

# The Extent to Which Working with Faith-Based Organisations Can Undermine or Promote Positive Social Change

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## Abstract

Much of development literature observe that there is growing recognition of the role of religion in development thought and practice. The recognition of the importance of religion in the lives of beneficiaries of development is increasingly shaping policies and strategies deployed by development institutions in recipient countries. However, while there is little disagreement on the need to engage with religious actors to achieve the right development objectives, there is little evidence that attempt is being made to understand faith-based organisations in terms of their underlying motives and political agendas, in order to design appropriate models of engagement required to produce the right development outcomes. Rather, a great deal of the discussion on engagement with religious institutions has focused on the need for development actors to be sensitive to local customs and traditions in order to produce positive social change. Not enough attention has been paid to political organizations within religious communities. This paper argues that the existence of such groups presents one of the greatest challenges to contemporary development policy and practice. The paper argues that while the objectives/agenda of these groups are often more political than religious, they have nonetheless found religion a very effective tool for promoting their particular worldviews. Using the polio immunization programme in northern Nigeria as a study case, the paper demonstrates how alternative modes of engagement with such religious actors can produce the right or wrong development outcomes for entire populations. In order to find the right strategy of engagement between development institutions and religious actors, it is necessary to recognize that different groups exist within each religious community. The paper found that political groups within faith communities are more likely to contest than aid development. They also present the greatest challenge for engagement, with potentially adverse consequences. I recommend that political movements within faith communities should be given serious consideration in negotiating development agenda and in managing development processes. In negotiating with such groups, the challenge is to seek means of engagement which carry a higher probability of positive outcomes: not just for the negotiators but, more importantly, for the beneficiaries.

**Keywords:** faith-based organisations; religious actors; positive social change; identity politics; polio immunization; faith communities; development diplomacy;

## Introduction

There is considerable agreement among development scholars that the role of religion in development has only recently begun to find space within development literature (Holenstein, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011). While it is not the primary focus of this essay to explore the reason(s) for the previous neglect of the subject or provide an explanation for the belated involvement, it is important to note, as did the literature, that the avoidance of the subject was engendered by a misleading commitment to the secularization of development. However, there is now a growing acceptance of “the unavoidable presence and importance of religion in the lives of people in developing countries, and in most developed countries” (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011:46).

While there is little disagreement on the need to engage with religious actors to achieve the right development objectives, it is clear that the emerging discourse has thrown up very important questions as to the appropriate model of engagement required to produce the right development outcomes. Expectedly, most of the discussion addressed the need for sensitivity to local customs and traditions and how such approach is integral to producing positive development outcomes. There is also attempt (within literature) to project the notion that both religion and development share a common objective of a ‘better life’ for the individual. To this end, significant attention is paid to the activities of Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) involved in development work, with useful recommendations on ways to review existing models of engagement.

While these are very pertinent aspects of the discussion on the relationship between development institutions and religious actors, one finds that not enough attention has been paid to political organizations within religious communities. Although some reference is made to the existence of these groups within faith communities, the main characteristics of these groups hardly fit most of the models of organizational types identified for the purpose of collaboration with development agencies. As the case study for this essay would show, the existence of such groups presents one of the greatest challenges to contemporary development policy and practice. This essay will show that while the objectives/agenda of these groups are often more political than religious, they have nonetheless found religion a very effective tool for promoting their particular worldviews. My aim is to show, through case study, how alternative modes of engagement with such actors can produce the

right or wrong development outcomes for entire populations.

### **Understanding the influence of various groups within Faith Communities**

Mcduie-ra and Rees (2008:21) believe that the question “who sets the development agenda?” has been a crucial element of the “critical scholarship” on the opening up of the development space to multiple actors. Incidentally, the question can also be asked about who sets the agenda within faith communities, in relation to how these communities engage with development institutions.

While traditional symbols of religious authority and representative or apex organizations (Clarke, 2006) are easily recognizable and are increasingly being targeted for engagement by development institutions, one group that is becoming increasingly influential, in shaping the attitudes of communities, consist of individuals without institutional authority but posses considerable political mobilizing capacity. Clarke (2006:840) situated them within one of four organizational types namely faith-based socio-political organizations “which interpret and deploy faith as a political construct, organizing and mobilizing groups on the basis of faith identities but in pursuit of broader political objectives”. In addition to religious parties, Clarke (2006:842-843) described this organizations as existing also as “broad-based social movements” engaged in the provision of social services, and have been “largely ignored in the empirical analysis off civil society”. However, this description does not completely describe socio-political organizations which are neither political parties nor involved in the provision of any kind of service beyond the exploitation of identity politics. Similarly, (Mcduie-ra and Rees 2010:21) appeared to describe this group within their category of informal actors which are “often overlooked in negotiating, setting and contesting the development agenda”, but did not go beyond groups that are involved in social works.

So, one finds that while attempt is being made within development discourse to examine and propose ways of engagement with religious groups that are political in nature, there is a noticeable tendency to give less prominence to groups whose activities do not fit the more recognizable models which have been identified for potential collaboration with development agencies. Although these individuals are neither clergy no custodian (of customs, traditions or beliefs); are not necessarily motivated by the promise of a ‘better life’ for their loyalists; are not engaged in development practice; yet their activities sometimes trump the best efforts of local religious leaders in determining attitudes of entire faith communities.

Our case study, presented in the next section, will attempt to show that even though these groups appear at first as fringe or disruptive elements in the development process, the growing prominence of identity politics and public religion (Clarke, 2006; Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Hardy 2016) presents one of the greatest challenges and even opportunities for engagement with such groups.

### **Polio Eradication Programme in Nigeria**

In 2003, as part of a final drive to eliminate the polio virus from the remaining polio endemic countries by 2005, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) launched a polio immunization programme in 125 countries including Nigeria. But the programme had barely commenced when some states in the predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria boycotted the national polio vaccination programme due to claims that the immunization exercise was a ploy by western powers to sterilize female children with intent to reduce the Muslim population (Yahya 2006; Da Costa 2007). What had started as a rumor among local religious leaders quickly gained legitimacy when the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN) claimed that it was in possession of ‘evidence’ that the vaccines contained anti-fertility agents.

Following a very effective campaign by the SCSN calling on parents to reject the polio vaccines, the authorities in the northern states of Kano, Kaduna and Zamfara, the first two of which constitute the bulk of the population in Northern Nigeria, officially suspended the programme (Jegede, 2007). Although the boycott was officially announced by the authorities in the above states, it severely affected the exercise in other states in the region. The incident was described by Da Costa (2007) as “a devastating rollback for a polio eradication campaign that seemed finally on the verge of success”.

By the end of 2003, and as a result of the boycott, Nigeria accounted for about 45 percent of total polio cases in the world. Within one year, this figure had risen to 70 percent of global infections. Within 10 months, polio infection has spread to twelve countries which were previously free of the polio virus (Irin, 2004; Jegede; 2007; Agbeyegbe, 2007). Kaufmann and Feldbaum (2009) identified the number of new infections in twenty countries, across Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, noting that the boycott resulted in additional cost of more than US\$500 million, and prevented the eradication of the polio virus within the last decade.

Looking back, it is easy to recognize the role that religion played in a local situation that produced what became a global health crisis. It is also important to explore the strategies adopted by national and global stakeholders in resolving the problem, for relevant suggestions on how engagement with religious actors can help or harm development processes. But it would be misleading to try to do this without properly identifying the character of the religious group whose activity was central to both the consequence and outcome for the polio

eradication programme in Nigeria. It is to this organization that I now turn.

### **The SCSN and Identity Politics in Northern Nigeria**

The Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN) came into existence following the return to civil rule in Nigeria in 1999. The group has been variously described as “a voluntary civil organization” (Oba 2011) and “self-proclaimed supreme council” (UN 2004). Often perceived as an organization committed to the establishment of the Islamic legal system (Makinde & Olstien 2011), it has been associated with broader political and global issues than its nomenclature suggests. It is headed by a Kano-based physician and former candidate for an opposition party during the presidential elections in Nigeria.

Given the above description, the first question that arises from the profile is ‘how much can this group, which was so effective in mobilizing an entire community on the basis of religion, be said to be legitimate representative of that community?’ And what traditional elements (custom, belief, doctrine) was being promoted by its opposition to a preventive health project?

Most literature consulted for this exercise identified reasons which are neither religious nor socio-cultural for the SCSN’s position on polio immunization. Agbeyegbe (2007:40) believes the successful campaign by the SCSN was due largely to “strained relations between the west and Muslims in Northern Nigeria”. The author also observed that the boycott was most effective within communities with strong anti-western sentiments aggravated by the war on terrorism. Renne (2010:52) explained the boycott in terms of the fact that polio eradication programme “began at a time of considerable political tension and insecurity for northern Nigerians relating to national and international affairs”.

While it can be argued (in relation to the point about the boycott being more noticeable within anti-western communities) that correlation does not necessarily imply causation, the dominant rhetoric by leaders of the SCSN at the time leaves little room such doubt. Jegede (2007) quoted the group’s spokesman thus: “Since September 11, the Muslim world is beginning to be suspicious of any move from the Western world...Our people have become really concerned about polio vaccine”. Dr. Datti Ahmed, leader of the SCSN, was even more poignant in his submission that the vaccines were “corrupted and tainted by evildoers from America and their Western allies” and that “we believe that modern-day Hitlers have deliberately adulterated the oral polio vaccines with anti-fertility drugs and viruses which are known to cause HIV and AIDS” (Jegede, 2007). Similarly, the author also made the point that local political rivalries, resulting from the loss of political power by the northern Muslim political elite, played a significant part in mobilizing the local population against the polio programme.

Moving beyond this point of contestation between the Muslim community in Northern Nigeria (as it turned out) and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, it is necessary to examine how the various stakeholders in the polio eradication project acted to address the problem, with specific focus on what lessons can be drawn for future strategies for engagement with religious actors.

### **National and International Interventions in the polio Immunization Crisis**

Following the rejection of the polio vaccines by some states in northern Nigeria, the Nigerian government set up a team of health professional, traditional and religious leaders to verify the safety of the vaccine. Samples of the vaccine were sent abroad for laboratory screening. The test result certified the vaccines as free of anti-fertility agents and safe for administration. However, the SCSN rejected the results of the tests on the grounds that “the Muslim community was not properly represented on the committee” (Jegede, 2007). Again, the government responded by appointing another committee, this time to include members of Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), an umbrella organization of all Muslim groups in Nigeria. The JNI is headed by the Sultan of Sokoto, the most senior traditional ruler, and officially the spiritual head of all Muslims in Nigeria. Still, the SCSN rejected the findings of the committee, which it did not recognize as representing its own group (Jegede, 2007).

Despite the vaccine’s certification and government’s sensitization efforts, rejection rates remain very high, going up to about 82 percent even in those northern (Muslim) states that did not originally sign up to the boycott (Agbeyegbe, 2007).

### **International Diplomatic Efforts**

In examining the global efforts to resolve the crisis, Kaufmann and Feldbaum (2009) and Yahya (2006) provided the most incisive accounts of the role of international diplomacy in resolving the boycott. In a study supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, Kaufmann and Feldbaum interviewed and reproduced accounts by key actors involved in the diplomatic initiative, which served “to illuminate the experiences, perspectives and interests of both policy makers and institutions” (Kaufmann and Feldbaum 2009:1092).

Having realized that local attempts by the Nigerian government to engage with local religious leaders had failed to resolve the disagreement, the UN Secretary-General, on the advice of the American Secretary of State and UNICEF, dispatched a special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, to Nigeria (Kaufmann and Feldbaum, 2009). Gambari, himself a Nigerian Muslim, is the Secretary General’s senior adviser for African affairs. During the

visit he met with key personalities involved in the dispute, spending considerable time with the leader of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria.

Simultaneously, the US diplomatic mission in Nigeria opened diplomatic channels with local political leaders in the affected communities.

The GPEI Secretariat also tried and got the polio immunization programme on the agenda of the Tenth Islamic Conference in Malaysia . This caused several *Fatwas* (Islamic religious rulings) to be issued on polio immunization.

Finally, in July 2004, the polio immunization programme resumed fully in Northern Nigeria. The new vaccine, according to Kaufmann and Feldbaum (2009), we accepted this time because it was manufactured in Indonesia, another Muslim country. The authors made the very significant point that the same vaccines being used as excuse for resumption of the polio programme had always been used in Nigeria prior to the boycott. However, it was important for the development institutions involved in the polio eradication programme to play along as accomplices in the politics of polio immunization in Northern Nigeria, this time, to ensure the success of the programme.

Overall, the eventual resolution was hailed as a victory for diplomacy in development. Kaufmann and Feldbaum (2009) projected it as a novelty in 'Global Health Diplomacy'. Yahya (2006) commended the tireless efforts of UNICEF representative in Nigeria and acknowledged the roles of religious and traditional leaders as community advocates. Jegede (2007) pointed to effort by UNICEF particularly in mobilizing 150 Muslim clerics and traditional leaders from neighboring countries to Kano, Nigeria to discuss the polio problem.

### **The Real Lessons for Engagement with Religious Actors**

While I find the above points relevant and important to the subject of engagement with religious actors, I also realize that the recommendations do not address the reality that emerged from the crisis, conflicting development agenda within faith communities. In discussing the subject of engagement with religious actors, I take seriously Clarke's (2006:836) warning that the new concern with religion within development studies "risks repeating the conceptual and programmatic problems" of development practice, by not recognizing the disparate organizational types within faith communities. I have focused on the political organizational type, not just because it featured in the polio case but largely because the point has been made sufficiently that the recent interest in religion by development studies stem largely from the growing influence of identity politics.

Therefore, simply talking in broad terms about "global diplomacy" and "the roles of religious and traditional leaders" cannot point the way to the right policy of engagement with this groups who, as we now know, do not require any legitimate claim to institutional authority to be able to set the agenda within such communities, just as they do not require any culture or faith reasons (the basis for negotiation with religious actors) to contest development processes. Often, what they simply seek is political relevance in the affairs of their communities.

To the extent, therefore, that a UN special envoy was dispatched to meet with the leader of the SCSN, such strategy was very effective in bringing about positive social change. Dr. Ezio Murzi, the UNICEF representative in Nigeria was very explicit about this point: "That visit was instrumental. It opened up the doors to increased conversation" (Kaufmann and Feldbaum, 2009:1094; see also Yahya, 2006).

But then, the extent to which such strategy is institutionalized as a policy of engagement would determine the incentives that exist for even political upstarts to disrupt development processes in order to negotiate political space using religion as an effective tool.

Thirdly, it is important to note that these groups easily acquire relevance (and influence) within communities with declining legitimacy of political leadership or diminished credibility of spiritual authorities. In the case of traditional spiritual leaders, any attempt to negotiate development agendas with such *de jure* symbols of authority risks undermining development processes. In our polio case study, these sentiments were expressed by members of the communities: "People think government and even Muslim scholars, they have no fear of God in their minds. Both the *malamai* and the big people now, they are not honest" (Renne 2010:21). Given such mindset, further attempts to get these 'legitimate' traditional and religious leaders to 'own' the polio project, just kept discrediting the polio programme.

The last point concerns the integrity of the 'engagement' process that caused the opponents of the programme to change their minds. According to Kaufmann and Feldbaum (2009:1094), "It is hard to know why the governor of Kano finally ended the boycott". Taken together with UNICEF's complicity in keeping quiet about the fact that the earlier (rejected) and later (accepted) batches of polio vaccines had the same origin, the people of Northern Nigeria were simply not allowed the benefit of information on a process for which they had paid a great price. This clearly does not serve the development objective of empowering people with the knowledge needed to determine their own destinies.

## Conclusion

In order to find the right strategy of engagement between development institutions and religious actors, it is necessary to recognize that different groups exist within each religious community. Bearing in mind that identity politics has been known to play an important part in the growing awareness, within development studies, of the place of religion in development, political movements within faith communities should be given serious consideration in negotiating development agenda and in managing development processes. While some socio-political faith organizations are actually engaged in providing tangible services for their communities, others exist for strictly political purposes. These 'political' groups are therefore more likely to contest than aid development. There also present the greatest challenge for engagement, with potentially adverse consequences. In negotiating with such groups, the challenge is to seek means of engagement which carry a higher probability of positive outcomes: not just for the negotiators but, more importantly, for the beneficiaries.

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