

Religion and development cooperation in fragile states

The complementarity of roles of Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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1. Introduction: Policy Dialogue 'Fragile states and religion'

The *Handout Religion and Development Policy*³ has shown the importance of making room for religion in development policy. This is especially true for fragile states: countries in which the government is unable or unwilling to provide physical security, legitimate political institutions, sound economic management and social services for the benefit of its population.⁴ It is in these fragile states that religious institutions usually stay upright and provide the population with basic social services such as education and health care, where the state fails.

'Fragile states and religion' was the central topic of a policy dialogue organized by the Knowledge Forum Religion and Development Policy with (former) Dutch minister of Development Cooperation Bert Koenders⁵ and the NGO-members of the Knowledge Forum in April 2009.⁶ For both the NGOs and the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs, fragile states are an important focus point in development cooperation. The Dutch ministry follows the 3-D strategy: Development, Diplomacy and Defense. The NGOs have more or less a bottom-up approach.

Preparatory meetings and an international conference preceding the policy dialogue learned that the NGOs and the Ministry share the viewpoint that religion plays an important role in development in fragile states, whereas their intervention strategies differ. In the policy dialogue the NGOs and Ministry proposed to investigate if, and how, they could complement and strengthen each other with regard to recognizing and involving religion in their development practices in a specific fragile state. The participants of the policy dialogue chose the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as a research case.

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³ Knowledge Forum Religion and Development Policy 2008, see www.religion-and-development.nl

⁴ We use the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2006: 17).

⁵ Koenders was minister for Development Cooperation from 2007 to 2010 in the Balkenende IV-cabinet.

⁶ The Knowledge Forum Religion and Development Policy is a joined initiative of the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs and eight non-governmental organisation (ICCO- Kerk in Actie, Cordaid, Prisma, Stichting Oikos, Mensen met een Missie, Initiatives of Change, IKV Pax Christi and Edukans).

Based on the results of the DRC case study research conducted in 2011, this chapter outlines to what extent the NGOs and the Ministry could be complementary to each other in dealing with religion in development in a fragile state. We first give a short overview of the role of religion in development in fragile states, followed by the main findings of the case study concerning the complementarity of roles of five Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Embassy in the DRC.⁷

We are careful in extrapolating the findings presented in this article to other fragile states. The DRC is a country as large as Western Europe, in which the field of action of NGOs is located mostly in the East, while the Dutch Embassy is situated in the West. Moreover, the Dutch Embassy has only been working on development since 2006. Due to policy changes the Dutch bilateral development relations with the DRC will end in 2012. In addition, the NGOs and the Dutch Embassy in the DRC are still exploring how they can complement each other on a more general level. The DRC case study thus serves as an illustration of the opportunities and difficulties of cooperation of Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning religion and development in the context of a fragile state. Some generalizations of the findings of the DRC case study are nevertheless possible. In this article we will provide several recommendations on practical coordination for Dutch donors operating in fragile states willing to co-ordinate their development practices in which religion is involved.

2. Religion in development in fragile states: the Fragile State Principles

Until present, little research has been conducted on the role of religion in development in fragile states. To provide a contextual framework for the DRC-case, we combine theories on international engagement and development in fragile states from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) with theories on religion in development from various influential researchers.⁸

The OECD has developed ten principles for good international

Principles for Good International Engagement In Fragile States and Situations	
1.	Take context as the starting point
2.	Ensure all activities do no harm
3.	Focus on state building as the central objective
4.	Prioritise prevention
5.	Recognise the links between political, security and development objectives
6.	Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies
7.	Align with local priorities in different ways and different contexts
8.	Agree on practical co-ordination mechanisms between international actors
9.	Act fast... but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance
10.	Avoid pockets of exclusion ("aid orphans")

Fig. 1. Fragile State Principles

Source: OECD, 2011

⁷ The five NGO-members who were involved in the DRC case study research are Cordaid, ICCO/Kerk in Actie, IKV Pax Christi, Mensen met een Missie and Prisma (represented by ZOA VluchtelingenZorg)

⁸ Déneulin 2009; DFID 2005; Kaplan 2008.

engagement in fragile states (see figure 1). Religion is interlaced with several of these Fragile State Principles. The first principle, *Take context as a starting point*, emphasizes the importance of a thorough context analysis of a fragile state, region or situation in which development organizations operate. Part of this context analysis is the mapping of formal and informal power structures, also called "drivers of change".⁹ Especially in fragile states religious institutions and leaders often are important drivers of change, who can be involved positively as well as negatively in developmental issues.¹⁰

Principle 7 states that development goals should be aligned with local priorities. This implies that co-operation must be sought with local communities and societal organizations, such as religious institutions. Moreover, the priorities and needs of the local population can on a deeper level be closely linked to religious ideas, practices or experiences. Recognition and acknowledgement of the possible influence of these religious resources¹¹ on local priorities within different contexts is therefore crucial for good international engagement in fragile states.¹²

Principles 8 and 9 indicate that donors should act fast, but that sustainable intervention should have priority in fragile states. To do so, practical co-ordination between and long-term relationships with national and international actors is necessary. Partnerships with national and local organizations on macro, meso and micro level will most likely only root if there is mutual understanding and knowledge of the ideas and practices of the partner. In developing countries religion is often part of the public sphere. Ideas and practices of partner organisations can therefore be religiously oriented. This should be recognized in order to harmonize and sustain intervention strategies of national and international actors.

This brings us to the importance of agreeing on practical co-ordination between (inter)national actors in a fragile state, where religion often plays an important role in development. The DRC case study shows how Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Embassy involve religion in their development practices in the DRC. Subsequently, the case study brings up the existing forms of complementarity as we noticed them in our research. Finally, our study discusses the complexities and opportunities when two parties wish to attune their intervention strategies in the difficult and highly sensitive field of religion and development.

⁹ See for instance DFID (2005). *Why we need to work more effectively in fragile states*. London: Department for International Development.

¹⁰ Boender 2008a; Boender 2008b; KCRO 2009; Van Meerkerk 2011.

¹¹ For an explanation of religious resources please see chapter 2 'Religion and Development Policy' of the Handout (2008, p. 9).

¹² Also see Kaplan 2008.

3. The DRC case: Religion in development interventions of Dutch NGOs and the Dutch

Embassy in the DRC

The staff members of the NGOs and the Ministry involved in the DRC case study are aware of the role of religious actors in development in the DRC. They agree that religious institutions, often Christian churches, play a significant role in providing basic social services and structure in the DRC, and that religious leaders have considerable moral authority in this country. They furthermore consent that contact and/or co-operation with religious actors is important in development interventions in the DRC. The interviewed staff members of both parties do emphasize that one must be careful in choosing its partner, as power abuse and corruption – a common theme in Congolese society – take place also in religious institutions.

Where the interviewed staff-members have little trouble pinpointing the role of religious *actors* in development in the DRC, they do find it difficult to identify the role of religious *ideas, practices* and *experiences* – the remaining religious resources – in development in this country. The NGO staff-members mostly refer to the religious-based norms, values and identities of the people they work with in the DRC. For the staff members of the Ministry, who are less in direct contact with local society, analysing the role of religious ideas, practices and experiences in development in the DRC proves even more difficult. The staff members of both parties do find that religion can be valuable in the process of peace building and reconciliation, but also see how it can strengthen conflicts. They emphasize the importance of having an “antenna” for religion when development cooperation in the DRC is concerned. Considering that the NGO staff members operate from faith inspired NGOs while staff members of the Ministry work from a secular perspective, it does not come as a surprise that the NGO staff members have more of an eye for religion than do the staff members of the Ministry.

The NGO staff members give several examples on how the priorities and needs of the local population in development practices are linked to religious ideas, practices or experiences. One interviewee recalls a telling illustration which happened when large groups of refugees returned from Congo to their homes in South-Sudan, where the local bishop saw his herd return. The respondent vividly describes the bishop who stood at the border of a boundary river in between two dioceses or provinces. People had to cross river. “I could not do anything”, the bishop said, “as I had no money, I had nothing at all. The only thing I had was my own faith, my words. So I went and stood in the river, and shook everyone’s hand, and welcomed them into the diocese.” According to the interviewee, this appeared to be an crucial moment for the people from that diocese. “Now they

knew that things would get back on the right track. It was not all the international aid and goods that gave them this confidence, it was the bishop that stood in the river welcoming everyone. That, I think, is the power of faith. I do not believe myself, but these things are beautiful." Although emergency aid is evidently indispensable, in this case religion appeared to be a powerful force in processes of reconciliation.

Another Dutch NGO sponsors the research of a Congolese anthropologist who studies cleansing rituals within the *église de réveil*, to see how these rituals can contribute to the reintegration of marginalised women. Teenage mothers, rape victims or women who are marginalised for economic reasons, leave behind their feelings of shame and guilt through *rites de purification*, to find themselves purified and ready to enter a new future.

Having *knowledge* of the (possible) influence of religious actors, ideas, practices and experiences in development is deemed important by most staff members. Yet how does this extend to the development *practices* of the NGOs and the Dutch Ministry situated in the DRC, and how can both parties complement each other in this regard?

Religion and development in practice

Religion is given different consideration in the interventions of the NGOs and the Ministry. In both cases, it is not absent or out of sight. Contact and co-operation with religious actors is mostly part of the development practices of the NGOs. The Embassy does occasionally invite religious actors, but regards direct and structural contacts with FBOs as the responsibility of NGOs - who are invited to inform the Embassy with their insights.

The NGOs mostly work *bottom-up* on the restoration of basic social services, democratisation and peace building, by cooperation with and the financing of local NGOs. They work closely with local faith based organizations (FBOs) such as the catholic Caritas network and protestant development bureaus. The case study research shows that Dutch NGOs, when cooperating with local FBOs or religious leaders, tend to use religion instrumentally in their development practices. Churches can be partners in programs for HIV positives. "The people who should be reached by these programs are church members. Churches give a "voice to the ones without a voice" ('la voix des sans voix'). They take care of orphans and widows. They play a role in prevention. But you should not ask a Catholic church to distribute condoms. Churches have their own approaches, but in itself they are insufficient. We try to use religious actors in those parts of our program in which they are strong players. And otherwise not." The NGOs support local and national church organizations to strengthen certain

programs, while avoiding them when they would be (even) counterproductive. Furthermore, the quality of an organization is always a leading factor in the choice of partnerships. The interviewed NGO staff members do not find this problematic, as long as the instrumental use of religious actors is done in accordance with local priorities and the interests of the people. However, apart from several concrete examples on the involvement of religious ideas, practices and experiences described in the previous section, we did not see that the NGOs involve these religious resources *consciously* or with a clear *policy* in mind in their development practices.

The Embassy mostly works *top-down* on state building by financing multilateral development projects and Dutch NGOs. The staff members of the Ministry therefore only have occasional contact with religious actors; there is no structural co-operation with religious actors or instrumental use of religious resources. This is due not only to the Embassy's top-down approach of development. It also results from the position of the Embassy as operating within secular framework of differentiation between responsibilities of the state and religious parties. The state should not interfere with religion nor base its decisions on religious motivations. Religion might therefore easily be overlooked in their development practices. Last but not least, knowledge and awareness of the manifestation of religion in the public domain at the Dutch Embassy in the DRC – and at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in general – is highly dependent on the person in charge of development cooperation. Various Embassy respondents make notice of how religious actors and notions can be of influence in various state building interventions, such as security sector reform (SSR), the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in post-conflict situations (DDR), and in the field of politics and human rights¹³

Complementarity

Despite the awareness that religion is significant in the development work of the NGOs as well as of the Embassy in the DRC, finding common ground for complementarity on this sensitive and complex theme has proven difficult. In the DRC the development practices of the NGOs and the Ministry are far apart. *Geographically* there is a vast distance between the Embassy situated in the very west, and the NGOs situated in the east of the country. *Ideologically*, there is a difference in the view on religion of both parties: where the NGOs often work from a religiously inspired perspective, the Ministry has a secular approach. *Practically*, the NGOs and Ministry operate from very different angles on development, respectively working bottom-up and top-down on the development of the

¹³ See Van Meerkerk, 2011: 59-60.

DRC. Finding complementarity and agreeing on practical co-ordination in all kinds of matters –not only religion- is therefore a challenging endeavor.

In order to improve their cooperation, the NGOs and Ministry meet annually to discuss their development policies and exchange information, such as context analyses. This yearly meeting has been set up among others to discover the possibilities of synergizing and complementing the development cooperation of both parties. When the DRC case study research was conducted in 2011, the process of finding complementarity on this general level was still ongoing.

The staff members of both parties state that when religion is concerned, complementarity mainly lies in the exchange of information. NGOs are the 'eyes and ears' of the Embassy, providing the Embassy with valuable information from society-level. Although information on religious issues is not explicitly shared, both parties agree that it could be valuable for the Embassy to possess information on this subject.

Exchanging information is, however, a relatively weak form of complementarity. Although the NGOs could supply or *complement* the Embassy with data on religion in the DRC, they do not *strengthen* the Embassy's role in development as long as the Embassy does not have a set out policy for dealing with issues in which religion is involved. In fact, there is no agreement as to whether it is part of the role of an Embassy to use religious resources instrumentally in its development practices. According to several respondents from both the NGOs and the Embassy, it is sufficient if the Embassy's staff members have an eye for the (religious) background of the target groups they work for. This can be achieved by providing staff members of the Ministry with training on the subject of religion in development, but does not result in an operational agenda.

The NGOs do have an operational agenda, working closely with FBOs and religious leaders in the DRC. However, they often do not have a specific policy on when and how to involve these religious actors, nor the remaining religious resources, in their interventions.

Complementarity of roles requires first and foremost that the NGOs and the Embassy have a clear understanding of the purpose and objective of 1) involving religion in their development practices and 2) contact and cooperation between both parties. During the case study research it has become evident that on both of these issues an action perspective is missing.

Action perspective

To effectively determine the complementarity of roles of the NGOs and the Ministry on religion and development in the DRC, it is required that both parties thoroughly examine how religion plays, or could play, a role in their development interventions.

The parties interviewed in the DRC case study acknowledge that in development cooperation in the DRC one cannot avoid religion. It is present in every layer of society, and plays a role also on state level. The NGOs can supply the Embassy with knowledge of and insight into the working of religion in the DRC's public domain, given that the awareness and knowledge of religion of the Ministry's staff members increases. However, for practical co-ordination to take place, better insight is needed into the functioning of religion –negatively and positively – in the interventions of both parties. As long as there is no action perspective or vision on the institutionalisation of religion in the development practices of the Ministry, one cannot answer the question how the NGOs and the Embassy in the DRC can be complementary in the field of religion and development.

Both parties could benefit from an elucidation how religion -direct or indirectly- plays a role in their own development interventions. Then they can estimate the value of co-operation or co-ordination of their development strategies when it regards the working of religious resources in society. And then they can decide whether it suffices to simply have 'an eye' for religion, or whether it should perhaps be more than that, following the advices of the fragile state principles. Now this largely depends on the interest of individual staff members. It might be necessary to develop a policy how to deal –as a secular government or a faith-inspired NGO- with complex questions concerning development practices in which religion plays a role.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The DRC case study shows that religion plays an important role in development in the DRC. As in other countries where state and society are subject to fragility, religion is an important driver of change. Following the Fragile State Principles of the OECD, we argue that it is vital for NGOs and Ministry in DRC and other fragile states to be aware of the role of religion in development, and act accordingly. In the DRC case study, a first investigation has been made to see if and how Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Embassy in Kinshasa, are already attempting to join forces as to complement each other in their roles. Those roles differ not only geographically (working in respectively East and West Congo), but also ideologically (being respectively Faith Based and secular), and practically (working resp. bottom-up and top-down).

Respondents agreed that practical co-ordination between Dutch NGOs and the Dutch Embassy on issues concerning religion and development could prove beneficial. However, in this specific country the NGOs and the Embassy are still exploring how they can complement and strengthen each other on an elementary level. Finding ways of cooperation where religion is concerned is therefore far more complicated, and has no priority.

The DRC case study furthermore learns that complementarity of roles of NGOs and the Ministry in the field of religion and development requires an action perspective: a clear understanding of the purpose and objective of cooperation. To develop this action perspective, NGOs and the Ministry working on development in the DRC could:

- increase the “antenna” for religion by training staff members (when applicable);
- develop a vision on the role of religion in their development practice, using the context of the fragile state or region as a starting point;
- develop a strategy on the basis of this vision by researching in which development interventions it could be worthwhile to use religious resources instrumentally, and in which it would be sufficient to merely take into account religious notions that can hinder or promote development;
- compare these strategies and seek possibilities of joint interventions (e.g. in the field of human rights and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration).

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