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# The United Nations and Development: What do Religious Actors Add to Debates about Achieving Better Outcomes?

## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) has long been concerned with seeking to improve international development outcomes in the global South. At the UN, discussions about improving international development outcomes typically involve both state and non-state actors, including religious actors. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; 2000–2015), a blueprint to improve development outcomes, were a result of such deliberations. The MDGs helped inform the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; 2015–2030), agreed at the UN in September 2015. The SDGs are ambitious, with wide-ranging goals. Unlike the eight MDGs, which focussed exclusively on the global South, the 17 SDGs are worldwide in scope, involving 169 objectives.

The aim of the chapter is to examine (a) why many religious leaders and organisations have a higher profile today in relation to development issues compared to a few decades ago and (b) the impact of this change in terms of their involvement at the United Nations in the context of the MDGs and SDGs. The first section of the paper discusses the role of religion in development at the UN. The second section of the paper is a brief case study of the relationship between a religious organisation the World Council of Churches (WCC) and a UN entity, the World Bank, in relation to the MDGs. The third section of the paper looks at the involvement of several UN entities and religious actors in relation to the SDGs. The paper concludes that in the decades since the MDGs were introduced up until today, with the SDGs in the process of being institutionalised at the UN, there is more openness regarding the idea of secular and religious entities working together in pursuit of development goals. On the other hand, some secular actors continue to express uncertainty about what they see as the ambivalence of the role of religion in development, while some religious organisations continue to see secular development objectives as being unconcerned with spiritual outcomes. In sum, in relation to the main question of the book "Does religion make a difference?" the chapter makes the following

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observation: with regard to development policy at the UN, selected religious actors bring their philosophies to improving development outcomes while also showing high levels of pragmatism, manifested in their willingness to work closely with secular actors in pursuit of shared development objectives. Yet, whether they can make a difference at all will depend on their acceptance in "non-religious" development circles.

## Development concerns at the United Nations

The United Nations is the world's only universal international organisation, founded in 1945. The UN has long had both secular origins and ethos. It emerged following World War II, when religion seemed not to be an issue of concern for international relations, at a time of burgeoning secular ideological division between the USA and the Soviet Union. More recently, however, the UN has increasingly paid attention to what it refers to as 'faith-based' organisations (Haynes 2014). Religious organisations are often involved in development efforts, especially on the ground in many countries in the global South (Offut, Probasco and Vaidyanathan 2016). Already active in many areas of development including health, education, and poverty relief there is clearly overlap between what religious and secular actors do in relation to development; the UN is a forum where they often interact. Yet, this is not always trouble-free, not least because secular development agencies and religious organisations that engage in development work have different ways of measuring human welfare, and this is reflected in different guiding principles; each 'side' needs to respect those of the 'other'.

The background to the increasing involvement of religious organisations in development efforts in the global South was the general failures of economically liberal structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s, which paved the way for the formulation and founding of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Despite significant commitment and contributions from several UN agencies, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), SAPs had failed to overcome development shortfalls in the countries where they were applied, and led to strong critiques from many quarters, including: secular NGOs, grassroots movements, and some religious organisations, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC). A common accusation was that both the World Bank and the IMF promoted and supported a narrowly economistic conception of development via SAPs, which crucially lacked a holistic focus on human

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development (Joshi and O'Dell 2013). Religious critics of SAPs wanted to see a shift away from state and market-led approaches to broader, more holistic, conceptions of development, focussing on interactions of civil society, human development, and grassroots participation, informed by religious values. To pursue this different vision of development, some religious actors, including WCC, developed 'human development' outlooks, which focussed, *inter alia*, on opening development spaces to non-state, including religious, actors, in order to augment development work undertaken by governments and non-state international development agencies.

More generally, the MDGs helped to stimulate the involvement of religious organisations in international development issues, including at the UN, leading to some, such as World Vision and Islamic Relief, becoming "legitimate actors in the field of development and humanitarian aid" (Petersen 2010: 2). However, while the focus of religious organisations differed, generally they were interested both in the general thrust of improvements to international development, often with specific interest in the following MDG goals: arresting the spread of HIV/AIDS, and, in relation to gender issues in particular, reducing infant deaths, providing universal primary education and reducing adult illiteracy (Haynes 2007; 2013).[1] In addition, working on the premise that there can be no real or sustained improvements in global justice without peace as a starting point, many religious organisations work at the UN for conflict alleviation, conflict resolution and peace-building, which can complement work on improving development outcomes in the global South.

In sum, there was increased involvement of religious organisations at the UN from the 1990s, especially in the areas of development and conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The MDGs coincided with a new global public policy focus on civil society involvement in development which included both secular and religious entities which sought to move on from the egregious failures of SAPs to arrive at improved methods to achieve qualitative international development improvements.

The rise in numbers of religious organisations at the UN since the 1990s coincided with an international religious resurgence and increased prominence of ethical and moral (often overlapping with religious) concerns in debates about values, norms and behaviours, focussed in questions of global justice (Haynes 2007; 2013; 2014). This occurred in the context of post-Cold War, deepening globalisation, which led to many questioning the values and norms of international behaviour. Today, partly as a result, faith

1 MDGs are listed at http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.

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views and opinions are frequently heard in relation to ethical and moral controversies in the context of post-Cold War globalisation, in relation to, *inter alia*: increasingly polarised international development outcomes, "climate change, global finance, disarmament, inequality, pan-epidemics and human rights" (Carrette and Miall 2012: 3); that is, core global justice concerns. Put another way, contemporary campaigns at the UN for improved global justice are often significantly influenced "by the moral resources that "religions" offer and agencies of global governance need an awareness of what religious actors are doing and sensitivity to religious difference" (Carrette and Miall 2012: 3). More generally, this attribute, that is, an awareness of the morality of better and more widely shared development to incorporate those left behind in the context of post-Cold War globalisation, is a shared attribute of many non-state religious actors at the UN.

Pimbert *et al.* (2005) identify four main factors responsible for polarised development outcomes: (1) growing power of multinational corporations (2) diminishing land and water resources (3) climate change and deforestation, and (4) the impact of free market, neo-liberal economic policies. First, Pimbert *et al.* (2005: 2) point out that in recent years small numbers of multinational corporations (MNCs) have acquired a large degree of control over the world's food system. These MNCs control not only seed, livestock and agrochemical industries but also transport, processing and retailing; in the process they take a large and growing share of the price paid by consumers. The result is that farmers around the world including the developing world are compelled to accept falling farm gate prices. Some, as a result, face bankruptcy. Second, diminishing land and water resources around the world exacerbate both hunger and poverty. The situation is made worse by the apparently uncontrolled appetite for industrially produced livestock, typically fed on grains and starchy vegetables, a process that uses millions of hectares of land that could be used for food production for humans. In addition, huge areas of land in developing countries employed for intensive farming in the post-1960s 'green revolution' are now poisoned by pesticides; some are also salinised by poor irrigation. The consequence is that yields are stagnating or falling, while pressure mounts to convert land to produce biofuels for the affluent (Pimbert *et al.* 2005: 2). Third, environmental catastrophes including climate change and deforestation are the main causes of both lower rainfall and drought in many parts of the developing world. These factors can fundamentally affect the ability of small farmers in the developing world to produce sufficient for their own needs. This has become a major problem for food production. The problem is caused by less frequent yet inordinately heavy rainstorms, with

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declining numbers of trees causing erosion, reducing soil quality and producing meagre harvests (Pimbert *et al.* 2005: 21). Finally, according to Mulvany and Madeley (2006), "free market, neo-liberal economic policy has encouraged and justified the elimination of small-scale food producers" in the developing world. The result, Pimbert *et al.* claim, is that small-scale "farmers and indigenous peoples are seen as 'residues` of history people whose disappearance is inevitable. Throughout the world, small farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk and indigenous peoples are increasingly being displaced" (2005: 1) by powerful economic interests.

In sum, efforts to build stronger and better development in the global South are fighting a losing battle against powerful economic interests, including multinational corporations. In addition, linked to post-Cold War globalisation, the impact of the free market, neo-liberal economic policies coupled with environmental factors including diminishing land and water resources and accelerating climate change and deforestation, is leading not to improvements in human development but to its opposite.

## The World Bank, the WCC and the MDGs

A World Bank study, *Voices of the Poor* (2000), highlighted the potential importance of religion in the context of development, not least by the assertion that many poor people in the developing world had more confidence in their religious leaders than in their own governments. The MDGs coincided with this new global public policy focus on civil society involvement in development which included both secular and religious entities which sought to move on from the egregious failures of SAPs to arrive at improved methods to achieve qualitative international development improvements.

Among the eight MDGs was a key goal: eradication of 'extreme poverty and hunger'. When governments met in early November 2006 in order to assess the extent of progress made in achieving the goal of a 50 % cut in food hunger by 2015, there was a worrying lack of progress to report, an issue that many religious organisations, including the WCC, had noted (Kobia 2006). Data released contemporaneously by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation indicated that there had not been a reduction as planned but in fact an increase of more than 25 million chronically undernourished people during 1996–2006 (www.fao.org/). As a result, there were 850 million such people, more than 13 per cent of the global population of 6.5 billion. According to Mulvany and Madeley (2006), this was 'testament

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to how current global policies, far from working, are consigning the hungry to stay hungry'. Failure to achieve progress on this issue, according to an NGO active at the UN, World Forum for Food Sovereignty, was not due to a *lack of* but *too much* political will. The Forum pointed to "advances of trade liberalisation, industrial agriculture, genetic engineering and military dominance", claiming them to be the chief causes of the growing problem of hunger and poverty in the developing world ('Final Declaration of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty', 2001).

It was not only secular development actors who noted the polarising impact of globalisation on development outcomes in the global South. Lynch (2012) notes that when religious organisations ponder international development they typically move from an initially moral dimension to consider a highly material factor: "neoliberal competition of the 'market` [in] international development". From there it is but a short jump to consider how more current conditions of globalisation encourage or exacerbate an already unjust and polarised world, where the rich benefit disproportionately. It has however taken the UN a long time to get to the stage where it recognises religion as an equal partner in efforts to improve development outcomes in the global South.

The situation noted in 2006 by the WCC followed a decade of action led by James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank between 1995 and 2005.[2] The World Bank is one of the main UN agencies concerned with development, and the fact that Wolfensohn was a keen supporter of increasing the role of religion in development policies and programmes was an important step forward in the UN more generally recognising the potential importance of religious organisations in advancing the development agenda. There were two main reasons for this: First, Wolfensohn saw failure to involve religious organisations in development as irrational, given their great importance to many people in the global South. Second, the late 1990s and early 2000s were a period when the UN generally and the Bank in particular were actively seeking to engage with civil society, following criticism during the furore about the disappointing outcome to most SAPs, that the Bank was not always willing to listen to voices from below to improve them (Interview with senior World Bank employee, 23 January 2012). Wolfensohn believed that it was a missed opportunity not to harness potentially productive resources for improved development outcomes. For

2 Wolfensohn was strongly supported in his efforts by Katherine Marshall, see also her chapter in this volume.

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Wolfensohn, religious organisations could play an important role in in relation to development, in two main ways:

- Bottom up pressure on policy makers and consequential influence on policy formation. This could occur by engendering and/or influencing policy makers' values and outlooks, in turn affecting formulation of specific development policies;
- Bringing together or dividing communities along faith lines. This could either improve or worsen pre-existing social and/or political conflicts centring on access to improved development opportunities.

The second bullet point suggests that Wolfensohn did not believe that building three-way relationships between governments, secular development agencies and religious organisations would necessarily be easy. He saw involvement of religion in development as rational for the following reasons:

- Religious organisations of various kinds including, churches, mosques, religious charities and religious movements are important aspects of civil society in most developing countries. Their involvement in development policies and programmes could potentially help achieve improved development.
- Religious organisations already play a key role in providing education and welfare in many developing countries, so it seems logical to involve them in development issues and outcomes.
- Religious organisations may share many values. Coming together in pursuit of development could help not only to achieve improved development outcomes but also, as a result, assist religious/cultural understanding in developing countries.

Developing relations between the Bank and religious organisations were exemplified in the burgeoning relationship of the World Bank with the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC was founded in Amsterdam in 1948. It is an international, interdenominational Christian organisation which brings together around 345 Protestant, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox churches. WCC headquarters are in Geneva.

Following initial informal discussions, the Bank's formal dialogue with the WCC began in early 2002, continuing until August 2008, with a meeting in Accra, Ghana, which also involved the IMF ('The WCC-IMF-WB high-level encounter', 2004). From then until 2015, a period of nearly seven years, there were no further meetings between the Bank and the WCC

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('WCC general secretary meets president of the World Bank', 2015). Relations between the Bank and the WCC deteriorated following the departure of Wolfensohn. Subsequent presidencies of the Bank saw individuals leading the Bank who appeared unsure of the legitimacy and value of including religious organisations in development. It was not until the appointment of Jim Yong Kim in 2012 that the Bank overtly resumed its relationship with religious organisations, including the WCC, in the pursuit of improved development outcomes.[3]

The WCC became sceptical about the benefit of dialogue with the Bank, expressing 'far-ranging reservations about the motivations, governance structures, policies, and programs of the Bretton Woods institutions', including the Bank (Marshall and Van Saanen 2007: 196). There were at least four reasons why the World Bank/WCC relationship cooled for several years from the late-2000s. First, the two organisations had apparently incompatible worldviews which apparently made it impossible for them to work together. Second, there was a strong 'secularist' bias within the top echelons of the Bank. This meant that very few senior Bank figures openly sided with Wolfensohn in his pro-religion initiative. Third, many Bank employees at both junior and senior levels were uncertain about how practically religion could be factored into development initiatives. Linked to this was a concern expressed by several senior Bank operatives. They expressed the belief that improving development outcomes is most likely to be achieved through secular development initiatives and that religions are often divisive within many countries, including in the global South (Interviews with former and current senior World Bank employees, 25, 26, 27 January 2012).

Fourth, the perceived 'neo-liberal' orientation of the Bank focussing on issues such as 'liberalisation', the 'private sector' and 'privatisation' did not chime well with the WCC's outlook, which corresponded to a wish to see a structural reform of the global system, with more influence in the hands of countries in the global South. This focus is understandable when we bear in mind that the WCC groups together churches, denominations and church fellowships from more than 100 countries, representing over 500 million individual Christians from numerous non-Roman Catholic traditions. Most of the WCC member churches come from the global south, including: Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and the Pacific. This contrasts from when the WCC was founded in 1948,

3 After Wolfensohn, the presidency of the World Bank was filled by Paul Wolfowitz (2005–2007), Robert Zoellick (2007–2012) and from 2012, Jim Yong Kim.

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when members mainly came from Europe and North America. The WCC's ideological position can be seen in a WCC mission statement from 2013, whereby member churches:

- "are called to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship;
- promote their common witness in work for mission and evangelism;
- engage in Christian service by serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation; and foster renewal in unity, worship, mission and service". ('About us. What is the World Council of Churches', 2013)

In sum, while the language of the Bank in the late 1990s and early 2000s emphasised the perceived desirability of 'liberalisation' and 'privatisation', that of the WCC stressed the importance of 'serving human need; and seeking justice and peace'. These apparently incompatible goals were clearly in the short-term not conducive to developing a beneficial relationship between the Bank and the WCC, despite an initially promising initiative in the context of the MDGs. The result was a cooling of relations for several years.

## The World Bank, the WCC and SDGs: Building Cooperation between Religious and Secular Development Actors

The SDGs, running from 2015 to 2030, followed the MDGs. The SDGs broaden out the aims of the MDGs, specifically pursuing global concerns in relation to sustainable development.[4] Important religious organisations, such as the WCC, and development-focussed religious NGOs, including, World Vision and Islamic Relief, worked in pursuit of the introduction of the SDGs (Karam 2015).

The SDGs are a context and stimulus for a renewed focus on relations between the UN and religious actors, including that between the World Bank and the WCC. In February 2016, Dr David Nabarro, the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, spoke to a meeting of senior leaders of the ACT (Action by Churches Together) Alliance, Anglican Alliance, Caritas Internationalis and Lutheran World Federation, in a meeting convened by the WCC. During his

4 SDGs are listed at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300.

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address, Nabarro spoke of religious organisations' seven characteristics, which he believed were conducive to taking forward the SDGs:

- "Promoting the inclusion of different groups;
- Offering peaceful channels for conflict resolution;
- Upholding the human rights of the most vulnerable;
- Reminding political leaders of their duty to enable all people to realize their rights;
- Helping ensure that investment takes place in communities, with people at the local level making those investments with their own resources;
- Mobilizing people everywhere, especially young people;
- Sharing expertise on how to deliver services to those who are hardest to reach". (Tveit 2016)

The role of the WCC in convening the meeting with the UN was illustrative of its desire to work more closely with UN agencies, including the World Bank. Earlier, on 4 May 2015, the WCC's General Secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, met with Dr Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank, in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss 'possible collaborative actions to end extreme poverty' in the context of the SDGs. The meeting between Tveit and Kim followed a statement on the moral and spiritual imperative to end extreme poverty, signed by more than 30 global religious leaders in February 2015 (World Bank, 2015). After the February 2015 meeting, Kim invited the WCC to explore what could be done together, "in a kind of mutual commitment of the two organizations". The point is that the SDGs encouraged closer relations between the UN and religious organisations and this can be illustrated in the warming relationship between the World Bank and the WCC.

In addition, while the SDGs provided the context, the different approach of Kim, compared to his immediate predecessors, was instrumental in highlighting the importance of secular and religious entities working together if the goal of achieving the end of extreme poverty was realistically to be achieved during the SDGs. Kim noted that

> "Faith-based organizations and religious communities are often doing the essential work on the frontlines of combatting extreme poverty, protecting the vulnerable, delivering essential services and alleviating suffering. We are looking to expand the World Bank Group's partnerships with faith inspired organizations toward reaching our shared goal to end extreme poverty within a generation." ('The World Bank Group's Engagement with Faith-based and Religious Organizations', 2015)

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At their May 2015 meeting, Tveit commended the World Bank president on his efforts to end poverty by 2030 by addressing issues of inequality, human dignity and climate change. He said, "The WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace addresses structural, moral and political issues, and the WCC works collaboratively with other like-minded organizations to promote sustainable solutions to end poverty." For his part, "Kim shared his assessment of the global poverty situation and stated that faith communities and organizations play an indispensable role in combatting and ending extreme poverty. The World Bank is already working with faith communities in several countries through their governments, he noted" ('WCC general secretary meets president of the World Bank', 2015).

The World Bank hosted a major conference in Washington, D.C. from 7–9 July, 2015, entitled: "Religion and Sustainable Development: Building Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty". The conference brought together secular and religious entities to discuss working together to achieve the SDGs. In his address at the conference, Kim referred to the social teaching for "a preferential option for the poor", supported by the ecumenical movement as well as by the Catholic Church. In addition, he claimed that every religion shared this fundamental commitment to the poorest and most vulnerable and that this provided a common platform with the international development community aim to end extreme poverty. Kim also stated that: "We are the first generation in history that can say we can end extreme poverty in our lifetime. (…) We can't get there without all of you. We need prophetic voices to inspire us and evidence to lead the way" (World Bank, 2015).

The goal of bringing together secular and religious entities in pursuit of improved development outcomes was reflected in the make-up of the supporters and organisers of the conference. Convened and co-hosted by the World Bank Group, the conference also benefitted from involvement from: Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the USA's Agency for International Development, and the UK's Department for International Development. Co-sponsors included the Catholic Medical Mission Board, Catholic Relief Services, Islamic Relief USA, Tearfund, American Jewish World Service, IMA World Health and McKinsey & Company. In addition, other religious NGOs also attended, including: GHR Foundation, World Vision, and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, a coalition of religious organisations and academic institutions. Overall, the conference attracted a varied group of 'movers and shakers', including: policy makers, multilateral and bilateral agencies, religious leaders, development professionals from religious organisations and

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academics. The purpose of the conference was to build links between secular and religious entities in the context of the SDGs, specifically to connect "frontline policy makers to the evidence base and expertise to support more effective partnerships with religious and faith-based groups in the common cause of ending extreme poverty and promoting sustainable development" (World Bank, 2015).

The SDGs emerged at a time of significant global changes, many of which are linked to the impact of globalisation on people and communities around the world. In Europe, for example, many countries have seen increasing religious pluralism and multi-religious societies, as well as 'high' levels of migration and massive flows of refugees from war-torn and conflict-filled parts of the world (Haynes 2016). Religious leaders are seen to have an important role to fill in this context, focussing their efforts on building successful, stable and secure communities in the face of such pressures. In particular, religious leaders are looked on to not only to build cooperation across faith boundaries but also to show pronounced concern for justice, reconciliation and peace. How can this be built and implemented? It is widely recognised that fine words are not enough; what is essential is practical cooperation on the basis of shared values, concerns and goals, to provide necessary tools for increased and deepening common understanding and mutual recognition. This is the only way to defeat the extremists those who unleash religiously-inspired violence and justify terrorist activities by their lack of ability to live together with those of different faiths. But religious leaders should not only be concerned with and active in improving conflict resolution and peacebuilding; they should also be concerned about improving development, so as to make extremism less likely. But on what basis can religious leaders and their organisations work closely and fruitfully with secular entities in pursuit of peace and development? Today's leading development policy approach the rights-based approach refers to the idea that all people have certain rights and it is an imperative that development seeks to achieve them. The rights-based approach brings together development practitioners who agree on the need to bring about change at several levels, including: policies, practices, beliefs, values and ideas. Can one talk usefully and more importantly work successfully on implementing development policy about a rights-based approach when trying to integrate the work of secular and religious organisations?

As the General Secretary of the WCC, Olav Fykse Tveit (2016), points out:

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> "a fuller understanding of religion's role will help complete the picture. Hitherto, development actors have generally engaged mostly with the two top levels (policies and practices) and avoided engaging with the foundational level of 'beliefs, values and ideas`, even if this is probably the most important level for sustainable change. An example is the promotion of more equal gender relationships between women and men (SDG 5) or, in our [that is, the WCC] terminology, a Just Community of Women and Men."

Such issues were not only a concern of WCC General Secretary Tveit. Schelenz points to the desirability of including all members of a community not only those who adhere to a certain religious faith in order to reduce "discontent and frustration" and lead "to more harmonious and healthy community life. A rights-based approach to development" as supported by the WCC "is therefore important for the development of communities, countries, and regions" (Schelenz 2016: 11). Typically, in the context of the SDGs, UN initiatives, including those with WCC involvement, aim to bring together religious and secular organisations in pursuit of shared goals, including in relation to improved wellbeing for women and children in the global South, one of the SDGs. What motivates the partners in such development initiatives is shared commitment to improving health of children and women in the global South, while reducing men's violence against them. Perhaps the *only* language which is possible to combine activities of both faith-based and secular actors in this endeavour is rights-based.

A rights-based approach provides a firm basis for the coming together of secular and religious efforts toward ending extreme poverty and more generally towards the achievement of the SDGs. Yet, doubts have been expressed about the difficulties inherent in trying to achieve an undoubtedly ambitious and wide-ranging set of 17 goals along with 169 associated targets over a relatively short period of time (2015–2030). In addition, from the point of view of religion the SDGs lack any mention of what might be seen as core values. At a gathering of representatives from 24 religious organisations who met in a UK city, Bristol, in September 2015 to present to a UN representative their reactions to the challenges of the SDGs, a representative of the Baha'i faith, Daniel Perell, stated that in "Agenda 2030, words like selflessness, sacrifice, love, compassion, duty, generosity and charity are entirely absent". Perell's comment seemed to be taken seriously by the UN representative at the conference, Paul Ladd, in charge of mapping out a post-2015 agenda for humanity at the UN Development Program. Ladd stated that: "More than 80 % of the world's people express a religious affiliation (…) knowing this it becomes clear that the UN needs to work closely with faith communities over the next 15 years if the new

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global roles for sustainable development are to be achieved" (The Economist, 2015). The overall point is that the involvement of religion in development and the potential for secular and religious organisations to work more closely together in a sustained fashion to achieve desirable development outcomes, both within countries and in the context of the SDGs, is ambivalent, with both plus and minus points.

In a recent comment, Leininger and Striebinger (2016; see also Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb in this volume), note the efforts of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in relation to incorporating 'religion' into development. BMZ hosted an international conference in Berlin on 17–18 February 2016 "to explore the potential of religion for promoting sustainable development". The title of the conference "Religion as a partner for change" suggests to Leininger and Striebinger that for the BMZ, "religion has a fundamentally positive impact on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals". They suggested however that there is an ambivalence in the involvement of religion in development, which implies that it should not be seen as an unequivocal force for good in all circumstances and contexts. As with religion's role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, Leininger and Striebinger note that it can contribute usefully to sustainable development, including at the UN. This can be seen, for example, in the successful relationship that the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has developed with women's pro-choice faith entities, united in pursuit of the third MDG goal ('Promote gender equality and empower women') and SDG5 ('equal gender relationships between women and men'. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works closely with some conservative religious leaders in the Arab world, especially in developing shared initiatives pertaining to MDG goal number 6: 'Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases' and SDG3 ('good health and well-being').

Finally, as Leininger and Striebinger claim, "different religious positions can serve to intensify societal and violent conflict". Although religious believers would normally regard their chosen religious expressions as both benevolent and inspiring, religious faiths are sometimes linked to violence and conflict both between and within religious groups (or at least entities with a religious veneer, for example, various armed groups around the world, such as al Qaeda or Isis, which claim religious justification for their often-murderous activities). In recent years, a growing literature has appeared on religious contributions to both conflict and peacebuilding. Yet, alongside the now conventional understanding that religious hatreds and differences are central to many recent and current conflicts, especially in the

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developing world, there is also a growing body of evidence that religious leaders and organisations can play constructive roles in conflict limitation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Haynes 2011)

In sum, the ambivalence noted here regarding the involvement of religion in pursuit of both development and peace makes it highly important that while international policy makers, including at the UN in relation to the SDGs, should seek to deepen and extend their interactions with religious leaders and their organisations, they should also be aware that engaging in dialogue with them and actively involving them in pinpointing and executing solutions is not a simple or straightforward process. Secular policy makers need to find common ground with religious leaders and their organisations, with both 'sides' moulding their view of the world to incorporate and draw on consensual values while agreeing to advance a shared outlook stressing a rights-based approach to development.

## Conclusion

> "What we have stumbled upon through the MDGs is the common currency of development (…) so we share the determination to ensure that this framework is supported by all of us as we move beyond 2015." (Olav Kjörven, Deputy Administrator of UNDP and Director of the Bureau for Development Policy)

Religious organisations active at the UN in pursuit of improved development outcomes, especially in relation to the global South, have two key characteristics. First, they are in a good position to bring bottom up pressure on policy makers and consequential influence on policy formation. This may occur by engendering and/or influencing policy makers' values and outlooks, in turn affecting formulation of specific development policies. Second, especially as a result of interfaith dialogue efforts, religious entities are well placed to bring together or divide communities along faith lines. This could either improve or worsen pre-existing social and/or political conflicts centring on access to improved development opportunities.

Overall, whether religion can make a difference in relation to development outcomes, seems to depend on whether important secular development actors (such as the UN in general and the World Bank in particular) are convinced that religion can make a beneficial difference, encouraging them actively to collaborate with non-state religious entities. In other words, as the quotation above suggests, if religious actors are perceived as bringing in important specific capacities, there is a chance for them to help make a beneficial difference to development outcomes.

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We saw that various UN entities including the World Bank, UNFPA and UNDP engage regularly with assorted religious organisations, including the WCC, to pursue improved development in the context of the SDGs. The UN's engagement followed realisation that both secular and religious entities share a pronounced concern with development outcomes in the global South, including in relation to ending extreme poverty, as a crucial first stage in more generally improving development outcomes. Common ground linked them to a growing consensus that underpins adoption of the SDGs.

We examined two main questions in this article: Why do many religious leaders and organisations have a higher profile today in relation to development issues compared to a few decades ago? What is the impact of this change in terms of their involvement at the United Nations in the context of the MDGs and SDGs? We started by highlighting the sobering failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, which paved the way for the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals from 2000. Generally, SAPs led to disappointing outcomes in the global South and the MDGs reflected a wide recognition that a new approach to development was required. It also reflected an understanding that many religious leaders and the organisations they represent have the support of ordinary people to a degree that many governments lack. It is often uncontroversial, as a result, to think of religion and development working together not least because many ordinary people in the global South may well believe that it is entirely correct that religion should be an influential voice in helping resolve development problems and be part of the quest for improved strategies in this regard. Yet, many governments the huge majority of which are explicitly secular in their orientation and outlook tend to regard the prospect of religion's institutionalised involvement in development with apprehension or suspicion, a perception often linked to what they see as problematic involvement of religion more generally in secular political, social and economic issues. To an extent, although it is impossible to be precise at this early stage of the implementation of the SDGs, the UN can provide a crucial forum and environment where both secular and religious entities can work together in pursued of shared development goals.

Second, there are marked differences in perceptions of poverty and development between religious entities, on the one hand, and many governments and secular international development agencies, on the other. That is, while many governments and secular international development agencies see economic growth *per se* as the most important achievement, religious leaders and organisations often see things differently: they prioritise a range

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of ways of understanding the notions of poverty-reduction and development, over and above achievement of higher incomes alone. The key practical question is *how* and *in what ways* can governments and secular development agencies constructively integrate religious perspectives into poverty reduction strategies, such as the SDGs? Or, to put it another way, *how* and *in what ways* can religion constructively influence governmental and secular development agencies' perspectives on poverty reduction strategies and by extension development in the context of the SDGs? It seems clear that while the SDGs theoretically provide a new impetus towards achieving better and more durable partnerships between secular and religious actors, in practice this is going to be a difficult issue to resolve, one that will require sustained commitment and involvement from all involved.

Finally, while often paying lip service to the involvement of religion in development, it may be that both governments and UN agencies either lack the ability or are simply not interested in integrating alternative including religious perspectives into wider development programmes and policies, including poverty reduction strategies. In the late-2000s, this issue strained the relationship and undermined confidence between the World Bank and the World Council of Churches and it took some years and a change of personnel at the top to get the relationship back on track. There is potential for such relationships now to burgeon and improve in the context of the SDGs. What is necessary for this to happen is both open minds and a willingness to compromise and the development of vigorous and constructive debate about poverty, followed by concrete and sustained steps to build on the MDGs in the context of the SDGs, consistently drawing on and learning from both secular and religious insights.

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