

**Exploratory Network Conferences on  
'Religion and Development – Nordic Perspectives on Involvement in Africa'  
Funded by NOS-HS 2011-2013**

*Stavanger, Norway 16-15 April 2012*

*Helsinki, Finland 3-4 December 2012*

**Project manager:** Tomas Sundnes Drønen, School of Mission and Theology

**Co-applicants:** Päivi Hasu, University of Helsinki and Magne Supphellen, Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration

**Administrative committee:** Marianne Skjortnes, School of Mission and Theology and Auli Vähäkangas, University of Helsinki

**Motivation and background**

In November 2010 the Norwegian Minister of Environment and Development, Erik Solheim, launched the project "Religion and Development." Through an article in *Aftenposten* the Minister argued that development workers and diplomats should be more aware of the role that religion plays in terms of creating development and its role in reconciliation processes. As a consequence of this initiative the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights was asked to administer a project in order to raise the public awareness of these issues. A committee of academic experts was formed, and the first meeting launched many interesting questions – but it also revealed the fact that very little research was conducted in Norway related to these issues. Research projects in Great Britain and the Netherlands were referred to as groundbreaking in this new academic field, but the question we had to ask ourselves was the following: What do we do in our context?

Two members of the expert group (Magne Supphellen, Professor at Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration and Tomas Sundnes Drønen, Associate Professor at School of Mission and Theology) therefore contacted their Nordic academic networks in order to investigate the situation in the other Nordic countries. The results of these inquiries were identical in all the countries; we all have a long history of involvement in development projects in third-world countries, and especially in Africa, but little research has been conducted on the particular role that religion plays in different aspects of what the Nordic agents define as development.

The Nordic countries have been major contributors to development projects in Africa south of Sahara in the post-war period. This is partly due to the influence of strong Christian mission movements in all the countries, and the solidarity aspect of the social-democratic political movements (Gullestad 2007). The Nordic states have all promoted a strict focus on a secular development-sector through their government-organised agencies.

A large majority of the population who receives this help is, however, strongly religious. In many of the receiving countries religious institutions are important actors in the social field, and development is interpreted in a holistic way where spiritual and material development is intrinsically connected. The lack of a religious focus in the Nordic development discourse has therefore inspired us to question the role that religion plays in development.

### **Research Topics**

The main object of the explorative workshops is to analyse the role that religion plays in development-projects in Africa. This will be done through analysing the activities of faith based organisations in Madagascar, Central-, East- and Southern Africa. The workshops will focus on research with a holistic perspective and show how both Muslim and Christian organisations combine spiritual and material development in their activities. The two workshops will both have a double perspective. On one hand the focus will be on examining the research conducted by Nordic and African researchers on the grassroots level in Africa. Secondly a focus will be on Nordic involvement, on how Nordic governments and faith based organisations can gain insight and knowledge in order to interpret the role of religion in their concrete development projects. The thematic approach covers areas where Nordic agents recently have concentrated their efforts, and will be as follows:

- How does religion affect the gender aspect of joint Nordic development policies in terms of restoring dignity through empowerment?
- What role does spirituality play as a resource for social reconstruction in post-conflict societies?
- How has the growth of global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity together with increased Muslim activity influenced the significant public role played by faith based organisations and institutions in Africa?

- How do we understand the entrepreneurial orientation, self-efficacy, and religious attitudes in small third-world enterprises?

### **The Workshops**

The project consists of two workshops which both relate to the above mentioned research topics. Researchers from several disciplines such as Development studies, Social and Cultural Anthropology, Science of Religion (both Theology and Islamic Studies), and Management sciences will through cross-disciplinary efforts produce new insight through discussing the theme from different academic traditions. Since the main aim of these gatherings is to prepare the ground for future collaboration and long-lasting projects with consistent funding, the workshops will be exploratory in several meanings of the word, and questions will in this phase be more important than answers.

#### **Workshop I: *Quest for Social Reconstruction - Religion, Development and Gender***

Jan Pietersee (2001) has compared the impact of western development agencies in third-world countries with doing surgery with a chainsaw. The hard ‘social engineering’-approach has led to an invasion of technocratic western knowledge, and one of his recommendations is to promote a ‘softer’ approach to development. The inability of many African states to create sustainable economic growth and provide the population with necessary health and education facilities, has led many researchers to shift their attention from national governments to civil society in order to find partners for a balanced development. New keywords in the development debate, many of them developed and given content by researchers from the south, are dignity, empowerment, transformation, sustainability, and justice. Words which focus on the holistic aspect of development – which point to the fact that development is more than economic growth, that the human consequences of globalisation (Baumann 1998) are considerable. This is where gender issues come to the forefront in the Nordic debates, with reference to how development also should be a question of restoring dignity among suffering and marginalized people – and provide equal opportunities for women.

This focus on civil society as the *locus* of development, the place where people live their lives, go to school, work, eat, worship, socialise, are hospitalised – and die, highlights the role of faith based organisations which often are locally initiated and only partly (if at all) funded from the outside world. Local churches and mosques may be the only representatives of organised public society in many villages, and the only available and functioning social

security institution for the many newcomers moving into the urban areas of the African subcontinent. Paul Gifford even claims that 70 per cent of all HIV/AIDS care in Africa is carried out by religious organisations and institutions.<sup>1</sup> Urbanisation also reshapes traditional and ethnic social relations. Former social security-networks vanish and new see the light of day. Most clearly through the fast-growing Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, but also through the increased zeal among Muslim organisations which open schools and build hospitals and mosques at an ever increasing speed. These religious institutions in some areas replace the absent government structures, with a focus which is often much stronger on spiritual matters than material change.

One central question to be discussed in the first workshop is whether these organisations have ‘added values’ in terms of being agents of change due to their focus on ‘the human condition’ both from a spiritual and material point of view. If yes – what are these added values and how can they be coined with other theories of development in order for Nordic governments and NGOs to create more efficient strategies for sustainable development with a larger variety of partners?

## **Workshop II:** *The Impact of Religious Attitudes on Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy*

The combat against poverty is one of the major global challenges of our times, a challenge which do not only preoccupy the third-world countries. Within an increasingly integrated cultural and economic global condition, where we share the same limited natural resources and breathe the same air, words like social justice and sustainability are more than philosophical constructs. Scientific disciplines such as economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science have offered important contributions to the understanding of poverty and development, but Science of Religion, Theology and Management sciences have so far been relatively absent in this debate. The second workshop will therefore focus on *agency* and question the relationship between personal faith and entrepreneurial self-efficacy in a wide sense.

One major question to be discussed will be whether and how religious worldviews construct the dimensions of development and good life, and motivate actions of both individuals and faith institutions towards perceived wellbeing. One working assumption might be that economic reforms and the global economy shape the form and content of

---

<sup>1</sup> ”The Future of Christianity”, Inaugural lecture, SOAS 4 June 2007.

religious ethos and that the religious ethos in turn fosters particular kinds of economic and development actions.

A second approach might be to interpret personal agency in a different manner. If we conclude that the majority population in developing countries in Africa regard themselves as deeply religious (Haynes 1995; 2002), we might claim that it is likely that religious beliefs and attitudes influence the way people think about their daily income, about their fields and their businesses. Does religion inspire people to consider work as a *duty* which they are *called* to perform by a transcendent deity? Is work an engagement on the *spiritual* arena which is *rewarded* in terms of financial success? Or is work entirely a *fatalistic* project entirely in the hands of a supreme God?

To unfold questions of agency and personal motivation in a context of rapid global cultural, religious, and economic change will be of importance in order to understand how civil society in development countries is affected by decisions made in other parts of the world, and how religious dogma affects material development. These reflections in turn will influence the policies and activities of Nordic governments and both secular and religious NGOs.

### **Methods and Theoretical Considerations**

The workshops are not intended to represent unified methodological and theoretical approaches to the main theme. On the contrary, the workshops invite researchers from a variety of academic traditions in order to facilitate cross-fertilization of ideas. Even though some of the participants might represent purely theoretical traditions, the majority of researchers which are invited is well familiar with fieldwork in Africa, and will bring their empirical experiences to the workshops. This will also be the case with the invited keynote speakers from Kenya and Madagascar. One interesting novelty in terms of methodological approach lies, however, in the combination of methods used in religious/cultural analysis with those of management sciences. Agency and motivation are important terms in both traditions, but they are used quite differently, and this might help the workshop develop new and interesting research questions to be followed up in later research projects.

The cases discussed will be selected along religious, organizational, strategic, and service-oriented dimensions by considering a range of faith based institutions. Because human development is a hybrid concept with objective and subjective aspects, researchers working with both quantitative and qualitative methods will be invited to contribute. Textual material produced by the faith based institutions will also be included in the discussions; hence the

analytical methods will include statistical methods, ethnographic content analysis, cultural domain analysis and narrative analysis.

### **Expected Outcome of the Workshops**

The expected outcome of the workshops is twofold. The first is to join forces in the Nordic countries in order to document the, however scattered, ongoing research on the theme Religion and Development. In order to reach that goal we intend to publish a conference volume where the 10-12 most interesting articles will be included. This publication will highlight the second expected outcome, which is to bring us into contact with the ongoing international research on the topic. The volume will also point out new and innovative theoretical and methodological approaches which will enable us to develop proposals to further Nordic and international research programmes.