or is the lack of evidence due to the fact that data are simply not earmarked as being 'the work of FBOs'?
2. Some FBOs, and to a larger extent LFAs, especially those that are faith-permeated and faith-centred, tend to employ differential language and terminology in describing their projects and methodologies. Could this FBO-specific jargon constitute a barrier to closer faith-to-secular collaboration? Could the adoption of more mainstream terminology create a better, more 'neutral' ground for establishing collaboration? At the same time, would such an approach dilute the centrality of the faith element inherent in FBOs' work?
3. To what extent does proselytising take place in practice/in the field? What forms does it take and what impact does it have on the people and communities 'on the receiving end'? And, what can be done – and by whom – about proselytising practices without undermining the potential for faith-to-secular collaboration?
4. Is finding a common denominator, such as a thematic issue (e.g. child protection), a sufficient foundation for faith-to-secular partnerships? In other words, when worldviews fundamentally differ, but there is convergence on a specific issue, can a meaningful collaboration be realised?

This synthesis report marks the end of the first phase of this project. Although some of the above-listed questions are beyond the scope of this project entirely, others will be revisited in the phases that follow. To begin with, in the second phase of this project, The Broker will carry out a number of case studies that serve to test the insights gathered for this report. Are the findings corroborated by real life examples? And can the experiences and approaches from practice add new insights, provide nuance, and/or help fill in some of the knowledge gaps that still remain? Then, in the third and final phase of this project, all the insights will be translated into a policy-relevant document, further informed by another round of interviews – this time with policy makers. Those interviews will undoubtedly provide new perspectives and insights, enriching the body of knowledge The Broker is building, in close partnership with Prisma, Woord en Daad, Tearfund, Dorcas, and World Vision Nederland. Together, we are committed to paint a well-balanced picture of the current state of faith-to-secular collaboration and create a foundation for future partnerships that meaningfully contribute to sustainable development across the globe.

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