Helpdesk Research Report: Donor experience working with traditional and religious institutions
Date: 09.12.2010

Query: Identify and summarise donor experience of working with traditional and religious institutions on development goals. Where possible focus on Islamic institutions and activities that support the empowerment of women.

Enquirer: DFID

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1. Overview

Donor experience with traditional and religious institutions is poorly documented. Donors generally seem reluctant to engage directly with religious institutions, with the notable exception of USAID. Where donors do work with traditional and religious institutions this tends to be through local or international NGOs. When working on women’s issues in an Islamic context this is predominately gender-based violence and female genital mutilation, rather than women’s empowerment.

Though several donors have worked with religious institutions, especially religious leaders, this work has rarely been assessed. Barteloing and Buitelaar (2006) evaluated the Dutch government’s attempt to incorporate Muslim women’s view into development policy. They argue that there had been a strong tendency to generalise and define women first and foremost in terms of the religious dimension of their identity. This point has also been raised by Kirmani and Phillips (forthcoming) who argue against an exclusive focus on religion as the primary means of advocating for women’s rights. It is important to contextualise approaches taking into consideration the particularities of local power relations which can change and evolve rapidly. There is also considerable variability in gender norms, laws and the position of women in predominately Muslim countries such as those in the Middle East and North Africa (Moghadam, 2004).

Traditional and religious institutions, including Islamic leaders and institutions, can be significant actors in the development discourse. In Nigeria and Pakistan the relationship between the state and religion tends towards an instrumental approach with the state trying to co-opt and exploit the legitimacy of religious organisations (Nolte et al., 2009; Waseem and Mufti, 2009). At the same time it may be important to understand that their legitimacy may be questionable. Religious institutions, further legitimised by other domestic and foreign actors, may not progress development. This can be more so in the case of women’s rights, where
working with religious institutions may be promoting a patriarchal or male-dominated framework (see expert comments).

**USAID**

USAID seem to be strong supporters of working with religious leaders and institutions and have set up the Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives at USAID, operating since 2002. This Center is designed to increase the access of faith and community based organizations to U.S. Government funding sources. In addition, USAID run a one-day workshop for all USAID staff called “Programming in Religious Context”, which focuses on the challenges and best practices of development programming in religious contexts, and produced a “Religion, Conflict and Development Programming guide in 2009 (see expert comments).

USAID (2009) outlines a number of faith-based initiatives being undertaken by USAID, DFID and the World Bank. In Bangladesh, USAID is working with the Asia Foundation, a US-based NGO, to implement the Leaders of Influence (LOI) Program. This programme aims to encourage and facilitate the efforts of religious and community leaders to advance national development goals. As part of the programme the Asia Foundation organised conferences in 2006 and 2010, and various training exercises. The conferences facilitated dialogue and the exchange of experiences in advancing development among religious and community leaders, civil society and other actors. Other examples of working with religious leaders include projects in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Yemen and Pakistan on issues related to contraception and family planning. USAID operate other programmes working with religious leaders in Yemen, Indonesia, Egypt, Cambodia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and India. No documentation seems to be available which evaluates this approach.

**DFID**

Several DFID-funded projects involve some form of engagement with religious institutions. Rather than working directly with religious institutions, DFID has generally formed Programme Partnership Agreements with UK-based faith based organisations (Taylor, 2007). These organisations have sometimes worked with religious leaders and institutions. In Yemen, for example, a UK faith-based organisation funded by DFID provides training to imams and those delivering sermons to discuss HIV/AIDS from a religious perspective. This training has also been used to help examine religious leaders’ roles in reducing stigma and discrimination (DFID, 2010). The evaluation of DFID’s Yemen programme 2004-2009, however, does not mention traditional or religious leaders. Another example is DFID’s support to Acholi Religious Leaders in their peace initiative in Northern Uganda. There does not seem to be an evaluation of this support.

**GTZ**

GTZ have worked with Islamic societies in Mali and Mauritania on reducing the incidence of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) with mixed results (GTZ, 2009). In Mali there was a meeting of religious leaders and scholars. At this meeting although most participants failed to acknowledge the harmfulness of FGM, they nevertheless expressed their view that the practice of FGM was not obligatory in Islam. Domestic politics in Mali have a strong impact on social attitudes towards FGM, and GTZ (2007) documents the government’s ambiguity with regards to the practice and Islamic authorities’ opposition to anti-FGM legislation.

GTZ ‘Instruments of Development Cooperation and Islamic Values in Asia’ programme aims to get a better understanding of Islamic values and approaches to improve programming (GTZ, 2005). This programme uses a form of political economy analysis which explains the dynamics within Islamic societies in Asia where Islam could impact on development objectives. In Indonesia, for example, it is noted that the application of Sharia law could provide more rights to widows than traditional courts do (GTZ, 2007). Women’s organisations in Indonesia are gaining increased influence which may well create political space in future to undertake women’s empowerment projects.
AusAID

AusAID have undertaken programmes countering violence against women which include training religious leaders in addition to other men (AusAID, 2010a). This may well reflect a widely held belief that in countries such as Indonesia traditional authorities such as religious leaders limit the power and scope of other actors (AusAID, 1998). Such informal leaders may also play key roles in the promotion of aid projects and activities. In Indonesia AusAID support the Indonesian National Commission on Violence Against Women to undertake strategic dialogue with key stakeholders such as religious courts (AusAID, 2010b).

2. General literature

Bartelink, B. and Buitelaar, M., 2006, ‘The challenges of incorporating Muslim women’s views into development policy: analysis of a Dutch action research project in Yemen’, Gender & Development 14:3, 351-362
http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/display.asp?m=116&dc=493&sort=sort_date/d&mw=0&q=%28FACET%20contains%28GAD%29%29

This article discusses the Muslim Women and Development Action Research Project (MWDAR). This was an attempt by the Dutch government to introduce new discourses on Islam and the empowerment of women into their development policy. The report is based on a discussion of the project in Yemen, an analysis of its evaluation reports, and follow-up research with project participants. The authors find that the project did not meet expectations or project goals because it failed to go beyond an essentialist view of Muslim women, who are defined first and foremost in terms of the religious dimension of their identity. What is identified as ‘Islamic’ is wrongly represented as something that affects all Muslim women in the same way. Regardless of whether Islam is perceived of as a barrier to, or vehicle of, social change and development, in either view Muslim women are treated as a homogeneous group.


The increasing efforts to engage with religion as part of development efforts, especially with regards to the promotion of women’s rights, marks a significant shift in development discourse and practice. However, feminists working in Muslim communities have always had to take religious perspectives into account in their campaigning efforts, whether they have engaged with religion positively, neutrally, negatively, or defensively. Those advocating for women’s rights must contextualise their approaches within the particularities of local power relations, which will include but not be limited to a consideration of religion. Rather than prescribing any religious-based solutions, women’s rights advocates should aim to create a space for dialogue about these issues. Focusing on religion exclusively or as the primary means of advocating for women’s rights denies the complexity of identities and social relations as well as closing the space for non-religious or secular approaches.

Moghadam, V. 2004: Towards Gender Equality in the Arab/Middle East Region: Islam, Culture and Feminist Activism. UNDP Human Development Report Occasional Paper

This paper examines the relations among gender, culture, and Islam, and draws attention to the tensions that exist between concepts of cultural heritage and concepts of cultural freedoms in the Arab region and elsewhere in the Middle East. Notwithstanding elements of a shared culture and shared religion, there is considerable variability in gender norms and laws in the Arab world/Middle East, and there have been significant changes over time in the position of women. The paper examines the promises and limitations of Islamic feminism, and
argues for the need for a consistent body of laws, policies, and norms that draw on the region's rich history, cultural understandings, and universal standards.


Despite Nigeria’s secular constitution, religion has become increasingly important in the public sphere because of political liberalization and the degree of autonomy accorded to the State governments in a federal system. The relationships between the state and Muslim and Christian organizations are frequently ambiguous: while both world religions provide moral frameworks for people and groups to articulate their demands and critiques of the state, they also challenge institutions provided by the state. Despite attempts by the state at various levels to co-opt religious groups in order to gain grassroots support and legitimacy, State governments do not systematically support independent development efforts by these groups.


http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/PDF/Outputs/ReligionDev_RPC/WP27.pdf

This report presents the findings of a study of Islam in Pakistan that aimed at understanding and evaluating the relationships between Muslim organizations and activity in the formulation of development policy. The state in Pakistan has typically pursued a policy of exploiting the functional uses of Islam as a source of legitimacy in the absence of, or in combination with, a mass mandate. In doing so it has ‘played on the turf’ of Islamic groups by seeking to control the production and spread of the religious message, co-opting the ulema and managing religious affairs, ranging from levying Islamic taxes to the management of shrines, policies towards madrasas and a role in sectarian conflict.

### 3. USAID


This issue brief outlines programmes funded by USAID and other donors that collaborate with and build the capacity of religious leaders in shaping and providing sustainable development assistance.

**Afghanistan**

Under the USAID-funded Accelerating Contraceptive Use (ACU) project, contraceptive prevalence more than doubled in three rural districts in one year. Religious leaders reviewed and approved each ACU intervention, educated the community, and advocated culturally acceptable contraceptive use on national television. The ACU model is now being scaled up nationwide. A training manual for religious leaders is being developed to integrate information on birth spacing and contraceptive use.

USAID and the World Council of Credit Unions are supporting Islamic investment and finance cooperatives, which are working with religious leaders to confirm that the cooperatives' financial services are legitimate and compliant with Sharia (Islamic law).

**Bangladesh**
USAID is working with the Asia Foundation to implement the Leaders of Influence (LOI) program, which provides religious and other community leaders with training in national development goals and the values of democratic governance, tolerance, and understanding, which are essential to achieving these goals. Over four years, the LOI program will work with 20,000 leaders to enhance participants’ abilities to share development knowledge and serve as catalysts for community development activities. LOI also assists leaders in establishing collaborative working relations with other religious and secular leaders in Bangladesh and other South and Southeast Asian countries. LOI builds on the experience of the earlier Leaders Outreach Initiative program, which provided more than 5,000 imams the opportunity to study community development initiatives in education, human rights, public health, agriculture, fisheries, environmental conservation, and enterprise development.

Working in Bangladesh, as well as Yemen and Pakistan, the USAID-supported Extended Services Delivery project builds the capacity of religious leaders to act as change agents in increasing community acceptance of and commitment to reproductive health and family planning (RH/FP) programs and services. By providing gender- and culture-sensitive training in RH/FP issues to female and male local Islamic leaders, the project helps to address unmet family planning needs and increases the use of RH/FP services at the community level.

The USAID Smiling Sun Franchise program, implemented by Chemonics, is maintaining and expanding the availability of sustainable nongovernmental organization (NGO) clinics. The project works with imams to increase community use of health services and products. Community imams have been involved in the design and implementation of the project, including in the development of culturally sensitive messages and materials.

Indonesia

With support from DFID, the World Bank’s Access to Justice in Aceh programme in Indonesia works in partnership with government and civil society, including religious leaders, to improve legal awareness and legal education. Citizen participation, including the participation of local religious leaders in local councils, committees, and initiatives, can ultimately help improve government strengthen dispute resolution at the community level, and strengthen the capacity of the legal system to deliver justice for the poor and marginalized. A strong focus is on women’s legal empowerment, as women have suffered disproportionately as a result of the tsunami and conflict in Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah, the oldest and largest Islamic social welfare organization in the world is highly respected by communities, the Indonesian government, and international organizations, Muhammadiyah works closely with its associated yet autonomous women’s organization Aisyiah, the first major Islamic women’s social activist organization. USAID has worked with both organizations to provide family health services to advance citizen participation. Both organizations promote as Islamic values the principles of democratic pluralism, nonviolent conflict resolution, religious tolerance, gender equity, intercommunity reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue.

Paengajian As-Salaam, a Muslim women’s prayer group in north Jakarta, Indonesia, is one of USAID’s partners in supporting the promotion and distribution of Air RahMat, a solution that purifies water for drinking. Leaders of the women’s prayer group provide demonstrations on using the product and personal testimonials regarding their own families’ use of the treatment.

Religious leaders have helped develop and implement a hygiene and health project supported by USAID, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry (Ar-Raniry State Islamic Religion Institute), CARE International, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs. Religious leaders were instrumental in crafting health messages that are positively linked to Koranic verses and Islamic teachings, such as Islamic texts on basic hygiene and personal cleanliness. Ulama (religious leaders) that are involved in the project are committed to spreading these behaviour change messages in their communities through their Friday prayers, community meetings, and other speeches.
The World Bank’s Kecamatan Development Project in Indonesia provides block grants to select kecamatans (subdistricts), which then distribute the funds to villages. Grant distribution occurs after extensive information dissemination, community facilitation, and outreach, and the process works best when religious leaders work closely with the project. Proposals are written, committees are formed, and projects are selected and implemented – all within a year. As a result of the project, local people are directly involved in making their own choices about development, whether it be to use grant funds to build a social good, such as roads, or whether to use the money as individual revolving funds, with money to be paid back with interest.

Other countries

Progressio, a charity sponsored by DFID, is providing focused training to imams and khutubas (those designated to give Friday sermons) in Yemen to discuss HIV/AIDS from a religious perspective and to examine religious leaders’ roles in reducing stigma and discrimination.

The USAID Takamol project, implemented in Egypt through Pathfinder International, works with female and male Muslim and Christian religious leaders to convey maternal and child health and RH/FP messages within their local communities. In Uzbekistan, the USAID-supported Healthy Family project, implemented by Project Hope, worked with mahallas (collections of neighbourhoods) to identify representatives to facilitate community mobilization on health.

The USAID-supported Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance is supporting Buddhism for Development (BFD), which builds on Cambodia’s cultural and religious traditions to address major development challenges. Much of BFD’s work is based on its six-week “Peace Development School” in which monks learn about health care and HIV/AIDS, community participation, vocational training, and agricultural extension methods.

With UNICEF support, the Buddhist Leadership Initiative, implemented in East Asia and the Pacific Islands/Oceania, promotes the role of religious leaders in community responses to HIV/AIDS. At the Dashchoiling Buddhist monastery in Mongolia the Buddhist Leadership Initiative is supporting the lamas’ discussion of the issues that are confronting community members and their development of strategies for community members to cope effectively with the disease.

In Jordan, the Water Efficiency and Public Information for Action (WEPIA) program, supported by USAID and the Academy for Educational Development, worked with a coalition of representatives from all segments of society, including religious leaders, to develop messages to increase community understanding and use of use of water-saving devices and other water efficiency measures.

In partnership with the Islamic Institute of Osh, a madrassa (Islamic school) in Kyrgyzstan, a USAID-supported street law program has enabled students to learn about religious rights and tolerance, democracy and the law, social norms, and constitutional and criminal law. The street law program, with law students from a local university, conducted lessons for groups of girls and boys in separate classrooms. Since 2006, the program has expanded to 10 madrassas, two Islamic institutes, and one religious NGO that serves women. Thirty teachers have been trained on interactive teaching methods and legal content.

In India, the Muslim population suffers from poor school enrollment, attendance, and completion, all of which are far below national averages. In partnership with the Muslim community, local religious leaders, the CAP Foundation, and the Andhra Pradesh government, USAID supports programming that provides quality formal education, in conjunction with religious education, in Andhra Pradesh madrassas. Religious leaders participate in training and discussions with Islamic scholars who lecture from the Koran on the necessity of quality education for creating positive change in peoples’ lives. Madrassa leaders and teachers have participated in USAID training on how to introduce activity-based teaching/learning methodologies.
The Leaders of Influence (LOI) Program is funded by USAID and is implemented by The Asia Foundation, a non-profit, non-governmental organization promoting "the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region". The LOI program aims to encourage and facilitate the efforts of religious and community leaders to advance national development goals and improve democratic governance, tolerance, and understanding, considered essential to reducing poverty and fostering a lasting peace.

In June 2006, the Asia Foundation convened a regional study program in which more than 30 religious leaders, scholars, and educators from 10 South and Southeast Asian countries visited Bangladesh to study the LOI model and share relevant experience from their countries. Through plenary and country break-out sessions, participants identified certain challenges and sensitivities that affect the role and contribution of religious leaders in development efforts and designed basic strategies to meet and overcome them. The Bangladesh study program was complemented by a series of outbound exchange programs in which LOI trained imams and government officials visited Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to share experience with counterparts. These study and exchange programs have generated strong regional interest in the LOI experience, facilitating communication links that participants continue to draw on.

Following this USAID proposed to convene another regional conference in Bangladesh on the role of religious leaders in advancing development in Asia which was held from 21-24 March 2010. The purpose of the conference was to facilitate dialogue and the exchange of experiences in advancing development among religious and community leaders, civil society and non-governmental organizations, political actors, development practitioners, and their counterparts in 14 South, Southeast and Central Asian countries, together with U.S. Government officials. These countries were Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Tajikistan, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Maldives.

No follow-up documents evaluating the outcomes of these conferences seem to be available.

4. DFID


This webpage provides an account of DFID-supported work with religious leaders. In November 2007, a two-day workshop was convened in the Yemeni capital Sana’a. It invited preachers to look closely at religious attitudes to HIV/AIDS and consider their roles in reducing stigma and discrimination. Imama Sheikh Abdul-Wali al-Qadasi was one of those who took part in the workshop. He comments that it is his “religious duty” to prevent HIV/AIDS from spreading and to ensure that people living with the disease do not suffer discrimination.

Progressio, a UK charity, is working in Yemen on combating the fear and ignorance that surround HIV/AIDS. The report comments that recognising the support of religious leaders is crucial to achieving this. One recent Progressio project has provided focused training to Imams and Khutabas. DFID provides 64% of Progressio’s income through a five-year Partnership Programme Agreement (PPA) (2005-2011).

This paper notes that DFID has shown an awareness of the importance of faith in development through isolated activities rather than a systematic approach. Particular projects were funded for the value in a specific context, rather than because DFID has a strategy to engage with faith entities. These relations have taken the form of signing Programme Partnership Agreements and have been with faith based organisations in the UK rather than religious leaders or institutions in-country.

5. GTZ

GTZ, 2009 ‘Female Genital Mutilation and Islam’, German Technical Cooperation / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH


This report discusses work in Islamic societies countering Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In particular it documents work with religious leaders of Africa's Muslim population. In Mauritania in June 2007 the GTZ Good Governance Programme, together with the Islamic Forum and the Mauritanian Ministry of Women's Affairs, held a national colloquium entitled ‘Harmful Practices for Women: the Role of Tradition and Islam’, which advanced public discussion of women's rights. In Mali, support was given in November 2007 to a meeting of religious leaders and scholars. The debate and discussion focused on the question of the supposed legitimisation of FGM by Islam. Even though the majority of participants still failed to acknowledge the harmfulness of FGM from a medical standpoint, they nevertheless expressed their view that the practice of FGM was not obligatory in Islam.

GTZ, 2007, ‘Female Genital Mutilation in Mali’, German Technical Cooperation / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH


This paper documents GTZ's work in Mali countering Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It is noted that although there is no link between Islam and female genital mutilation, religious leaders torpedoed the anti-FGM legislation in parliament in 2002, when the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Ministry of Health submitted a pertinent legislative text. Since 2002 members of parliament and the Islamic authorities have been informed increasingly about the harmful consequences of the practice, but the Malian government has not yet taken a clear stance on FGM, which is an obstacle to passing an appropriate act of parliament. In November 2007 the GTZ supraregional project supported a meeting of religious leaders and scholars which focused on the issue of the legitimating of FGM by Islam. The debate was able to lay the foundations for further dialogue, and alliances were forged to foster the adoption of relevant legislation and the destigmatisation of uncircumcised women.


This paper outlines the 'Development Cooperation and Islamic Values in Asia' programme. The programme goal is to provide a better understanding of Islamic values and approaches, and their applicability and relevance for development cooperation projects, which will improve the cooperation with partner countries in South and Southeast Asia.

Wagener, O., 2007, ‘Development Cooperation and Islamic Values in Indonesia’, German Technical Cooperation / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH
This Information sheet presents a sector-specific introduction to the priority areas of Development Cooperation (DC) in Indonesia, focusing on the socio-cultural factor of Islam. There has been no systematic assessment of experience in the thematic area of Development Cooperation and Islam in Asia. This sheet instead highlights the priority areas in which Islam influences theoretical and practical development work in projects based in Indonesia. The sheet focuses in particular on the Aceh region.

In relation to women’s rights, debates on the introduction of Sharia in Indonesia directly influence women’s rights and efforts to secure gender equality. The formal interpretation of Sharia in Aceh has shown that in a society characterised by patriarchal structures, Islamic law is used to regulate and control the behaviour and outward symbols of women. Experience with decentralisation in Aceh and other regions shows that women are marginalised through exclusion from decision-making processes in political, social and economic spheres. This discrimination arises because patriarchal influences dominate the interpretation of the Islamic law sources, the Quran and Hadith, although these are open to other interpretations. In some cases, however, the application of Sharia can also strengthen women’s rights. For example, judgements in inheritance cases after the tsunami in Aceh showed that Sharia courts grant more rights to widows than traditional courts do. However, as the application of Islamic law is not yet generally adopted in society, widows remain without legal rights in many places. Since 1998, the public debate on gender questions in Islam has been pushed forward by women’s organisations. These organisations are gaining increased political influence. Their impacts and achievements so far are the authorisation of female judges for Sharia courts, open opposition to polygamy and efforts to reach a 30% quota of women holding office in political parties.

6. AusAID

AusAID, 2010a, ‘Australia's approach to eliminating violence against women’, AusAID, Australia

This webpage provides an overview of AusAID work on eliminating violence against women. In Fiji, Australia has supported the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre since 1990. One training program run by the centre, along with the Vanuatu Women's Centre and the Solomon Islands Family Support Centre, targets men. This program trains men, including police officers, military personnel, community workers, chiefs and religious leaders, in raising awareness of violence against women.

AusAID, 1998, ‘Indonesia: Lessons Learned Cultural influences Helpful hints for project preparation and monitoring’ AusAID, Australia

This paper notes that the respect accorded traditional authority structures (aristocrats, intellectuals, religious leaders and the nouveau riche elite) also limits the power and scope of bureaucrats and military officials. The most influential NGOs tend to be elite-based rather than grass-roots organisations. Such informal leaders may also play key roles in the promotion of aid projects and activities.

AusAID, 2010b, ‘16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence’, AusAID, Australia

This blog entry summarises the work AusAID carries out relating to Gender Violence. In Indonesia, AusAID is supporting the Indonesian National Commission on Violence Against Women, Komnas Perempuan. Some of the activities delivered by Komnas Perempuan with
Australia’s support are: developing and producing reference material and training on violence against women for important stakeholders such as judges and prosecutors; improving the database on violence against women for use by civil society and government organizations; undertaking strategic dialogue with key stakeholders on important women’s issues, relating to health, domestic workers, religious courts, or emerging issues impacting on women’s rights.

7. Additional information

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Selected websites visited:
AllAfrica.com, UNDP, UNDP Sierra Leone, Overseas Development Institute, Center for Global Development, USAID, USAID Mozambique, Asia Foundation, AusAID, AusAID Indonesia, Leaders of Influence Program, GTZ, Agence Française de Développement, DFID, University of Birmingham, Gender and Development, OECD, AIDS Portal

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