



Religions and Development Research Programme

Comparing religious and secular NGOs in Nigeria: are faith-based organizations distinctive?

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In Nigeria, case studies of three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and four faith-based organizations (FBOs) (two Christian and two Muslim) in two Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Kano State (largely Muslim) and one LGA in Lagos State (religiously mixed) sought to identify whether and in what circumstances FBOs have distinctive characteristics with respect to their goals, values, organizational characteristics and activities related to the achievement of development objectives. All the organizations studied are well-established, with good reputations, and are engaged in HIV/AIDS-related work (one of the main areas of development work for which funding is currently available and in which differences between secular and religious organizations might be expected).

After 2000, the Nigerian government's desire to address the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS raised sensitive issues, as did the proliferation of NGOs attempting to implement relevant programmes, especially in largely Muslim areas, where they were perceived as donor driven and lacking in credibility.

The study did not find significant differences in the development-related aims, values and activities of organizations self-identified as FBOs or NGOs.

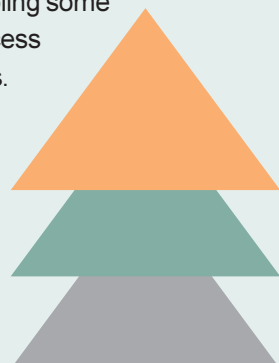
- The FBOs and NGOs studied largely share a commitment to humanitarian, charitable and service delivery aims; some are also engaged in development, advocacy and conflict resolution activities, especially those exposed to international development thinking.
- FBOs generally justify their activities, including their HIV/AIDS-related work, in religious terms and use religious language and practices in their work. In addition, the truth claims of both Christianity and Islam

encourage adherents to seek to spread their religion. FBOs therefore believe that they have a responsibility to do so, and often see their humanitarian activities as a means to that end.

- NGOs, in contrast, express their mission and values in secular humanitarian terms, even when their founders, employees and volunteers have religious motivations, as many do in a society where almost everyone considers him or herself to be religious. Despite this, observers consider NGOs to be less able and willing to adhere to religious principles in their practices.

Differences between FBOs and NGOs were evident with respect to programme design, and were even more marked in relation to their organizational characteristics.

- An organization's values influence the design, implementation and evaluation of the HIV/AIDS programmes it delivers, including the targeted populations, with only one of the NGOs targeting high risk groups who engage in behaviour of which FBOs disapprove, including truck drivers and sex workers. In addition, the organizations vary in their willingness to advocate condom use by the unmarried, with religious organizations stressing abstinence and faithfulness to prevent transmission. Some foreign funders (especially those with religious affiliations) are willing to accept religious objections to condom use, enabling some FBOs (both Christian and Muslim) to access international funding for their programmes.
- NGOs' activities have a predominantly material focus, emphasizing improving physical wellbeing, while FBOs combine material and spiritual aims, which influences the content and delivery of



their programmes. For example in HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, NGOs emphasize physical aspects and choice, and advocate the use of condoms. In contrast, FBOs use religious justifications for their messages and stress the moral basis for behaviour, emphasizing abstinence and stressing the importance of marriage and the family, but also providing spiritual succour to the users of their services. Most beneficiaries seem to prefer FBOs' combined material and spiritual focus, which is seen as being more holistic.

- All the FBOs studied deliberately recruit staff from within their own faith tradition, at least for senior and management positions. In addition, FBOs display symbols of their religion in the dress of their staff, in their facilities and on their vehicles. They also (like at least one of the NGOs) observe daily prayer rituals.

Organizations perceived as committed to relevant development objectives, effective and reputable were chosen for this study, so major differences in priorities, perceived performance or allegations of malpractice were not anticipated. Unsurprisingly, their leaders, staff, local stakeholders and beneficiaries had positive perceptions of their performance. In addition, responses indicated that differences in the perceived performance of FBOs and NGOs are not marked. However:

- while some beneficiaries feel that the NGO approach to condom use is likely to be more effective, others prefer FBOs' focus on abstinence and behaviour and their approach to HIV/AIDS education, which uses moral and religious (rather than secular and humanitarian) language, values and messages.
- what appears to matter most is the perceived quality of the service provided, judged in terms of an organization's local presence, frequency of contact with local communities and the nature of the services provided.
- few, if any, NGOs and FBOs do systematic assessments of the outcomes and impact of their activities. While those organizations that receive official donor funds are required to systematically monitor progress against objectives (using targets and quantitative indicators), FBOs believe that whether their operations and activities comply with religious values and injunctions is a more important criterion for assessing performance.

Many beneficiary respondents feel that FBOs, in general, have some advantages over NGOs (e.g. a long history, an ongoing presence, frequent contacts with communities, higher levels of trust, greater financial independence, and autonomy in setting their own locally responsive development agendas). FBOs' (partial) financial independence depends on religiously mandated giving from their members and associated congregations, which is significant for most of the FBOs studied. However, several also rely on international donor funding (as do the NGOs), and one FBO also has income from its own business investments. For some functions, however, NGOs may have advantages. For example, some have greater expertise, and one of the Kano State studies notes that NGOs are considered to be better at prevention campaigns, while FBOs are considered to be more effective in providing care and support to PLWHAs.

Both NGOs and Christian FBOs find it difficult to work in largely Muslim Kano State. In this context, traditional religious leaders (and Islamic FBOs) can provide NGOs with legitimacy and access to local communities and NGOs are perceived to be more successful if they work with FBOs and religious leaders. Thus the context in which an organization works matters and this may affect their performance more than any religious/secular difference.

Some implications of the study for donors and policy makers are that

- i. Decisions about whether and how to engage with FBOs must be made on a case-by-case basis, based on an understanding of individual organizations and their context – neither a general preference for FBOs nor a standard approach is appropriate, any more than it is appropriate for NGOs.
- ii. NGOs and FBOs are not necessarily alternative partners for development activities, since joint working may be appropriate in certain religiously sensitive contexts.

Based on Comfort Davis, Ayodele Jegede, Robert Leurs, Adegbeniga Sunmola and Ukoha Ukiwo (2011) *Are Faith-Based Organizations Distinctive? A Comparative Study of Selected Religious and Secular Non-governmental Organizations in Nigeria*. Birmingham: Religions and Development WP 56.

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