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Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Religion is a major cultural, social, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) recipient countries and understanding religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors is crucial for sustainable development. While faith communities have endured and thrived the world over, a wave of modernist, secular social change dominated development practice and discourse from the second half of the 20th century. It was assumed that religion had become outdated and would eventually disappear. However, faith communities, actors, and assets continue to occupy a critical space. Accordingly, development discourse and practice have seen a new wave indicating a turn to recognizing the significant role of religion.

Many faith actors have also been involved in development policy, including a commitment to join the global collaboration around achieving the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Two factors underpin this paper. First, the process to decide the SDGs involved the largest civil society consultation ever held in the UN's history. Second, over the past decade or so increased attention has been paid to the collaboration between faith actors and secular global development actors. Considering these two factors we wanted to better understand the role that faith actors are playing in the SDG process. The paper is based upon findings from a research project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)— "Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the SDGs"—that has been led by the three authors of this paper.

Introduction

Religion is a major cultural, social, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) recipient countries, and understanding religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors is crucial for sustainable development. While faith communities have endured and thrived the world over, a wave of modernist, secular social change dominated development practice and discourse from the second half of the 20th century. It was assumed that religion had become outdated and would eventually disappear. However, faith communities, actors, and assets continue to occupy a critical space. A Pew Research Centre study found that in 2012, 8 in 10 people still identify with a religion (2012). Accordingly, global development discourse and practice has seen a new wave indicating a turn to recognizing the significant role of religion. Greater portions of development aid are now channeled via faith-based initiatives or organizations, and religion is increasingly recognized as a human resource rather than an obstacle to development.

Many faith actors have also been involved in development policy, initially by adopting and heralding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and more recently through a commitment to join the global collaboration around achieving the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs comprise 17 goals with 169 targets that were signed by the 193 UN member states in 2015. They have replaced the MDGs, which ran from 2000-2015, and are part of a broader Agenda 2030, reflecting the aim that they should be achieved by the year 2030. The MDGs had been unilaterally set within the UN with little to no consultation with civil society. By contrast, the SDGs were arrived at following a wide-reaching negotiation process within the UN as well as the largest civil society consultation ever held in its history, made possible via the use of the www.worldwewant2015.org website. It was documented that over seven million people took part in the survey up to the end of 2014 (Dodds et al 2017). The MDGs were also perceived by many as a top-down Global North to Global South exercise, whereas the SDGs apply equally and contain goals and targets for countries of the Global North and South. The SDGs also seek to ensure a more grassroots and locally owned type of development based on the recognition that "local people" are better placed to both understand and respond to development challenges. Since local societies in development aid recipient countries are often centred around faith communities, the engagement and role played by them becomes even more critical to the discussion on sustainable development.

In the consultation process as well as the implementation phase, there has been a coordinated effort from within the UN to engage with civil society actors, including those who are faith-based. The UN inter-agency task force on engaging faith-based actors for sustainable development played a leading role in this engagement (see Box 1) (Karam 2014, 2016). Although the MDGs made progress on some development indicators, they proved less suitable for reducing inequality (Dodds et al 2017). A central commitment of the SDGs is to make sure that no-one is "left behind," which in essence seeks to support a more inclusive approach to development that ensures the poorest and most marginalized do not lose out. Following the SDG consultation process, which began after the Rio+20 conference in 2012 and re-established "the sustainable development narrative at the global level," states, civil society, and the private sector have been increasingly involved in approaches and methods towards implementing the goals (Dodds et al 2017). For example, many civil society actors participate in the annual UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development meetings, and states are carrying out country level consultations to decide national indicators for the SDGs, as well as putting in place initiatives to collect relevant data so as to measure progress.

This paper explores the role of faith actors in the SDG process to date, including the consultations to set the SDGs as well as the implementation phase. It is based upon findings from a research project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)—"Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the SDGs"—that has been led by the three authors of this paper.[1] Considering the increased attention that has been paid to the collaboration between faith actors and secular global development actors over the past decade or so (Rakodi 2015), we wanted to better understand the role that faith actors are playing in the SDG process. This project has involved three main in the UK, India, and Ethiopia workshops (Birmingham in February 2017, New Delhi in December 2017, Ethiopia in September 2018).. A final conference was held at SOAS in February 2019, which also included the launch of our project report at the Westminster Houses of Parliament in a joint event with the All Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society.[1] The workshops have involved representatives from FBOs (alongside other NGOs and academics) who have reflected upon their engagement to date with the SDG process. Notes from the various discussions at the workshops already held, along with the transcripts from ten key informant interviews, form the data that we draw upon in this paper.

As outlined in Box 2, the broad category of "faith actor" extends beyond the formal faith-based organizations (FBOs) that are most visible within the global development world. While this project has focused on the role of such FBOs in the SDG process we will also comment on the role of other types of faith actor, including religious leaders.

The first section discusses three phases of the engagement across religions and global development:[2]

1. the colonial period when religion and development efforts were ideologically entwined in the Christian "civilizing mission";
2. the era of the secular global development industry in the post-World War II period where the significant role that religion continued to play in local level development and humanitarianism[3] was marginalized in development studies and political processes; and
3. the "turn to religion" by global development policy and practice from the early 2000s.

The second section outlines the SDG process from its emergence after the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 and the setting of the goals in August 2015, through to the current implementation and monitoring phase.

Section three looks more specifically at the contribution of faith actors to the SDG process, drawing on our research from the 'Keeping Faith in 2030: Religions and the SDGs' project. It examines structures within the UN to engage faith actors as well as how faith actors themselves have taken the SDGs into their work and what this means for them. In this section we ask:

- Were faith actors involved in the consultation to set the goals, and if so which faith actors and what has their contribution been?
- How are they beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs?
- Are there any SDGs that pose a challenge for some faith actors and why might that be?
- What should be the role of both faith and secular development and humanitarian actors in mitigating such challenges?

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1 The final report and policy recommendation can be downloaded at https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2019/02/Policy-Paper-for-web.pdf

The paper ends with a set of recommendations for governments and NGOs.

Religion and Global Development

Phase one: the colonial period

Religious traditions have always played a central role in supporting those experiencing poverty and marginalization, through service delivery as well as the provision of spiritual resources that provide mechanisms for resilience at both the individual and community level. Sometimes these interventions were limited to those within one's own religion, but often people extended support to those from other religions or understood it as an essential part of their religious commitment to combine their religious outreach with relief and development efforts. This was a particularly marked phenomenon within the Christian missionary movement which accompanied European colonialism from the nineteenth century onward, from early abolitionist activism and the slogan of "Christianity and commerce" to the "civilising" ideology and the provision of essential services in health and education as colonialism took root.[4] Colonial and missionary interests did not always align and were at times even marked by conflict, but the Christian "civilizing mission" formed a pathway for colonialism and provided it with an important ideological justification in Europe by casting colonial efforts as a service in development.

In this way, Christian mission and abolitionism were at the root of modern ideas of global development, and other religions in the colonies were judged on their compatibility with this "civilizing" project (Haustein and Tomalin 2017). This sparked "modernizing" movements within some religions, where some reformers asserted their compliance with European social and economic visions, while others used the process of reform to resist and critique colonization (Haustein and Tomalin 2017, 81). Moreover, religious institutions became key providers of the welfare services which functioned as crucial indicators of the "civilizing" project, providing health care, education, vocational training, as well as local information and advocacy. Complementing the failures and needs of the colonial economy in rapidly transitioning contexts, they in many ways occupied the same structural position that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have today (Manji and O'Coill 2002). This was not only limited to Christian actors, local religious institutions occupied similar spaces in their engagement with the colonial state and the wider public (Haustein and Tomalin 2017, 82).

Phase 2: the marginalization of religion from development

Despite this strong association of religion with development and welfare provision during the colonial period, the emergence of a new bipolar world order after WWII brought about fundamental changes in the configuration of the global economy and its narratives about inequality, especially as the USA and its competition with Russia displaced the waning colonial powers (Haustein and Tomalin 2017). The American post-War development project at first inherited much of the rhetoric of the Christian "civilizing" mission as is evident in Truman's famous Point 4 Speech, but also in the continued presence of missionary actors and an understanding about the role of religion in orienting development. However, with the increasingly evident rise of secularism in the Global North and the emerging secularization theories, religion was soon ignored in Western development policies and theories, or given a broad value-orienting position at best. In this way a secularist position took hold of the global development industry, claiming implicitly or explicitly that modernization will and indeed should lead to secularization and that religions are outdated and likely to act against development and progress. Within development studies and practice, this has marginalized the significant role that religion continued to play in local level development globally as well as forgetting the roots of Western led global development during the colonial missionary era.

Phase 3: the "turn to religion" by development

While modern global development discourses from the 1960s onward thus have tended to be secular in nature and to pay little attention to people's religious values and identities, over the past decade or so there has been an apparent "turn to religion" in development studies, policy, and practice (see Box 1) (Rakodi 2015). This reflects the realization that modernization and secularization do not necessarily go hand-in-hand and that religious values and faith actors are important determinants in the drive to reduce poverty as well as in the structures and practices that underpin it. The political tailwinds for this turn can be linked back to American debates about the role of faith-based and community initiatives in the delivery of state welfare. During his first term in office, George W. Bush used a number of executive orders to harness the capacity of community and faith-based initiatives to this end, which also changed the position of USAID on cooperation with faith actors. Since the early 2000s, and continuing through the SDGs, there has been a marked increase in interest from secular global development institutions in funding and working with faith actors around poverty reduction and humanitarian relief, and the concept of faith-based organizations (FBOs) arose in this very context. It is important to note, however, that this "turn to religion" has more relevance in the Global North than South, since in many settings in the Global South, secularism never took hold or was not as widespread as in the North, and religion has continued to shape development values and practical solutions to development-related challenges.

Critiques of the "turn to religion"

While many faith and secular development actors consider that the "turn to religion" is a progressive move, others have been critical. Global development institutions are still, on the whole, dominated by secularist approaches and considerations of religion, and the contribution of faith actors are still a long way off being "mainstreamed" in the way that gender analysis has been. Some are wary of engaging with religious institutions and faith actors, suspicious that their interest in development and humanitarianism is being used to mask attempts of proselytism. Other critics are concerned that an inherent conservatism and sectarianism within many faith communities will inevitably clash with certain development goals, such as gender equality (SDG 5) or peace and inclusion (SDG 16) and assert that universal human rights are better pursued on secular routes.

Given the long history of the interplay between Western ideas about religion and development ideology, it is important to recognize that religion, like other approaches including secularism, cannot be a panacea to solve development problems. The presumed advantages of FBOs, for instance, can sometimes be overstated and essentialized. Strong discourses have emerged around FBOs having a "comparative advantage" over secular NGOs, including that they are trusted by the poor and understand their worldview, and carry out development efficiently (and cheaply) as they have a ready pool of donors and volunteers. While FBOs are today sometimes viewed as the "forgotten factor" (Selinger 2004), marginalized from mainstream development due to the secular focus of the Western development agenda, their presumed advantages do not always guarantee success nor reflect reality (Tomalin 2012). The very category of FBO itself as distinguishable from NGOs has been queried particularly in countries where religious affiliations and motivations run right through NGOs as well. Often, FBOs have learned to state their goals in non-religious language (Tomalin 2012).

Nonetheless, a strong argument can be made to support the view that unless development policy and practice takes religion seriously, both in terms of how religious traditions still prevail across much of the world, as well as the significant contribution that faith actors make to the development and humanitarian field, then efforts are likely to be met with limited success. This

requires careful consideration of when to engage and when not to engage, and of knowing where religion might be particularly relevant as a strategy or resource to improve people's lives.

Some faith actors have also been critical of the "turn to religion" arguing that it has not gone far enough. They argue that their resources and social capital have been instrumentalized by global development institutions to achieve a secular development model rather than one that is more human-centred and takes the human relationship with the divine seriously. Also, while global development institutions are taking religion more seriously, they often choose to partner with FBOs that look like themselves. This formal FBO sector consists of organizations which operate (at least in their public facing persona) like any other international non-governmental organization (INGO) and express their religion "passively" or do not bring it to the table at all.[5] Therefore, the "turn to religion" risks missing out on what might be distinctive about the ways that religion shapes everyday values and practices as well as on the contribution of much faith-based activity at the local level, including in places of worship and the congregations of charismatic religious leaders (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Tomalin 2018).

The SDG framework

The emergence of the post-2015 agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the outcome of several years of discussion and negotiation, hosted by the UN, that began in 2012 as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were reaching their cut-off date of 2015. The SDGs, writes Fukuda-Parr "are a major departure from the MDGs. They differ not just in the number of goals and targets, but in their very purpose, conception, and the political process that drove their elaboration" (Fukuda-Parr 2016). A mandate for the SDGs as a global set of goals for sustainable development that apply equally to all countries emerged after the Rio+20 conference in June 2012 and an intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) was set up to deliberate and outline the goals. Parallel to this, the UN Secretary General launched a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons to guide the discussions about the Post-2015 agenda and these "combined over time to elaborate the declaration to be adopted at the 2015 General Assembly, encompassing both the agenda and the goals" (Fukuda-Parr 2016, 45).

The SDG-OWG had 30 seats, which were shared by a group of 70 member state representatives. It operated between March 2013 and July 2014 and came up with the draft 17 goals and 169 targets. It was chaired by the Permanent Representatives of Hungary and Kenya, Ambassadors Csaba Körösi and Macharia Kamau. In addition to the involvement of member states, the OWG also included mechanisms for the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) to be consulted between March-November 2013 on 26 themes that could become the subject of an SDG.

The role of civil society actors in the consultation process

While there was a role for civil society actors in the OWG consultations, the Rio+20 Conference had also agreed that both thematic and regional consultations would be held prior to the SDG-OWG to feed into the negotiations. This consultation process aimed to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, the private sector, media, universities, think tanks and the general public. The SDG-OWG completed its work in July 2014 and in October 2014 Ambassador David Donoghue of Ireland and Ambassador Macharia Kamau were appointed as co-facilitators of the intergovernmental negotiations that would finalize the post 2015 development agenda and to produce the text of *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. These negotiations ran from December 2014 to August 2015 and involved all 193 member states as well as structures for input from MGoS.

Although the SDG consultation process claimed to be the largest ever held in the UN's history and gathered the views of a wide range of stakeholders in many different parts of the globe, there was also criticism that the consultation did not extend as far as it could have done and that the negotiations were biased in the favour of state inputs. It was, however, a considerable improvement on the MDG selection process, meaning that governments and civil society actors were likely to feel more committed to the SDGs. Moreover, the fact that they are global in nature and that they aim to directly tackle inequality is of great appeal to those in the Global South.

Faith actors and the SDGs

Keeping in mind that the category of "faith actor" is broader than the formal FBOs that have tended to be the focus of the "turn to religion" by global development institutions so far (see Box 2), in this section we look at UN structures for engaging faith actors with the SDG process as well as how faith actors themselves have engaged with the SDGs, via the UN or otherwise.

UN structures for engaging faith actors with the SDG process

The UNFPA has been the main space within the UN where religious engagement has been nurtured and it now has decades of experience working with faith-based organizations, with several publications that explore the role of religion and culture in its work (UNFPA 2005, 2007, 2008). It has been at the forefront of efforts to mainstream considerations of religion throughout UN agencies. It was part of a new initiative beginning in 2007 and formalized by 2009, the UN Inter Agency Task Force (UNIATF) on Religion and Development (see Box 1) (Karam 2014, 2016) and in 2009 produced *Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change* (UNFPA 2009). Other work in this area includes producing reports on the UNIATF's engagement with faith actors (UNFPA 2014, 2016, 2018). More recently this body, now known as the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development, has played a role in events and publications concerned with bringing faith actors into the new SDG process (Karam 2014, 2016). This included an event during the final stages of the SDG-OWG consultation process – Religion and Development Post-2015 – held 12th-14th May 2014 in New York (Karam 2014). The participants at this Donor-UN-FBO (DUF) Roundtable then became the nucleus of PaRD, which formed in 2016 (see Box 1).

Since the SDGs were set, the UNIATF on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development is supporting joint activities across UN agencies, as well as reporting on what different UN agencies are doing (UNFPA 2016, 2018). This involves engagement with formal FBOs linked to the UN system as well as local faith actors in different countries.

However, on the whole, the negotiation processes to decide the SDGs involved faith actors as civil society actors, so that their religious identity did not make an obvious difference. As one interviewee who was involved in the final negotiations told us:

> *Within the NGOs, how visible were faith groups, I'm asking myself. I honestly couldn't say that they were that visible, that's not to say that they weren't there but I have a clearer sense of the faith community as it were from a couple of side events, which I addressed around that time.*[6]

It appears that there was little attempt to engage faith actors as a distinct stakeholder group in the main SDG process. None of the faith actors that we have spoken to felt that there was a space to bring in a discussion of anything "religious" (e.g. relating to theology or religious beliefs) into the public facing SDG process. However, neither did many articulate a need to do so, preferring rather to use the SDG framework as a way to protect their rights and gain equal treatment. In our discussions in India and in Ethiopia we found a similar sentiment. Keeping overt religious

language out of the SDG process and ensuring a religiously neutral space for development policy was felt to be important in a setting where religiously based conflict and tension is prominent.

Some opportunities to take part in events and sessions more focussed on religious engagement specifically did exist as part of the SDG consultation process, including those organized by the UNIATF on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development. However, another interviewee warned that when faith groups are treated as a separate group of stakeholders and meetings are set up to cater for their needs and input they then can become siloed and "the consultations, the capacity building, the knowledge management… and the policy advocacy takes place separately."[7]

This highlights the fact that faith actors, in the same way as other civil society actors, interact in a range of forums where they use a different language and ways of engaging according to the character of other participants. While many faith actors deliberately maintain a "secular" persona in their public engagement with the SDGs, they are at the same time able to also engage with local faith communities in terms of religious language and concepts where appropriate.

The engagement of faith actors with the SDGs[8]

Despite these global structural issues in the consultation process, faith actors all over the world actively engage with the SDGs and their local implementation. In order to find out more specifically what their perspectives and approaches to the SDGs are, our workshops consisted of a series of discussion activities formed around four main questions. Our workshops held in Birmingham (February 2017), New Delhi (December 2017), and Addis Ababa (September 2018) yield a number of interesting insights with regard to faith actors around their engagement in the SDG process. We present them here sorted according to four main questions which were central to our workshop activities.

1) Did you participate in the consultation process to set the SDGs?

In the Birmingham workshop, participants (who were mainly representatives from the first type of "faith actor" outlined in Box 2) did not feel that there had been a particular effort by the UN to consult FBOs and other faith actors about the SDGs and instead they had been actively "knocking at the door" to have their say. The FBOs who had been involved in the consultation tended to be those who were already "at the table," who were funded and involved in UN networks, and there was little successful attempts, or perhaps not far-reaching enough attempts, to engage with a wider cohort of faith actors. These FBOs were involved more as INGOs than as faith actors *per se*. In other words, the fact that they were faith-based was not the reason for them being included, but rather incidental. They also noted that the faith actors who were involved in the consultation process were mainly Christian and that there were very few non-Christian FBOs represented. It was also highlighted that the very discourse on the SDGs was highly Christian. For example, Pope Francis has had a large impact on debates through his encyclical *Laudato si*.[9]

In New Delhi, our participants (who were mainly representatives from the first and second types of "faith actor" outlined in Box 2) mostly reported that they were unaware that the consultations were going on. The national consultations in India had not specifically reached out to faith actors, including religious leaders and organizations, and where faith actors did engage (e.g. via the civil society coordinating group Wada Na Todo Abhiyan) they did so as civil society actors.

In Ethiopia, none of the assembled organisations had participated in any kind of national or international consultation about the SDGs, with the exception of one academic who had been part of a subject-specific consultation. Others had only heard about SDG consultations through their international headquarters, but had not been involved in them in any way. For the most part, the SDG agenda was something that only gradually showed up on the radar of Ethiopian FBOs

and NGOs, and for some participants our workshop was their first serious engagement with the SDGs.

2) To what extent and in what ways are you now beginning to interpret and implement the SDGs in your work? Have they changed what you do?

In New Delhi a number of the participants had been involved in the subsequent consultations to set the national indicators for the SDGs, rather than the pre-2015 consultation process discussed in the section above. They participated in meetings organized by civil society actors and by the government, as well as inputting into the public consultation on the draft country level indicators. There was no indication that these faith actors were participating in ways that brought their religious identities and beliefs to the fore, although many said that this motivated them to act. Instead, their participation was as civil society actors who represent groups that are marginalized and belong to minority religious traditions in the country (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam). There was a strong articulation from participants that the SDGs should be "secular" and that this was positive. In India the meaning of secular is nuanced to emphasize that something is relevant to all religious traditions rather than a religious perspective being absent or dismissed as unimportant. In a political climate where participants could face accusations of proselytization or anti-Hindu sentiment, the commitment to "secularism" is an important public value.

In Ethiopia, by contrast, our participants did not report any involvement with the SDG implementation process either. Development policy and practice in Ethiopia is highly controlled by the state, which pursues its own national development agenda, laid out in five-year Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP). The current GTP II claims to "mainstream" the SDGs in the Ethiopian context, but actually pursues a much more narrowly defined development agenda with a primary focus on GDP and infrastructure growth. All development actors are accountable to the GTP, with their government consultations and reporting structured accordingly. While in international FBOs the SDG agenda was gradually beginning to influence their planning and reporting frameworks, this had not yet filtered down to the Ethiopian country offices. However, one country representative of an international FBO reported to us after the Addis Ababa workshop that they had now begun to reframe their planning and fundraising efforts around the SDGs.

In all three settings, our participants told us that the SDGs had not changed what they focused on in their work, as their planning was driven by their organisational visions, capacity, and the primary needs of their constituents. For some organisations, however, the SDGs had become a new way of articulating their activities. They had already redesigned leaflets and websites to express their key areas of activity in relation to the SDGs. Some organizations were beginning to organize events to sensitize local communities towards the SDGs, including what they could benefit from engaging with the framework. This local level work did involve some degree of articulating the SDGs in religious terms. Others, however, asked what the added benefit of the SDGs would be, since they only reflected – in quite unspecific language – what they had been doing for many years if not decades already.

3) If the SDGs have not significantly changed what you do, then what is their value for your work and for meeting development targets that will reduce inequality?

In Birmingham and New Delhi, participants were already referring to the SDGs in funding applications in order to demonstrate the relevance of their work to this new global framework, and some were anticipating that the SDG framework would unlock additional funding sources. In the India workshop it was stressed that the SDG framework offers a way to connect local initiatives to international development discourse and to participate in global conversations, helping to align the purposes and goals of FBOs toward a common strategy and vision, and that

it provides opportunities to collaborate and increase the impact of individual FBOs. Thus, participation in the SDGs provided them with an opportunity to articulate their work within the language of global development, which helped to gain acceptance and inclusion in some policy debates. Participants also felt that working within the international framework of the SDGs gives FBOs additional credibility, providing benchmarks by which their work can be assessed under professional criteria such that the quality of their activities can be demonstrated rather than just the fact that they exist (e.g. quality education).

In India we also heard that especially for marginalized religious groups, the SDGs were seen as an important way to engage with the state and its uneven hand in programming and implementing development processes. In some cases, the framework was also proving to be an effective civil society building tool, which was enabling groups to coalesce around issues and to present a coherent set of demands to the government. One of our interview respondents explained that Muslims in India have many groups but that these are mostly "religious based groups or influenced by religion," focussing on religious education rather than a broader set of development goals.[10] International faith-based organizations were therefore playing an important role in India in demonstrating that there is "something which is going on in the outside world and we as a citizen of the country, need to engage" and that global frameworks can be used by minorities to leverage gains within their countries. The fact that the government was being compelled to create mechanisms for collecting disaggregated data, according to factors such as caste, religion, and gender, in order to monitor SDG progress effectively, was also seen as another potentially empowering aspect of the SDG framework, serving as a lobbying and advocacy tool. In the absence of such data it is difficult for marginalized groups to evidence their inequality. The SDGs play a dual role of being a framework for advocacy as well as for programming and resources.

Mirroring some of these findings to our participants at the Ethiopia workshop, some agreed that the SDG framework might be helpful in agreeing universal standards and reporting mechanisms, while others agreed with the Ethiopian government's approach of prioritising a national framework in development planning. Participants also saw potential for the SDGs becoming more relevant in the future with regard to their fundraising and communication. At the same time they saw two main challenges. Firstly, there was an absence of knowledge around the SDGs and a lack of capacity building in this area. Secondly, they also critiqued the absence of moral and ethical elements in the farming of the SDGs and targets, which runs counter to the "holistic" development approach of faith-based actors, which understands the discussion and improvement of communal and personal norms as an important component to achieving sustainable development.

4) Do any of the SDGs pose challenges to faith actors?

It has been reported that two of the most controversial SDGs to agree upon during the consultation process were 5 "gender equality" and 16 "peaceful and inclusive societies." With respect to SDG 5, the reference to "women's reproductive health and reproductive rights" (target 5.6) had become controversial throughout the OWG and beyond with 'divergent views aroused from differing ethical and religious perspectives" (Dodds et al 2017, 38). In fact, the language for target 5.6 was one of the last to be agreed in the final hours of the OWG. Similarly, SDG 16 was "possibly the most sensitive and controversial of all…[and]…considerable opposition to Goal 16 remained until the last hours of the OWG" (Dodds et al 2017, 40). It was not faith actors opposing this goal. Instead its sensitivity was due to the perception that this goal more than others impacted upon national sovereignty and security concerns and that were viewed by some critics as lying outside the remit of the SDGs. However, religious dynamics play a role in conflict and insecurity, and therefore need to be part of the solution.

These goals were also mentioned by our workshop participants as two of the goals that are potentially challenging for some faith actors, while being amongst the most important. We heard that some "conservative" faith actors find aspects of SDG 5 threatening for seeming to contradict certain norms about men and women's roles, as well as for the perception that it fails to promote the proper place of sexual relationships as only being within heterosexual marriages. Both goal 16 (peace and justice) and 17 (partnership for the goals) were also seen as difficult on account of religious particularisms sometimes getting in the way of dialogue and collaboration.

There was, however, an important point of difference between our UK and overseas workshops in assessing the consequences of these difficulties. In our Birmingham workshop, the international FBOs present pointed to likely doctrinal or ideological differences when assessing what goals might be difficult to implement with their overseas partners. By contrast, most of our workshop participants in India and Ethiopia stressed that none of the goals were too difficult to adopt and integrate. Many were keen to demonstrate that they supported all of the goals and that any obstacles to the SDGs were not rooted in religious doctrine. Instead, they saw that many of the challenges to the SDGs were to do with culture rather than religious doctrine, for example in the case of stereotypes about gender inequality, which they asserted were rooted in culture rather than religious doctrine. Sustainable development therefore would require a more complex translation process that recognised the interconnectedness of religious and cultural norms and was better attuned to local conditions. Faith actors stressed that with their local expertise and networks as well as their exposure to international development language, they were particularly well-placed to facilitate such translation and transformation processes. Accordingly, some participants saw part of their role as demonstrating to communities that their religion supports equality and human rights in an attempt to reform negative attitudes that would undermine the SDGs.

The reasons for this disparity point to likely tensions in international development cooperation, and more research on this point is needed. However, we suggest that international FBOs engaging with faith actors in the Global South should focus their dialogue on the specific challenges of "culture change" rather than doctrinal obstacles. In such dialogue they should suspend their focus on religious doctrine and explore what is considered to be the particular cultural difficulties in the implementation of an SDG and why, and how this might be overcome. Many FBOs already do this. Faith actors, including local FBOs and religious leaders, can be key allies in the process of culture change when they are in a position to demonstrate the ways in which the SDGs are supported by religious doctrine. However, it is important not to over-emphasize or over-rely on the capacity of the same religious leaders to effect change and care must be taken to engage with various parts of the community including minorities and marginalized groups that might not be represented by religious or community leaders.

From the point of view of secular development and humanitarian actors who encounter—or perceive that they encounter—obstacles to particular SDGs on the basis of differences in religious doctrine, two points are important here. First, it is likely be more effective to focus on the specific challenges of any particular SDG. Rather than focusing on the entire goal and making or accepting generalizations that any obstacles are due to doctrinal differences, it is helpful to realize that aspects of how gender equality, for example, is formulated in some targets of SDG 5 may be difficult for some within their religious communities. These precise points of tension need to be identified in order to work towards establishing common ground. There may be some areas that can never be agreed, but much progress can be made in others in partnership with local faith communities and actors. Second, objections to particular aspects of an SDG are in reality unlikely to be primarily to do with doctrine. Religious doctrine might be invoked to

support or justify particular attitudes and behaviours, but this is unlikely to be the primary motivation since religious practice is about so much more than doctrine (e.g. ritual, belonging, heritage, pride, expectations etc.). Sometimes a distinction is made between religious doctrine and culture, with these additional features of religious practice being relegated to the sphere of culture rather than authentic doctrine as codified in sacred texts. This kind of distinction is analytically meaningless and does not help us to understand the dynamics of lived religion and its contextual understanding, which may be very different from that of the West.

The assumption that the religious practice of individuals is dictated by their religious texts reflects one aspect of the Western "world religions paradigm," where sacred texts are valued over vernacular "lived religion." Another aspect of the "world religions paradigm" is that people can only belong to one, discrete religious tradition each of which may be differentiated by their religious texts and teachings. However, in many places the boundaries between religions are often not clear-cut, and people may appear to practice or belong to more than one at the same time. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa people often practice African Traditional Religions (ATR) alongside or within their affiliation with Christianity or Islam. A final aspect of the "world religions paradigm" is that it not only differentiates between religions but also between the religious and the secular. However, such a distinction between the religious and the secular is hard to find in highly religious contexts, and people might not think about what they do or what influences them as being "religious." Instead, religion permeates all aspects of their lives rather than just being relevant to the private realm of religion and belief.

We finish the paper with a series of policy recommendations that we hope will be helpful to governments and NGOs wishing to engage in this area. We note that there are some tensions between some of the recommendations and they may seem to point in different directions. However, it needs to be borne in mind not only that here are different types of faith actor (see Box 2), but that faith actors can wear different hats at different times (ie sometimes they should be treated just like other development actors, and at other times they may have something distinctive to offer or that needs to be considered because they are faith actors). Therefore, different recommendations will be relevant in different kinds of situations.

Policy Recommendations

Governments and NGOs should recognize that the category of "faith actor" is broader than just formal FBOs that have an international profile and are familiar with global development processes and discourses. In selecting who to partner with, a wider range of faith actors needs to be brought to the table beyond those who are typically already participating. Religious apex bodies, regional and national FBOs (including those that are small and informal) as well as local places of worship, their religious leaders and congregations all play an important role in social welfare and development within their communities and can also facilitate the implementation of the SDGs.

Faith-actors should not be brought in solely as "religious voices" but as development partners like all others. This clearly emerges from our research. Often, local faith actors and FBOs do not want to be relegated to the "religion corner" nor is their goal in engaging with the SDGs simply to insert religious interests or perspectives. Instead they see themselves as part of the global development effort, operate through its language, and seek to gain further visibility as development actors. For politically marginalized religious communities, this is even more crucial, as the SDG process provides them with a way of increased participation and speaking back to government policy – not in order to further religious or doctrinal goals, but to ascertain the rights of their respective population.

Identifying which faith actors to engage with according to their relative background and expertise, and on what issues, should be given careful consideration. While it is important to take the contribution of faith actors to development seriously, and to realize that religion is a human resource rather than an obstacle to development, religion or faith is not a panacea to solve development problems and can sometimes exacerbate inequality and conflict. There is a need to resist discourses that overstate and oversimplify the apparent advantages of FBOs. However, the SDGs can only be achieved if the widest range of partnerships and collaborations are encouraged and facilitated across all sectors and all levels of society. Faith actors are key to this since so many people who have the most to benefit from the SDGs live in the Global South where levels of religiosity are high and religious organisations are present in the most remote locations. In meeting the aim to "leave no one behind" faith actors can play important role in changing attitudes, in supporting those in need and in transforming their lives.

Perceived tensions between certain SDG goals or targets and religious values should be approached by recognizing that faith-based development actors are important mediators for gaining a more specific understanding of such tensions. The discussion around real or perceived clashes between SDGs and religious communities tends to revolve around a rather general understanding of very complex issues. FBO representatives and other faith actors typically have a very good understanding of the breadth of doctrinal positions within their religion and the varieties of cultural obstacles or concerns. As such, they should not be seen as representatives of a particular doctrinal position or "difficulty," but as experts in navigating a plural field of positions and cultural practices in the interest of implementing a particular SDG goal or target in a contextually sensitive and sustainable way.

In engaging with faith actors, governments and NGOs need to recognize that some areas are sensitive due to the impact of religious teachings and theologies. This includes debates over gender equality and LGBT rights. These issues are important to address so that the SDGs can be met, and recognizing that some areas are sensitive does not mean that they should be avoided or ignored. However, addressing them is likely to require time and space for dialogue, including gaining a sense of doctrinal diversity on this issue and seeking alliances with faith actors who are committed to equality in all areas. In this regard some FBOs are well positioned to play the role of broker or mediator between secular human rights goals and particularistic and conservative religious ideologies. Provided they are given the space to articulate, discuss, and help modify alternative moral and ethical visions, they can be key to facilitate changes in attitudes and practices in a way that they are not perceived as threats to tradition and identity. The considerable colonial baggage that is carried by modern global development institutions and fears over continued imperialistic domination can mean that some communities in the Global South are more likely to reject and fear calls for equality when it is seen to be promoted by Western institutions, including drawing attention to instances of perceived of double standards. Both the message and the means of deep and sustained social transformation needs to be owned by communities and faith actors can play an important role in this.

In building partnerships with faith actors, it is important that they are listened to and included on their terms rather than being instrumentalized to achieve pre-defined development goals. Some faith actors feel that their resources and capacity has been instrumentalized to serve a secular development agenda, without including the level of transformation and fundamental structural reform that their teachings and values, as well as experience, indicate are really necessary in order to reduce human suffering and inequality. Faith actors are not alone in making this kind of critique and there are a broad range of civil society actors who are suspicious that the SDGs are going to be incapable of achieving their ends as they do not adequately tackle the root of the problems faced by the poor. However, faith actors often

feel that there is no space within global development discourse for them to be taken seriously in terms of the intangible aspects of their religion and the relevance of the relationship between the human and the divine, or in terms of teachings and practice that point beyond the ultimate significance of the material and social world. These aspects are hidden or reduced in their interaction with global development institutions and processes. Therefore, the "turn to religion" risks missing out what might be "distinctive" about the ways that religion shapes the things that people value in their lives and how this impacts on understandings of what counts as development and how to achieve it. While this kind of incorporation of religion is not appropriate to every development collaboration, and indeed many faith actors appreciate the existence of religious neutral discussion forums for development, investment in the creation of effective processes to accommodate the epistemological differences between secular and religious worldviews on development, including better dialogue between faith-based and development actors and their perspectives on desirable societal trajectories, could be beneficial in fostering closer collaboration.

Members of NGOs and governments should increase their religious literacy, not only in terms of the history, teachings and practices of different world religions, but also with respect to how religion actually manifests in diverse settings. Rather than viewing religion in the Global South in terms of the "world religions paradigm" alone, it is important to also consider the following three factors: First, the Western "world religions paradigm" tends to prioritize texts over lived religion and the role of religious leaders as official representatives of the populations they claim to represent. Such an approach in the Global South can lead to a poor understanding of religious dynamics. Second, the "world religions paradigm" tends to present religionists as belonging to only one, discrete religious tradition, when in many places the boundaries between religions are often not clear-cut, and people may practice or belong to more than one at the same time. Third, the "world religions paradigm" also not only assumes a clear distinction between religions, but also between the secular and the religious. In many settings in the Global South this is not a binary that reflects how people think about their religion and instead it permeates all aspects of their private, public and political lives.

Box 1

The "turn to religion" by development studies, policy and practice – some important global initiatives

2000: World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) was the first major global initiative in this area, bringing together development actors, faith groups, and academics. It was set up by former World Bank president James Wolfensohn and then Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey of Clifton. In the early years WFDD worked closely with a World Bank unit, the (now defunct)

Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics (DDVE), which led both policy analysis and research from within the World Bank.[11] It is currently based in Washington, DC, at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University carrying our research and publishing reports.

2002: The Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI) was established at USAID "to create a level playing field for faith and community-based organizations to compete for USAID programs."[12]

2005-2010: Religions and Development (RaD) Research Programme*:* DFID funded a large £3.5 million research programme based at the University of Birmingham. This carried our research in India, Pakistan, Tanzania and Nigeria, publishing dozens of papers and policy briefs.[13]

2007: UN-Interagency Task Force (UNIATF) on Religion and Development first came together informally (UNFPA 2015), and in 2009 produced *Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change* (UNFPA 2009). It was formally approved in 2010. Other work includes producing reports on the UNIATF's engagement with faith actors (2014; 2016). More recently this body, now known as the UN Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development, has played a role in events and publications concerned with bringing faith actors into the new SDG process (UNFPA/Digni (2016b).

2012: The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) was founded, catalyzed by the UNIATF consultations, and with a commitment to "build our collective understanding of the potential of local faith communities for improving community health, development and well-being."[14]

2014: World Bank Faith Initiative was a "revitalization" of World Bank Group "engagement with faith-based and religious organizations based on a recognition that they are often doing the essential work on the frontlines of combatting extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services, and alleviating suffering. The Faith Initiative team serves as a bridge for faith actors looking to engage with the World Bank Group and as a resource to better equip and support World Bank Group staff. The team collaborates with units across the Bank and works closely with the United Nation through the Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development to advance shared development priorities."[15]

2015: The World Bank Group took leadership of a new initiative called "Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative" involving a joint statement from religious leaders to end extreme poverty by 2030. This has

included a conference held in Jun 2015 "Religion & Sustainable Development: Building Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty."[16]

2016: International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) established at the Berlin conference "Partners for Change – Religions and the 2030 Agenda" and 'aims at greater and institutionalized communication and coordination between secular and non-secular actors, while fostering new synergies through cooperation of its members and partners'.[17] Its secretariat is located in the offices of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Bonn and Berlin, Germany.

Box 2

Types of Faith Actor

The broad category of 'faith actor' extends beyond the formal faith-based organisations (FBOs) that are most visible within the global development world. We have identified the following types of faith actor:

- Large, formal international FBOs, typically with branches in the Global South (e.g. Christian Aid, Islamic Relief, Tearfund etc.). They often have strong links to the UN (e.g. special consultative status at ECOSOC) and other international processes.
- International apex bodies representing faith traditions (e.g. Anglican Communion, Vatican, World Council of Churches) with formal links to UN processes.
- Formal FBOs and networks, such as interreligious councils that have a national or regional reach, are frequently partners with government ministries and are usually located in national capitals. They may also have links to the UN and other international processes, including through their participation in worldwide religious networks.
- Smaller formal FBOs may have some transnational ties but are not necessarily linked to the UN or other international development organisations. They may be supported by religious centres in the West (e.g. churches, mosques, etc.) but any further international ties are unlikely.
- FBOs carrying out development and humanitarian work, which are small-scale and local, may be linked to local places of worship, and are less likely to have formal links to UN and other international processes. This could include parish committees or *zakat* committees. They have some organisational structure within their religious communities but they are not necessarily separate, registered organisations.
- Religious leaders are increasingly invited to participate in global and national policy debates. This is due to the perception that, in the Global South, they often hold positions of authority and trust and they are revered and listened to. Faith leaders – that may have local, national and international levels of leadership – can be valuable allies in promoting the SDGs and other development values and goals. However, certain religious views and values may also present obstacles, making understanding and respectful engagement all the more important.
- Places of worship and their congregations in the Global South may also support development and humanitarian work at a local level. Groups may spontaneously mobilise within such communities and at places of worship when there is a crisis.

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Endnotes

[1] See "Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals" at https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk.

[2] It must be noted that religious traditions also played a role in shaping understandings of development and providing welfare support in pre-colonial settings. However, our aim is to understand the different phases of engagement between religions and global development institutions and discourses, with the latter having their roots in the colonial era.

[3] While "development" can refer to general processes of social or economic change in this paper it refers to the more specific western donor-driven development project that emerged after WWII. It is conceptually related to 'humanitarianism' (activities taking place in the days and weeks following a disaster) but aims to involve more long-term and sustainable processes of transformation, often coming after humanitarian interventions.

[4] Firoze, Manji, and Carl O'Coill (2002) The missionary position: NGOs and development in Africa. *International Affairs*, 78(3), 567–584; Gregory Deacon and Emma Tomalin (2015) A History of Faith-Based Aid and Development. In E. Tomalin (ed) *The Routledge handbook of religions and global development*. London and New York: Routledge, 68-79; Jorg Haustein and Emma Tomalin (2017) Religion and Development in Africa and Asia. In P. Amakasu Raposo, D. Arase, S. Cornelissen (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Africa–Asia Relations.* London and New York: Routledge.

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[6] Research interview, May 21, 2017.

[7] Research interview May 20, 2017.

[8] See "Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals" at https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk/events/.

[9] Francis. 2015. Encyclical Letter, "Laudato Si," The Holy See. http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

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12 See USAID, "History of the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives," https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/history.

13 See University of Birmingham, "Religions and Development," https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/departments/international-development/rad/index.aspx.

14 See "About JLI on Faith & Local Communities," https://jliflc.com/about/.

15 See World Bank, "Faith Based and Religious Organizations," http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/brief/faith-based-organizations.

16 See World Bank, "Global Conference on Religion and Sustainable Development: Strengthening Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty," http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/07/12/global-conference-religion-sustainable-development

17 See PARD, "Mission Statement," http://www.partner-religion-development.org/about/mission-statement/