



# 1 Introduction: Religion and Development Policy

The Knowledge Forum for Religion & Development Policy seeks to stimulate policy dialogue on the role of religion in combating poverty and exclusion. The Forum is a joint venture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and nine Dutch NGOs: Cordaid, ICCO, Kerk In Actie, Hivos, IKV Pax Christi, Oikos, Seva, Prisma and CMC Mensen met een Missie.

Religion is currently a prominent item on the nation's political agenda, yet government policymakers and NGO staff often feel out of their depth when they have to deal with it. The Knowledge Forum seeks to bridge this gap by providing analysis, knowledge exchange and practical recommendations. The Forum's secretariat brings together the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the non-governmental organisation BBO (Bureau Beleidsbeïnvloeding en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking). The Forum's members reflect the wide spectrum of beliefs held in Dutch society, and as such, have an equal voice in the policy discussions.

The Forum's members are all committed to upholding international human rights standards and pursuing the eight Millennium Development Goals. The Forum considers conflict resolution and good governance at local and national levels to be essential for reducing poverty, although these factors are not explicitly formulated as part of the MDGs.

This work describes the positive and negative influences of religion in relation to four themes related to the Millennium Development Goals: conflict, education, HIV/AIDS and ecology. It also contains case studies, which show how belief in an invisible world ultimately influences the visible world around us. In the future, the Forum intends to update this work with new themes, analyses and best practices. After all, religious views, motivation, and values will always be part of the civil and political interplay of forces in developing countries. As such, they can provide new insight into the most effective ways to stamp out poverty. For better or for worse, religion is part of human society, and we should be open-minded and respectful of its value and meaning for other people.

*For more information about religious affairs in the country you are working in, contact:*

*David Renkema (d.l.renkema@stichtingoikos.nl)*

*Dennis de Jong (dennis-de.jong@minbuza.nl)*

## Making room for religion in development policy

Religious faith is a recurrent topic in politics, the media and everyday conversation. Indeed, there is a noticeable resurgence of interest in religion as a phenomenon that rules the daily lives of the vast majority of people in today's world. Religion is a significant factor, whether we consider the rise of the Evangelical movement in Latin America, the expansion of Christianity in China and Africa, or – last but not least – the persistent controversies about the relationship of Islam to Western society.

What is happening at a deeper level? Is religion likely to retain public interest (in the West) or will it fizzle out, like other passing fashions? Could it be that nowadays, religion is being rediscovered as an essential aspect of human life – one that deserves our careful and focused attention? In the contemporary Western world, for various reasons, religion has declined in importance and the influence of faith on daily life is now marginal. Because of this, many Westerners find it hard to realise that in the greater part of the world, by contrast, no such thing has happened. Yet, religion is indeed a widespread phenomenon and no one who reads the newspapers can fail to notice this fact.

Many people are wondering what to think about the ‘resurgence of religion’, as it has been called. This is certainly the case in the world of development cooperation. Development organisations tend to have religious origins, and a number of them are currently reflecting on how this affects who they are and what they do. Development cooperation, in particular, engages with people for whom religious identity is very significant. However, it is not the remit of development policy to be immediately concerned with the truth content of theological concepts such as an afterlife, God, paradise or spirits. What matters is that most people in developing countries have strong religious convictions, and that development cooperation takes appropriate account of them. Development policy needs mutual understanding, with openness to, and recognition of, other people’s religious faith. Development cooperation is not only about eradicating poverty, but also about relating to people who want to be understood and respected.

Since religious faith means so much to people, how can development policy do it justice? On the one hand, organisations could seek cooperation with ‘religious resources’. Religious faith can offer insights into sustainability, instil values in education and health care and inspire reconciliation rituals. Development policy can benefit from all of these, and from the influence of faith organisations, leaders and volunteers. By cooperating with religious institutions, development cooperation can extend its influence and increase its opportunities. Religious convictions may be the key to a proper understanding of a particular local situation. Considering the religious views of others may help development policy to set and articulate its objectives in specific country situations: the effects of development efforts on society as a whole need to be taken into account, including the effects on the social, cultural and religious fabric of society.

However, religion has two sides, both of which need to be acknowledged. Scientific research and experiments in several countries have produced evidence that many religious organisations and leaders have indeed contributed to health care, education, poverty reduction and peacebuilding. But conversely, research also shows that religious rigidity initiates and re-enforces poverty, conflict, inequality and exclusion. Religious traditions can hamper development, for example by excluding women from education and by propagating certain views on sexuality.

It is clear that development cooperation cannot ignore or remain ignorant of religious convictions. Development policy should not only take account of the destructive power of religion. It should also be conscious of the many ways in which development organisations can be more effective by working together with religious institutions. The separation of church and state is not necessarily a barrier in this respect between secular (i.e. state-

related) and faith-based organisations. Moreover, religion and development policy often share similar objectives.

The encounter with different cultures – a common phenomenon in our globalised world – shows Western society that religion is not a thing of the past, but indeed very much alive. As this report will show, there are many ways in which development cooperation and religion can actually work together and exchange ideas in hope of a better world. The Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development Policy inquires into the many faces of religion and offers practical tools for building a sustainable development policy