

# RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT POST-2015

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**REPORT OF A CONSULTATION AMONG DONOR ORGANIZATIONS,  
UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND FAITH-BASED  
ORGANIZATIONS**

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Any errors in this report are entirely my own. An important disclaimer here is that ***none of the opinions expressed in this document necessarily reflect those of any territory, institution, organization, office, government, Board or staff member.***

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## SUMMARY

The consultation titled “Religion and Development Post-2015: Challenges, Opportunities and Policy Guidance” was hosted by UNFPA in its capacity as Convenor of the UN-IATF-FBO and co-sponsored by George Mason University, City University London and Digni, a religious umbrella organization from Norway. The roundtable event took place on 12-13 May 2014 in New York. The nexus of religion and development concerns both faith-based organizations (FBOs)<sup>1</sup> as well as so-called secular ones. It is critical to recognize the diversity within religious organizations and actors and not seek to essentialise, over-simplify or categorize. This is especially the case because religion embodies layers of ambiguities, potentials and risks – whether as ritual, institution, non-governmental organization, leader or service provider.

Strategic thinking about religion and development requires a transformational shift in the attitudes of secular development actors — starting from simple stakeholder analysis undertaken from a presumed position of secular predominance, to considerations of a level playing field based on complementarity and parity between actors. The work of development has always been the domain of faith-based entities. The ‘intruders’ may well be so-called secular organizations.

Development actors, both faith-based and secular, must learn how to navigate the complex world of religion, rather than ignore or marginalize its significance. Secular development actors are cautioned against either ignoring the role of religion (in which case the development agenda loses a valuable interlocutor), or over-simplifying the complexities and ambiguities often found in such domains, particularly around contentious rights-related issues.

The dynamics of the diverse and complicated relationships between the United Nations and a range of religious development actors should be analysed with a view to the risk of mutual instrumentalization; i.e. the United Nations using religious actors and vice versa. A deliberate and careful stakeholder analysis of religious actors in any socio-political and legal context is key. Equally important is a critical reflection by secular and faith-based development actors about who is at the policy-making table and who is absent from it.

All development actors (secular and faith-based) stand to benefit from assessing even the unintended secondary and tertiary impact of engagement processes, and be wary of the risk of mutual instrumentalization, even if for the ‘right’ objectives.

What can often be ‘striking’ about the modus operandi of FBOs, including how they work with other faith communities in different parts of the world, is the invitation to

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<sup>1</sup> There is a great deal of discussion and debate around the definition of an FBO. It is used herein to reference faith-based or faith-inspired non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with legal standing, which are working to advocate for and/or deliver development and humanitarian services whether nationally, regionally or internationally (or indeed at all those levels). In this article, FBOs are distinguished from individual religious leaders (RL) or local faith communities, which operate in diverse contexts without being legally registered or established as a non-governmental entity.

question and be questioned, rather than appearing to know the answers to various developmental challenges.

Religious leaders and FBOs, are not necessarily equipped to play a prominent role in national governance matters, nor would they want to. Some religious institutions (e.g. the Catholic Church) have learned from diverse experiences, not to engage openly in politics. Some “horrific outcomes” that have resulted from religious leaders’ and religious groups’ involvements in political space were pointed out. The concern was also raised that religious institutions themselves are not the most democratic of spaces and can be replete with political mismanagement. Some of the latter extends to the inability to deal with issues of abuse, and even domestic violence, which take place within the institutions themselves.

Many FBOs are ill-at-ease challenging political order, and therefore tend to shy away from such engagement. But at the same time, the civil space is shrinking in many countries, and attempting to stay ‘out of politics’ is increasingly unrealistic. Not only that, it was argued, but increasing political instability in some parts of the world has effectively encouraged a search for and a resurgence of more faith-inspired activism.

On the nexus between religion and peace and stability, several themes resonated, including:

- The instrumentalization of religious identity in conflict situations;
- An ambiguity about the role of religion during times of conflict and therefore its potential as a destabilizing force; and
- The potential of religious actors as peacemakers, thus the capacity for some religious elements to provide solutions to conflicts.

On the evolving ecology of financing, some FBOs as well as governments are acknowledged to be infusing significant resources. While not all FBOs are involved, they are, nevertheless, important brokers. These dynamics should have implications on ODA considerations and possibly also on the role of international financial institutions. The post-2015 agenda may require a conversation around the alignment of the strategies of emerging donors alongside those of Paris Club members from some of the world’s largest economies.

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