



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religious organizations, values and rivalry in Nigeria: exploring the implications for development and politics

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Religious belief is universal in Nigeria, where about half the population is Muslim and half Christian, although many continue to hold beliefs and engage in practices that are associated with African traditional religion. Religion is a key aspect of people's identity and of political and social relationships at all levels of Nigerian society. However, attention has mostly focused on the growth of new religious movements (for example Pentecostalism within Christianity and radical movements within Islam); religious rivalry, which is associated with political competition and an apparent increase in the frequency of inter-religious violence; and ways in which religious beliefs and organizations appear to hinder the achievement of development objectives, for example, gender equality. Many aspects of the links between religion and development continue to be neglected.

This paper synthesizes the findings of nine research projects that addressed aspects of

- the development activities of faith-based organizations (FBOs)
- the links between religion, governance and development
- relationships between values, religious teaching and development concepts and practices.

Undertaken as part of an international research programme, these studies addressed both issues familiar in the Nigerian context and some that have been neglected in development studies and policy. Using qualitative methodologies to increase understanding of complex social and political relationships, local interpretations of religion and aspects of development, and belief and value systems, the studies mostly undertook one or a limited number of case studies of localities or organizations. Work focused on selected states with differing religious compositions, mainly Kano,

Plateau and Oyo (also Lagos and Anambra). While Kano is a majority Muslim and Anambra a majority Christian state, the remainder are religiously mixed, with differing proportions of Christians and Muslims. While the states and case studies were selected with care, the research is illustrative rather than comprehensive. Unlike much existing writing in Nigeria, the studies do not make normative assumptions about religion's positive or negative contribution to development, instead basing their conclusions on the evidence assembled.

The main findings include:

- Religious organizations are significant and widely but unevenly distributed. Because of Nigeria's religious history, most Muslim organizations are based (and strongest) in the north and most Christian organizations in the south, although neither are confined to these regions.
- Most provide social services, in particular education and health; fewer are engaged in activities such as community development or advocacy.
- In a society in which most people are religiously active, there are considerable similarities between the aims of secular and religious NGOs, but the latter also display a range of distinctive characteristics.
- Beneficiaries of FBO and NGO programmes prioritize service quality, but also often prefer the combined spiritual/moral and material approach adopted by FBOs engaged in activities related to HIV/AIDS.
- There is some evidence to support the supposed comparative advantage of FBOs (e.g. higher levels of trust, an ongoing presence, financial autonomy), although these are not exclusively associated with FBOs and NGOs are thought to have advantages for some activities.

- The core funding for FBOs comes from local religiously mandated giving, but like NGOs, many also rely on institutional and external funding.
- Many NGOs and FBOs work with each other and the state; this is particularly beneficial in religiously sensitive contexts.
- The scope for civil society participation in the preparation of poverty reduction strategies has been limited in Nigeria, and religious organizations have not taken advantage of the opportunities available, but a pilot project demonstrated that they can work together to assemble evidence of relevance to monitoring and policy review.
- Violent inter-religious conflicts reflect not only religious and ethnic rivalry but also competition for political power and control over resources. FBOs compensate for government shortcomings by playing short term roles in the immediate aftermath, but are rarely engaged in long term reconstruction and conflict prevention. They are not a substitute for competent security forces, justice systems and government agencies.
- Christians and Muslims share similar views on good governance and development, but State governments do not systematically support independent development efforts by religious groups, instead attempting to co-opt them to gain legitimacy.
- Reflecting their unequal and insecure access to State governments, religious organizations tend to see each other as political rivals, despite their shared engagement in the provision of basic services.
- While encounters between the state and religious groups have facilitated dialogue, the potential for improving cooperation is undermined by their unequal integration into politics, with religious minorities being particularly marginalized and vulnerable.
- Attitudes to corruption reveal a gap between universally held religious values that label corrupt behaviour as morally wrong and perceptions that most public servants are corrupt and that most ordinary people have no choice but to act corruptly when faced with a corrupt system.
- While some campaigns for legal reform to secure women's rights have failed because of religious opposition, others have succeeded in part because of the support of religious groups.

- Poverty is viewed as having both spiritual and material dimensions; for most, spiritual power and living a holy life are expected to ensure material prosperity. Material wealth that is honestly accumulated and well used is seen as compatible with religiosity. People have a multidimensional view of development, attributing continued poverty and failure to achieve development objectives mainly to government failure.

Some of the main implications of the findings include:

- FBOs and NGOs engaged in development have many similar characteristics but differ in some important ways. Decisions by donors and policy makers 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.
- More participatory approaches to policy making are needed in Nigeria and there is potential for religious organizations to play a role in policy formulation, monitoring and review.
- Inter-religious violence reflects underlying conflicts that can only be addressed by government, which also needs to improve the competence of its security forces and justice system.
- There is a potential role for FBOs in long term post-conflict rebuilding and conflict prevention, in addition to relief, but at present they lack the capacity.
- Religious rivalry and conflict are likely to increase unless the state is even-handed, religious groups have equal access to political representation and resources, and more forums for inter-religious dialogue are established.
- The most effective means of reducing corruption is seen to be enforcement of regulations and laws, but there is potential for religious leaders and organizations to play a role in anti-corruption initiatives providing they put their own house in order.
- The women's movement can learn how to work with religious groups from the tactics and outcomes of successful and unsuccessful campaigns for legal reform.

Based on Odumosu, O. and Simbine, A.T. (2011) *Religious Organizations, Values and Rivalry in Nigeria: Exploring the Implications for Development and Politics*. Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper 64.