

## Religion – a decisive factor in development cooperation

The aspect of spirituality is often not taken into account in development cooperation. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the rural realm that religious issues are an important part of daily life. If they are ignored, communication and ultimately the development project as well may fail.

Poor people generally do not make a strict distinction between material and spiritual development, as many development experts have been doing for decades. This was spotlighted by the “Voices of the Poor” study published by the World Bank in three volumes between 2000 and 2002. For example, when asked what prosperity meant to her, a farmer woman in Bangladesh responded: “A full stomach, time to pray, and a bamboo platform to sleep on.”

The significance of religion is a powerful cultural factor in community life. Religious beliefs provide answers to questions about the meaning of life. They have also co-shaped production methods, for example traditional agrarian cultures, in which religious rituals play an important role. Decisions as to how and by whom a sick child should be treated and when and how fields are to be cultivated are influenced just as much by religious beliefs as are state laws and politics.

Anyone involved in development cooperation soon realises that there are great differences between the doctrines of the major religious communities and the everyday beliefs of the people. Indigenous cultures have

blended with the major religions; in the Andes and in Brazil, for example, people continue to worship their pre-Christian deities in the form of Catholic saints. Often they are barely familiar with the major doctrines, as rituals and holy places in the rural setting are more important to them.

For their part, institutionalised religions with their hierarchies, offices, schools, and hospitals are power factors. Their representatives can use their power for good as well as for evil. All religions can be advocates for peace, justice, and human rights – but also sources of violence. This ambivalence makes dealing with religious factors in development cooperation extremely challenging.

### ■ Religion – a taboo?

Sometime around 2000, the sociologist Kurt Alan Ver Beek caused a stir in the professional community with the hypothesis that spirituality is considered taboo in development cooperation. He cited evidence

from theory and practice to back this up. In dealing with these issues in the scope of the *Entwicklung und Religion* [Development and Religion] project, Swiss development organisations and the state agency Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) confirmed much the same thing.

The reasons for this taboo can be found in the history of international

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*An medicine man of the Kuna  
Indians in San Blas/Panama  
blesses a huntsman's arrow so  
that it will lead him to good prey.*

Photo: laif



*A Voodoo priest at work in Benin. People come to him seeking cures for illnesses or to get rid of maledictions.*

development policy. US President Harry S. Truman started it in 1949, with the following words in his inaugural address: “[...] we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.” Among other things, technological modernisation processes were to replace the “underdeveloped” traditional agrarian cultures along with their religious beliefs.

The preconception that religion is “dangerous, divisive and largely defunct” is still prevalent among programme heads of many development organisations. Katherine Marshall, head of ethical and religious affairs at the World Bank from 2000 to 2006, summed up her experiences with negative views toward religious factors with those very same words. These prejudices lead to the erroneous conclusion that religion has no place in professional development work.

The fact is that Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) have always played an important role in development cooperation. Nevertheless there are some FBOs that do not distinguish clearly between development and conversion work. Any serious FBO must therefore be able to demonstrate that it does not mix its developmental aid with aggressive religious propaganda.

## ■ Looking through the cultural lens

Secular and religious organisations should train their staff in how to deal constructively with the potentials *and* risks of religious factors in their fields of work. At least as important as fundamental religious knowledge for



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doing so is personal openmindedness, in order to learn what religion and spirituality mean to the people with whom one is working. This gives rise to the willingness to develop one’s own perceptual capacity and put aside one’s personal prejudices. Anyone who makes the effort to understand the internal orientations of the people will also see that people constantly change their culture and religious beliefs as they adapt to the challenges of their environments.

To this end, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has developed methods known as the “Cultural Lens.” The cultural lens enables pro-

gramme heads to understand the religious concepts of communities and to recognise local power structures and religious and political interest groups. In campaigns against the genital mutilation of women, for example, it may be that midwives, village elders, priests, nuns, and imams are important as allies of the programme – or must be taken seriously as opponents.

Partners in development programmes need to jointly sharpen their perceptual capacity. Beside the local NGOs, it is the views of the local population that are essential. In all areas of activity, the parties involved should ask one another:

- Which religious factors and stakeholders are important shapers of society?
- Which religious organisations contribute to solidarity as “connectors” and which ones polarise as “dividers”? How can the “dividers” be won over as cooperators as well?

For sharpening the perceptual capacity of all parties involved, the sociologist Peter L. Berger gave the following valuable advice: “In assessing the role of religion in the affairs of this world there is no alternative to a nuanced, case by case approach. But one statement can be made with great confidence: Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril.”

## ■ Practical recommendations

In the scope of the *Entwicklung und Religion* project of the Swiss development organisations and the state agency Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), the “case by case approach” was adopted as the central guiding principle. To this end, programme heads prepared case studies dealing with the following central questions:

- What are the potentials and risks of religion and spirituality in a given project? (analysis)
- How can these factors be taken into account in this project? (observation methods and tools)

## Zusammenfassung

Von vielen Entwicklungsexperten wurde Religion lange als Tabu behandelt. Im Zentrum der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit standen die technische und materielle Entwicklung. Diese gehen jedoch oft an der Bevölkerung vorbei, wenn kulturelle und insbesondere religiöse Faktoren nicht einbezogen werden. Im Projekt “Entwicklung und Religion” setzten sich die Schweizer Hilfswerke und die Direktion für

## Case study: Witchcraft and HIV/AIDS

Mission 21, a Protestant ministry based in Basel, Switzerland, has been dealing intensively with the tabooing, stigmatisation, and ostracisation of HIV/AIDS victims in Africa. A major factor is the influence of witchcraft phenomena, in which the HIV/AIDS patients and their family members put their trust for healing or for cursing. The issue is interpretive patterns of health and illness in African and European cultures and what happens when these patterns collide. In its cooperative work with African churches, Mission 21 is directly confronted with this phenomenon and has therefore explored these different outlooks with African partners and experts. The case study presents reflections on dealing with the irresolvable dilemmas in the triangle of the socio-cultural significance of witchcraft, biomedical findings, and enlightened theology. Based on this case study, the ministry proposes criteria for projects in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

(The case study “Witchcraft and HIV/AIDS. The dilemma between traditional practices and concepts of modern trends” was compiled by Guy Thomas and Benedict Schubert.)

- How should we handle dilemmas between potentials and risks? (project management methods)

Eleven case studies were published in three readers. These were not scientific studies, but reflections on one’s own practices, designed to feed back to and benefit practitioners directly (for more information, go to [www.deza.admin.ch/Home/](http://www.deza.admin.ch/Home/)).

In the scope of the *Entwicklung und Religion* project, simple methods allowing the observation of the meaning and effect of religious factors in practice were tested. The goal was to produce criteria that are easy to manage, that are useful for cooperation with local partners, and that enable the inclusion of the local population. Three tools were developed:

- A first tool is environment mapping: Which stakeholders do the partner organisations perceive as important? What are the relationships (support/

rejection/conflict)? Is there a “market of religions” on which religious organisations are competing with one another? What is the role of religious affiliation with regard to the beneficiaries of the programme?

- The second tool asks which elements of religion and spirituality contribute to the success, and which ones contribute to the failure of the programme. The well-known SEPO method (also known as SWAT analysis) is useful here.
- Personal attitudes to religion and spirituality are addressed in a third step. The parties involved reflect together on the consequences of their views on religious questions for the programme.

You can find numerous publications on this subject at:  
[www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)

Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit – DEZA – intensiv mit dem Thema Religion und Spiritualität auseinander und geben Hinweise für den Umgang mit Religion in der Praxis der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit.

## Resumen

Durante largo tiempo, muchos expertos en desarrollo han tratado la religión como un tema tabú. La cooperación para el desarrollo suele centrarse en el desarrollo técnico y

material. Sin embargo, estas medidas a menudo no logran llegar a la población cuando se dejan de lado los factores culturales y sobre todo religiosos. En el proyecto “Desarrollo y religión”, los organismos de ayuda suizos y la Agencia Suiza para el Desarrollo y la Cooperación (COSUDE) tratan exhaustivamente el tema de la religión y la espiritualidad, y ofrecen recomendaciones para la consideración de la religión en la práctica de la cooperación para el desarrollo.