Pathways to Development Through Local Faith Communities

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Recommended Citation

Webster, M. & Watson, B. (2014). Pathways to development though local faith communities. *Development Bulletin,* (76), 47-51. Retrieved from https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/db-76.pdf

Pathways to development through local faith communities

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Introduction

Despite the success associated with several Millennium Development Goals, humanity is faced with unacceptable levels of material poverty, increasing socio-economic inequality, growing scarcity of natural resources and ongoing or newly emerging conflict between various ethnic and religious groups. Within this context, concern has emerged over the potential for religious fundamentalism to impede progress. Notably, at times of uncertainty, fundamentalism, religious or otherwise, tends to thrive as people seek certainty in an uncertain world. Conceding that religious and other forms of fundamentalism can be very destructive, and recognising that the role of religion within development theory and practice remains marginalised, this paper considers the positive changes that are possible at the nexus between 'religion' and what can loosely be described as 'development'. Running parallel to concerns over the rise of religious fundamentalism is a growing movement to engage local faith communities and religious resources more effectively in the processes of human development. In this paper original CPP research on gender programming in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Church Partnership Program (CPP) is presented as a brief case study that illustrates the potential when development processes engage with, rather than avoid, religion. We argue that in the case of PNG, attempts to separate 'religion' and 'development' result in an uncomfortable dichotomy. Rather than religion being viewed as irrelevant, or in direct opposition to development goals, there is significant common ground to be found between the two. It is the willingness of all stakeholders in the development enterprise to work together within this common ground that suggests its potential as a future pathway to poverty reduction and human development.

The role of religion

Religion is a significant component of the lives of the vast majority of the world population and is likely to remain so into the future. By one recent estimate over 88 percent of the global population consider themselves to be members of a religious group. Less than 10 percent indicate a non-religious affiliation and only two percent describe themselves as atheists (CIA 2013). Within Australia, widely considered to be a largely secular nation, census results suggest that 64 percent of Australians identify themselves as Christian. Although McCrindle (2012) indicates that this affiliation is purely nominal for the majority of Australians, and this may also be the case in developing countries, the connection remains strong enough to drive important aspects of behaviour and identity or to legitimate important social services providers. In many of the developing nations of the Pacific the proportion of citizens claiming religious affiliation and practice is much

higher. Estimates across all Pacific nations, excluding Australia and New Zealand, indicate that over 95 percent of the population identify as Christian (Pew Research Centre 2011). The religious communities in these countries are vibrant, active and already engaged in the improvement of their societies. Many of the medical, educational and social support services available to the population in these countries are provided by religious communities. For example, in PNG Hauck et al. (2005:14) points out that church representatives see 'social work' as their primary strength in working with communities. Christian groups collectively provide 50 percent of all health services, co-manage 40 percent of primary and high schools and run two of the nation's six universities. Additionally, organised churches in PNG are heavily involved in reconciliation and peace building, development of public policy and direct service provision.

Key to discussing the role of religion in relation to development processes is the need to identify components of religious experience and practice. Ter Haar (2011) categorises religious 'resources' into religious ideas, religious practices, religious organisation, and religious experience. Of these four categories the third is favoured when identifying potential for religion to enhance or hinder human development and nation building. This relates to the potential and capacity for religious communities to engage their members and deliver services that contribute to the broader development agenda. In the case of PNG, in 2010 the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which served approximately 10 percent of the population, operated one of the nation's six universities and 100 schools, assisting a total of 21,000 students (Watson 2012). For the most part, this sort of service provision, provided it is done well, is broadly deemed to be both necessary and beneficial while PNG develops export industries and a taxation base sufficient to bolster the public education system.

Ideas and beliefs are perhaps the aspect of religion most often questioned by secular development practitioners. Beliefs held by religious groups which act, intentionally or otherwise, to oppose or counter aspects of the development or human rights agenda, attract widespread concern, a prime example of which is the perpetuation or imposition of patriarchal norms on women which may have a devastating impact on their wellbeing. The rise of religious fundamentalism since the 1970s is a source of grave concern among secular critics and religious moderates. Notably however, a range of inconsistent and emotive definitions and uses of the term fundamentalism exist. For the purposes of this paper a contextual approach is taken drawing primarily from Emerson and Hartman (2006), who characterise religious fundamentalism as a reaction of communities against the marginalisation of religion by modernity and its accompanying processes of

development. By such accounts fundamentalism is a defensive aspect of religion that emerges naturally when secular development processes or other stressors are forced on religious communities. While this is one of various theories, of particular concern is the capacity for religious belief to be seized by extreme elements in society and used to incite conflict, violence and the abuse of human rights in ways contrary to the underlying value system of the religion itself. We argue that religious fundamentalism is more likely to arise and have a negative impact when development processes do not adequately engage or take into account the religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations of a community or society as a whole.

Religion and development

The past five years have seen an increasing interest in the synergies apparent at the intersection of religion and development that have perhaps been forgotten over time. While Christian missionaries have been best and worst known for evangelistic endeavour, their commitment to the social gospel has been less recognised. For example, a 1928 Church of England Study book (cited in Hilliard 1978:259) asserted 'the Christianising of the world involves the creation of sanitary conditions, of an educational system, of social, economic, and political welfare, in which life and life abounding may come to its full personal and corporate development'. Watson (2012:92) argues that to some extent the discourse of development mirrors that of traditional evangelical mission with obvious similarities between the dichotomies heathen/poor, primitive/illiterate, missionary/development worker, missionary organisation/NGO, gospel message/human rights message, evangelism/modernisation and civilised/empowered. Interest has come from a broader range of actors than those in academia and includes obvious candidates such as the development organisations of Christian denominations such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Caritas or those faith-based development organisations not tied to a specific denomination such as Islamic Relief and World Vision. Other less obvious actors include government aid donors from Australia and the United States of America, and multilateral agencies like the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and the World Bank. To some extent all have promoted the need to mesh broader development objectives with religious resources.

It is the view of ADRA Australia staff that increased engagement with faith-based groups is a positive trend in that it brings the potential for improved human development outcomes and increases the leverage of a broader range of religious community resources for development programmes. However, most commentators note that there are a number of gaps regarding both knowledge and engagement that need to be addressed for synergies to be maximised. In particular, 'the existing literature … is conspicuous in its failure to take religious ideas seriously in the sense that many scholarly works on religion and development regard religious thought as representing something else, generally some social quality or economic trend' (Ter Haar 2011:3). These gaps are important to address for several reasons. First, they mitigate against effective engagement of religious communities in addressing development challenges around challenging issues such as gender inequality. Second, the lack of good information about the role that religious communities play, in all their complexity, in effective human development makes it challenging for policy and decision makers to take appropriate actions and resource allocations.

To address these gaps a number of formal and informal groups have emerged, each with a focus on strengthening both learning and practice in the engagement of religious communities with development programmes. Some, such as the Religions and Development Research Programme are coalitions of academic institutions. Others, such as the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University, represent a single academic institution with close ties to a range of key development actors. A third type, of which the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities is a prominent example, are coalitions of a broad range of actors from academia, religious groups, development actors and the private sector. The combined effect of all this effort is an increasingly detailed picture of the existing and potential engagement of religion in development and improved understanding of good practice. What is missing, however, are specific case studies that demonstrate both the difficulties and successes possible when development practitioners work more closely with faith based groups and organisations.

Religion and gender

This paper does not set out to delve deeply into the relationship between religion and gender. However, it is necessary to touch on some of the issues that others have addressed in considerable detail, particularly as they relate to the argument being presented here and the case study from the Church Partnership Program in PNG. Gender, and specifically gender inequality, is a challenging issue for many development practitioners who belong to religious communities. Apparently homogenous religious communities contain a diversity of beliefs regarding gender roles, especially where religious communities incorporate numerous cultural groups. Development practitioners may find that corporate beliefs are in tension with their own beliefs and the gender equality ideals and human rights they are striving to achieve. Tadros (2010) effectively summarises these tensions by describing four conundrums commonly found in the engagement of faith-based organisations with gender inequality. The first conundrum relates to inconsistency in the standpoints that the organisation takes in relation to various gender issues. The second is characterised by complexity in the mix of both power and limitations imposed by religious tradition on women in a range of activities. The third lies in the degree to which religious organisations working at the community level may, or may not actually represent indigenous voices. The fourth describes dilemmas faced by women if services provided by faith-based organisations are directly or indirectly conditional on conformity with traditional gender norms. These tensions, which derive

largely from the patriarchal nature and discriminatory treatment of women inherent in the practices and traditions of many of the world's major religions, create challenges to establishing common ground and collaboration between secular development actors and religious organisations. The depth and width of the gap that these challenges create should not be underestimated when seeking new pathways to future development goals.

The Church Partnership Program

The Australian Government funded CPP in PNG is a 'long-term, multi-stakeholder partnership between seven denominational Australian Non Government Organisations (ANGOs), the churches in PNG that they represent, and the governments of PNG and Australia' (Kelly and Roche 2014:30). It was first funded in 2004 based on recognition of the key roles played by churches in the areas of health, education and social services provision within the PNG context. The underlying premise is that the quality and scale of this service may be enhanced if the capacity of, and collaboration between, the various churches is strengthened.

Based on a review of the first phase of the CPP, the partners agreed to an increased emphasis on mainstreaming gender and achieving outcomes related to gender equality in the second phase of the programme which began in 2010.

Figure 1

Adapted from Rao and Kelleher 2005:60
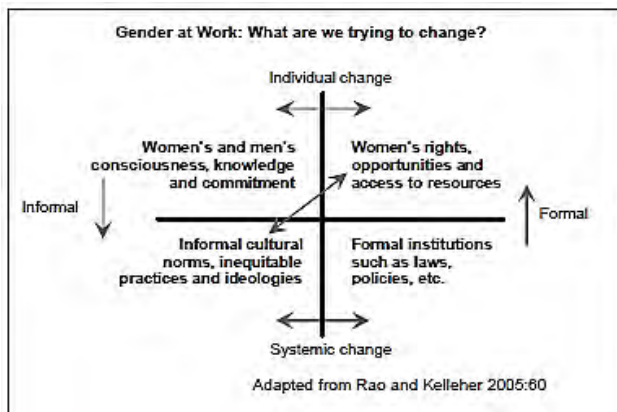
CPP activities, as reported by church leaders and programme staff, and documented in formal project reports, were particularly focussed on achieving individual change at the formal level but also at the informal level. For example, it was common to find churches operating gender awareness trainings for church leaders and establishing gender action groups at congregation level. Activities of this type were reported as prevalent in all seven of the church partners. One church partner was in the process of identifying gender champions from bishop down to lay member levels and forming action groups throughout their church structures to increase awareness of gender equality issues. Likewise, a richly diverse range of activities such as skills or leadership training for both men and women, and provision of gender sensitive health and education services were common across all seven churches.

Church programmes often engaged both men and women demonstrating an understanding of the dynamics

This aligned with AusAID's gender strategy for PNG which highlighted the importance of coordination of gender equality initiatives, and of improving the collection, analysis and use of gender equality data through joint monitoring and evaluation (AusAID 2010).

In 2012 a gender review was conducted by the lead author to establish a framework for further action against these commonly held objectives. The review took place over three weeks during February and March of 2012 and utilised semi-structured, qualitative methodologies based around AusAID's gender equality approach and the Rao-Kelleher gender change model shown in Figure 1 (Moser 2007:10). Fifty-one key informants identified by the churches participated in either individual or group interviews. The informants consisted of just over 50 percent women with group interviews usually involving a mix of men and women. The overall approach described above was deliberately adopted in order to allow a transparent and non-threatening engagement with all stakeholders on a potentially sensitive issue. The review found that all church partners engage with gender issues in their programme activities and that all seek to contribute to the achievement of gender change in relation to gender equality and women's rights. This is illustrated in Figure 2 which plots identified church activities against the Rao-Kelleher model, and described in more detail below.

Figure 2

Adapted from Rao and Kelleher 2005:60
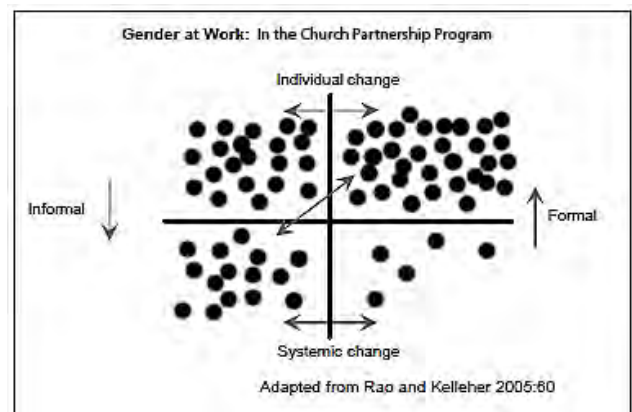
of gender issues within their religious communities. For example, churches that provided HIV/AIDS voluntary counselling and testing were not only aware of low access rates by men and seeking to address barriers to men's participation, but also aware of the consequences in terms of violence and social stigmatism for women when they accessed such services without their husband being tested too. That the churches were actively seeking to provide gender sensitive services reduced the likelihood of conflict or violence in the family (Webster 2012). It was evident to the researchers that long-term engagement of partners with the CPP was building gender awareness in service delivery by churches. CPP staff who self-identified as gender awareness champions within their churches indicated an optimism that change could take place. In several interviews, participants cited the shift over time in attitudes towards HIV/AIDS programmes within churches as evidence that positive was achievable.

Programming to address systemic change at either informal or formal levels was less common and 'is an area that could be strengthened, particularly in relation to understanding and effectively using gender change agents and the development of gender policy within religious communities' (Webster 2012:2). For example, only one church had formally adopted a gender policy, while three others were addressing some aspects of gender in existing formal structures. Informal systemic change was more common, though still with less activity across the churches than seen with activities aimed at individual change. Perhaps the most common example provided in interviews was the presence of the CPP itself within the church. In several cases the presence of senior staff, often women, from the CPP interacting regularly and raising gender issues amongst the church leadership was seen as a positive disruption to established gender norms within the church.

As a long-running collaboration between both secular and faith-based actors that deliberately seeks to find common ground around gender issues in development, the CPP represents an encouraging case study of an 'integral development' model. Interviews during the review process explored many of the conundrums outlined by Tadros within the context of religious communities in PNG. Of particular note was the significant number of responses that indicated the kinds of internal tensions associated with ongoing changes in gender norms within the churches. For example one respondent stated that,

> the church could be seen as hypocritical in arguing for gender equality in the community – when there are some church roles that are restricted to men – people can challenge that (Webster 2012:12–13).

Evidence from the review suggests that all seven CPP churches are in a process of transformation around gender.

The CPP also provided a platform for male and female church leaders who were already seeking to create gender change. Many of the review participants identified themselves as key change agents with a commitment to promoting gender equality in their religious communities extending well beyond the scope and limitations of the CPP. As one respondent described it,

> … peer influence is quite strong – so when men see other men showing respect for the roles and contributions of women then they are likely to change too (Webster 2012:14).

In reality, peer influence is a necessary though slow vehicle for change in relation to gender norms that are perpetuated in church structures and policies, often undergirded by deep cultural values and practices that predate the arrival of Christianity in PNG. Nevertheless, the rich interactions between CPP partner staff, the Australian NGOs and donors do lead to a questioning of dominant thinking and organisational culture.

Diversity and complexity of belief and practice on gender equality within churches and the community appeared to be taken into account by review participants in their narratives and actions. Four out of seven churches demonstrated evidence of developing gender approaches that 'balance or incorporate the positive elements of traditional PNG, church and 'Western' gender concepts … One participant suggested that

> … we should look for the good in traditional cultures (including church culture) and try to strengthen that aspect of things' (Webster 2012:13).

Many church leaders were clear in their view that attempts at rapid change were unlikely to have positive outcomes and might in fact undermine long-term efforts to achieve gender equality. '*I believe it is happening, slowly – but we are getting there*' (Webster 2012:13) sums up a common response from church leadership, whereas the response from CPP staff was more likely to feel that change needed to be faster. What was also equally clear was that the collaboration between local and external stakeholders on the CPP enabled an expansion of common ground that noticeably increased the pace of gender rights reform in the churches.

Conclusion

It is a well established principle in community development practice that success in the achievement of any development objective is more likely to be achieved when all stakeholders in the community have ownership of the decisions about their future and participate in the changes taking place in their lives. Given that in the majority of countries facing the most extreme development challenges, large sections of the population are part of religious communities, it does not make sense for development actors to exclude or ignore those religious communities, especially when seeking to deal with challenging and seemingly intractable issues such as gender inequality and gender-based violence. Challenges notwithstanding, increasingly there is a recognition that what Ter Haar (2011) describes as 'integral development' (deriving from an understanding that religion and development have more in common than is normally apparent) is an alternative to separation between the worlds of religion and development. In the case of PNG we find that religious communities are neither simple nor homogenous in their relationship to gender inequality or other development challenges. They are capable of being both part of the problem and part of the solution. Further, the separation of religion and development constructs an uncomfortable dichotomy for many Melanesians who see churches as intrinsically involved in peace building, service provision, policy development and the construction of social capital. An unnecessarily confrontational approach to gender inequality closes down pathways to future development and may result in a hardening of fundamentalist tendencies. Without compromising on human rights, a nuanced engagement of religious communities through a participatory approach such as the CPP, that values the religious resources in a faith community and seeks to harness its inherent diversity and complexity, opens new pathways to a future free from gender inequality and violence.

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