

# The influence of Religion in Vocational Education and Training

A survey among organizations active in VET

## MAIN REPORT

As submitted to the workgroup 'Religion as driver of change'  
Of the Knowledge Centre for Religion and Development.



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## Case study Religion as driver of change Religion in Vocational Education and Training

### 1. A short general description of the case

The case study was done by three member organisations of Prisma: Oikonomos Foundation (OF), Red een Kind (REK) and Woord en Daad (W&D). These three organisations are all working in various sectors, mainly on direct poverty reduction, but also civil society building and policy influencing. All are (among others) active in the sectors education, vocational education and training (VET) and economic development.

The three Dutch organisations are working with autonomous partner organisations in various countries, mostly in long term partnerships. All of these organisations (as well as the three Dutch organisations) have a (Protestant) Christian identity. Most of them are professional NGO's active in a wider field of development activities. Some are churches or are directly related to (councils of) churches, most are not.

Objectives of the VET programmes of the organisations are usually related to income generation (through self or wage employment) and self-reliance of the trainees, often explicitly including more holistic objectives, like 'responsible citizens', 'dignified life', 'life skills'.

The Dutch organisations are not involved in implementation of the programs and projects. Influence of the Dutch organisations on strategy level is present indirectly; mostly through discussions and consultations held. On operational and tactical level, the role of the Dutch organisations is mainly limited to financial support and monitoring.

A questionnaire was developed with questions about the influence of religion on the strategy, planning, implementation, quality and results of VET. This questionnaire was sent to a total of 42 partner organisations, 30 were returned, of which three have been left out for quality reasons. Of the remaining 27, 14 are from Africa, 10 from Asia (7 India) and three from Middle and South America. Apart from the questionnaire, a group interview was held with representatives of five partners (3 Africa, 1 Asia, 1 South America).

### 2. What is the context of the case?

The situation at the level of the VET projects of the various organisations sometimes differs from the national situation. The religious situations among the 27 organisations fall into three categories of nine organisations each:

1. Situations where Christianity is a small minority among a diffuse religious situation or among a majority religion (Bangladesh, India, Thailand) ("**minority situation**")
2. Situations where Christianity is one of several major religions (Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Ghana, parts of India, Benin, Indonesia-Papua) ("**diffuse situation**")
3. Situations where Christianity is the majority religion (Malawi, Colombia, Kenya, South Africa, Haiti, Guatemala) ("**majority situation**")

Each of these situations influences how partners perceive themselves in relation to their context and the way their Christian identity is expressed in their VET programs. This is worked out further in 3.2.

Religious conflicts hardly occur in the 27 cases. Some organisations report minor, incidental and local conflicts, or ethnic conflicts with religious undertones (North India).

The socio-economic context differs among the cases. In some cases, improvement of the socio-economic situation is mentioned as one of the biggest changes, usually going along

with increasing inequality (South Africa, India, Colombia). The religious consequences of these changes are sometimes experienced as loss of (traditional / Christian) values.

### **3. What was and what is your perception of religion as driver of change?**

#### **3.1. Identify Players**

The various players are:

- The three Dutch organisations involved
- The partner organisations.
  - Board level: 8 organisations are either churches or development departments that fall directly under the responsibility of a church, some other organisations are linked to Christian councils or fellowships. In these cases, board members are usually representatives of the (member) churches. Sometimes also other Christians. In some other organisations part of the board members are church representatives or board members need a recommendation from a local church. In almost all cases, board members are Christians. The fact that they come from a variety of denominations is often emphasised.
  - Staff level: ten organisations report that all staff are or have to be Christian. Usually (but not always) this is in majority situations. Other organisations have preference for Christian staff if the level of competence and quality is equal and for some (five) organisations, religion does not play any role in employing staff. This is often the case in minority situations. In these cases, it is often made explicit that staff should (and does) respect the Christian identity of the organisation.
- The target groups. In majority situations these are mainly Christians; in minority situation, these are mainly non-Christians and in diffuse situations, the target group may be of various religions. However, religion does not play any role in selection of the students.
- Churches and Christian religious groups. Formal influence is through board representation in several cases, as stated above. Informal influence is not only the case in the eight organisations that belong to churches. Pastors of churches where staff (and students) worship do have informal influence; some teachers are trained at a seminary of a church; volunteers from churches are helping in schools and informal discussions between staff or board of the organisations and religious leaders are all mentioned as informal relations with churches and religious groups. At the same time, several organisations strongly deny any formal or informal influence from churches as they want to be and remain independent from churches.
- Governments at local and national level.

#### **3.2. Assess positions of the players**

##### ***The Dutch organisations***

The three Dutch organisations have a protestant Christian identity. They base their work on the Biblical imperative for stewardship, justice and care. It is also made explicit that the Bible is the final authority and source for norms and values. They work (exclusively) with (protestant) Christian partner organisations. Partnership agreements include this common base.

The perception among the three organisations was that the Christian identity and the way this is expressed in the VET programs of partners has a positive impact on the results and the quality of the programs, mainly because of the ethical element that is included in most curricula, including business ethics, work ethics and general ethics, related to life skills. In consultations with partners, the inclusion of ethics in curricula has been discussed. However, the precise way how the religious identity is expressed in the programs and how this is

expected to lead to these improvements of the results is hardly discussed and almost never documented formally.

### ***The partner organisations***

The organisations all have a protestant Christian identity. Some have longstanding relations with the Dutch organisation (like twenty or thirty years). The way organisations perceive themselves in relation to their environment, depends on the situation.

Seven from the nine organisations in minority situations report that they do not perceive their values and norms to be deviant from those that are common in society around them. Or they report that there are differences in convictions and beliefs but that most values and norms are shared with others. It is clear that organisations seek to express what is common. In diffuse or majority situations, partners express more frequently (half of them) that they perceive their own norms and values to be deviant from those around them. Some make explicit reference to being deviant from other Christians too, especially in majority situations.

### The role of religion in VET

#### *Motivation*

The reason for organisations to become involved in VET, is without exception, the need they perceived or assessed. This need is mostly expressed in socio-economical terms (e.g. lack of income, unemployment, drop-outs), but in several cases religious or moral needs are included in the perceived needs (e.g. lack of ethical formation, wish to influence behaviour, morals). The great majority of the organisations indicates that their religion served as the motivation for this decisions as is also expressed in the mission statements of many of the organisations. Three organisations indicate that they regard their VET programs also as means for evangelism. In interviews, others indicate that they also hope for a worldview change of students, but that this is not an explicit objective. It appears that the objective to inculcate (Christian) norms and values (deemed to be relevant for the direct objective for VET – employment) and a positive outlook on life (as expressed in the Christian worldview) on the one hand and the objective for evangelism and conversion on the other hand are separated by only a thin line.

Most (14) organisations express that the moral aspect in their programs makes them well suited for the job. Some (2) mention that the dignity, sense of self-worth and entrepreneurial culture that is inherent in their religious identity is a factor why they should be involved in VET; others mention the historical relation between the church / Christian organisations and education as a basis for their being involved. One organisation mentions the closeness of the church to the target group as a reason to be involved. Some organisations indicate that they do not want to see themselves in competition with other actors in the field (with different religious convictions). Their religious identity makes it easier to have VET programs because of the regard and confidence they enjoy from the communities around their projects (13) and also because of the motivating energy they derive from their religion (6). Few mention that their religious identity makes it harder to operate VET, because the more holistic approach takes more effort (2) or that they face resistance (4): only initially (2) or from the government (1). In minority situations, the Christian identity is relatively more often experienced as a complicating factor, which is also expressed in having less explicit Christian activities in or along with the curriculum (see below).

#### *Admission*

For admission of students, religion does not play any role. Some organisations do have socio-economic admission criteria, but most state explicitly to make no discrimination based on religion, gender, ethnic group, etcetera. The only exception is a teachers training college in a majority situation where students are required to be Christians.

### *Religious expressions in the program*

Values and Norms. Most organisations do have formal or informal courses or sessions on (work and business) ethics and/or life skills. Some have integrated the teaching of values and norms in their curriculum as a course or as part in several subjects; others organise extra mural activities with direct or indirect attention for values and norms (e.g. Human Development Class, sports activities, real life stories). Most organisations do have explicit gender objectives for their VET program, but only some have explicit gender objectives included in their ethical teaching, including separate attention for boys and girls.

Some organisations also have Biblical or Religious education, sometimes as part of the government curriculum. Some organisations in minority situations have no explicit Biblical or Christian teaching, either formally or informally, but they do integrate teaching on moral values and ethics. Examples of norms and values taught focus on honesty, integrity, discipline, business ethics and hard work, and to a lesser extend: caring for others (sometimes through practical care projects), respecting others (esp. in minority situations there is much emphasis on respect for all and universal brotherhood), environmental care, simple lifestyle, neat dressing and no addictions.

Rituals. Most organisations have religious rituals of some kind. Many have weekly or daily prayers and devotions and celebrations of Christian festivals. Some organisations also use these devotions to focus on life skills and ethics, e.g. by using the stories of positive or negative examples. In many cases, attendance is on a voluntary basis, especially in minority situations. In some minority situations, there are no Christian rituals of any kind. One organisation has a prayer hall where all students can say their own prayers. In majority (and some diffuse) situations, attendance is often compulsory.

Lifestyle. Almost without exception, organisations want their teachers to function as a role model in addition to the integration of values and norms in the teachings. Only few mention specific activities (such as workshops) to encourage staff to function as a role model and the exact way. Exactly how role models (are expected to) function, does not become clear.

The strong emphasis on (Christian) values and norms, both in the curriculum, in extra-curricular activities, expressed in the lifestyle and (sometimes) in the rituals, is coherent with the motivation to become active in VET. Most organisations express that their Christian identity includes such values and norms that it makes them well-suited to be a provider of VET and the presence of ethical teaching in most organisations is the logical consequence of this.

### The (perceived) effects of religion in VET

Almost without a single exception, organisations believe that their religious identity improves the quality of their program, helps them to realize their objectives and helps them produce better students with better chances in wage employment and in self employment. Character formation is mentioned by almost all organisations as being the intermediate outcome.

Two lines of thought are followed:

1. Because of the Christian identity and Christian values, norms and lifestyle as expressed in the program and as modelled by the teachers, the students have undergone behaviour change and character formation. They accept and imbibe the morals taught and this makes them better equipped for their future jobs. Norms and values mentioned include honesty, integrity, responsibility, discipline, dedication, punctuality, trustworthiness, sincerity, hard working, good motivation, good attitude, less corruption and sense of calling in work. These virtues are also used by most organisations to describe the ideal person after receiving training, coupled with values like 'sharing, concerned for others. Several organisations (6) make mention of outsider testimonies as to the quality of their students, stating that they are preferred candidates for jobs.
2. The second line of reasoning is: Christians believe (wo-)man to be made in the image of God; this gives a sense of dignity, self-respect and self-worth and it gives students faith in the future, a victorious life and power to overcome difficulties. These are character traits

that are useful to climb higher on the social ladder in wage employment but even more so in self-employment as it helps cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit and attitude.

Some (4) partners make mention of the exposure of students and trainees to a wider worldview, outlook on life, frame of reference and mention that this helps them gain more perspective on (the future of) their own lives.

Organisations believe that the deeper the (Christian) convictions of the student have become, the more successful he will be in either wage or self employment.

Other religious actors mentioned which play a role in the formation of students and trainees are local churches or religious leaders. However, not many organisations are concrete in how this complements their own influence. Very few make mention of opposition from other religious actors in the context of the program; emphasis is rather on positive contributions, also in minority situations.

Almost all organisations are confident that their Christian identity plays a positive role in the socio-economic development of the wider society, but less than about the positive impact on their own programs. Several mention that their programs are still too new or that the scale they operate on is too small. The main line of thought in positive sense is the following: the Christian identity instils norms and values like integrity and discipline (see above) in people, as well as those of care, concern, solidarity and love for the neighbour and these infiltrate into society through these individuals ('just men constitute just institutions'). The second group of values (care, etc.) was also mentioned by most organisations among the five most important values for their students and trainees.

### ***Target group and other stakeholders***

The target group of the organisations represents the communities they work in. If there is differentiation, it is based on socio-economic position, causing the target population to be somewhat poorer than the average population, but religiously they reflect their context (majority, diffuse or minority, see above).

Some organisations carry out satisfaction surveys and find positive response toward their religious identity and how this is expressed. Change of religious adherence or conviction is sometimes reported from diffuse or minority situations. Organisations usually intend to be careful in order not to provoke problems when such conversions occur, e.g. by requesting students to have their parents' approval before being baptized.

Most organisations report that other stakeholders also appreciate their religious identity because they see the use of norms and values. In some cases, fundamentalist tendencies increase opposition toward the Christian identity.

In minority situations, organisations sometimes experience opposition from the government (sometimes along with appreciation from the local community). This is one factor that stimulates organisations to be less explicit in the operationalisation of their religious identity in VET.

### ***3.3. Analysing relationships and power between players***

Evaluating power is difficult in the research set up of this case study, because only perceptions of organisations are researched and not those of other stakeholders in the projects.

#### ***Churches – context***

Most organisations report not to have changed much in their VET programs over the past five years. The most reported change is becoming more demand driven, changing along with the market demands or accommodating to government demands.

Relations between greater socio-economic or religious changes in society and changes in the VET program are less evident.

### ***Churches – organisations***

In cases where organisations are churches, fellowships of churches, there is a power relation between the churches and the organisations. However, in the bigger organisations, this is mainly evident at general policy level, while the operational level is often in a separate department.

In the cases, where board members are church members, they usually do not represent their churches in a formal sense and according to the organisations, parochial interests hardly play a role. In the cooperation between organisations and local churches at project level (usually in majority situations), churches may have more informal influence. The higher professional level of the organisations compared to the local churches may be a factor to reverse the direction of power and control.

### ***Organisations – target group***

Organisations are usually very explicit in their Christian identity. In diffuse situations where (Christian) religion is explicitly taught, sometimes parents are asked to sign that they approve of the provision of such teachings to their children.

If there are extra-curricular religious activities, they are sometimes compulsory, mainly in majority situations, but mostly voluntary. In some of these cases, almost all students still do attend these activities. Peer pressure or social expectation may play a role, but organisations emphasize the voluntary nature of the activities and the fact that students know that attending or not attending does not influence their results in any way. In one case, an organisation had the perception among ex-students of the religious identity and values of the organisation researched (by non-Christians) and found a positive appreciation of these.

### ***Donors – organisations***

Organisations were asked what they regarded as most fundamental in partner relations. Answers focus mostly on trust, mutuality and reciprocity, respect and openness and exchange of ideas. Some mention the common (spiritual) identity. Most organisations indicate that sufficient attention is given to the most fundamental aspect. Some (two) indicate that not sufficient attention is given to good partner-relations or to reciprocity in the relation. Several organisations report that they have made changes in their VET programs because of their donors. Some indicate that this was through stimulating discussions and exchange with inputs from the donor organisations. The power relation may well have played a role in such discussions, but there are no indications that this is experienced negatively, but rather positively.

An influence that donors likely exert on partner organisations is to stimulate partners in not mixing evangelism and development objectives, while being explicit about Christian identity. Influence of secular institutional donors in some cases tends to stimulate partner organisations to even (almost) conceal their Christian identities when having direct contact.

## **4. Evaluate policy implications covering religion as driver of change**

1. Promote that the religious identity of players in projects and programs be made explicit. Stimulate that organisations work out in what way their religious identity is expressed in their organisation at all levels, including operational level.  
Also stimulate organisations to make explicit what they expect to be the influence of their religious identity on the results of their projects and programs. The question how religious identity impacts empowerment must also be answered.
2. Do research among religious organisations and other stakeholders in their context about the (positive or negative) effects of their religious identity on their projects and programs.

3. Stimulate organisations to make explicit (toward target group, donors and other stakeholders) what is expected in terms of religion in their projects and programs: e.g. participation in worship, etc.
4. Stimulate organisations to set holistic objectives for Vocational Education and Training: objectives that include character formation and behaviour change. This should be worked out in terms of the values and norms that are to be transferred and the methods that are to be employed.
5. Stimulate that in evaluations of VET programs (and likely also other interventions) more attention is given to character formation and behaviour change as intermediate outcomes, with the religious basis or contents of such formation and change being made explicit.
6. Stimulate openness and appreciation on the site of the donor community toward religious organisations (of whichever religious conviction) when they:
  - a. In majority situations: teach the majority religion and transfer the values and norms that are based on this religion. In various countries, there is a provision for this in the government curriculum with a subject like Religious and Moral Education.
  - b. In diffuse and minority situations: teach religious education and values and norms based on their own religion, under condition that they are open toward students / trainees and their parents about what they can expect in terms of religious teaching.

Especially if it can be shown or made plausible that the values of the particular religion lead to quality improvement and empowerment.

Manipulation, especially hidden manipulation should remain unacceptable.