Religious Pluralism is good for Africa - Study

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Religious pluralism in sub-Saharan Africa can promote rather than impede development and democracy in that region, according to research findings presented at the University of Birmingham.

Robert Dowd, from the University of Notre Dame, presented 'Christianity, Islam and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda' at the annual seminar coordinated by the Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Birmingham.

Dowd examined the impact of Christian and Muslim religious involvement on indicators of development, such as those concerning the role of women in society, the relationship between religious and state authority, interpersonal and social trust, and tolerance of differences of opinion.

The research highlighted the results of a mass survey that that the researcher conducted in three African countries – Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda.

According to Dr. Dowd, "religious involvement often has a more significant and positive impact on the indicators of development and attitudes thought to be conducive to development in the most religiously plural settings than in the least religiously plural settings."

Robert's findings questioned the conventional wisdom which holds that religious/cultural homogeneity is better for development than religious/cultural pluralism.

Professor Kunle Odumosu, from the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, also presented findings of his research on the activities of faith-based organisations and development in Nigeria.

Odumosu revealed that, "Within most faith based organisations, a strong associational infrastructure at the national and local levels exist. Such an advantage is particularly vital in rural areas, as many development-related NGOs are concentrated in cities and towns. In Nigeria, this existing infrastructure means that religious organisations are the first to increase awareness of development issues and encourage discussion among the population."

Odumosu's research also showed that most faith based organisations rely heavily on volunteers, and their jurisdiction often includes morality, beliefs and the rules of family lives.

The Religions and Development Research Programme, at the University of Birmingham, is an international research partnership that explores the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction.

It focuses on four countries - India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tanzania - enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems.

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Notes to Editor

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is undertaking a series of comparative research projects that address the following questions:

• How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?

• How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?

• In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research will provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals.

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