Mapping the Activities of Faith-Based Organisations in Development in Nigeria

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This paper is an outcome of the Religions and Development Research Programme in Nigeria. The rationale for this study is that the nature, scale and activities of faith based organisations (FBOs) are poorly understood and documented in Nigeria. The aim of the study was, thus, to undertake a ‘mapping’ exercise of the nature, scale and activities of FBOs in development in Nigeria. The objectives are: (a) To increase awareness of the nature and scale of faith based contributions to development in Nigeria. (b) To provide the necessary background and contextual information for further studies under other components of the RaD research programme, helping those involved to prepare detailed research proposals and to select geographical locations, faith traditions and FBOs for further study.

The methodological approach included the review of documented evidence and structured interviews. The study is of a qualitative character seeking to identify nature, scale, location and activities of faith based organisations through in-depth interviews with representatives of umbrella organisations and key informants from faith groups.

The survey revealed that the number of registered and active FBOs is limited in Nigeria. However, the active ones can be found in almost all the States of the Federation, or at the least, in every geopolitical zone of the country. It also revealed that a high proportion of religious organizations provide some human services. Most of the FBOs mobilize and rely on deeply engaged volunteers rather than paid staff, thus delivering services more efficiently than other providers. The key advantage of FBOs is that they have better access to volunteers, which could be used to expand their role in delivering social services. The faith-based organizations also have the advantage that they are located in communities where services are needed. They are also involved in informal networks (e.g., cooperating, coordinating, and working together with other organizations). These increase their delivery of human services. FBOs often have a direct impact on social institutions, such as schools, which socialise people and change values over time. In addition, their jurisdiction often includes a number of areas such as morality, beliefs about the spiritual bases of disease, and rules of family life and sexual activity. FBOs are also very active in practical areas of poverty reduction, providing income-generating programmes for community members.

FBOs’ influence derives from their ability to integrate their messages into broader belief systems, avoiding just delivering superficial awareness creation. Religion also has other comparative advantages in disseminating messages and educating about social issues. For example, churches and mosques have regular audiences at their places of worship. Local FBO workers and leaders have a history of regular contact and involvement in the daily lives of their congregation. Within most FBOs, a strong associational infrastructure at the national and local levels exists. Such an advantage is particularly vital in rural areas, as many development-related NGOs are concentrated in cities and towns, whereas religious groups often have a strong presence in rural areas. In Nigeria, this existing infrastructure meant that religious organisations are the first to increase awareness of development issues and encourage discussion among the population. Finally, in many cases, religious organisations command a
good deal of respect and trust from much of the congregation. Their flock perceives their actions as less politically driven and selfish than those of government leaders. However, there are two major deficiencies. One is that the religious organisations are strong on vision but weak on practical strategies for attaining the kind of equality and well-being they dream of; the other is that their community development work is carried out on such a small scale that it will never make a significant contribution to the fight against poverty. There is little evidence of their involvement in policy formulation and implementation. To improve on their performance, FBOs must be aware of key policy developments that affect them or the people they wish to serve, and they must be prepared to advocate issues that are important to them, their clients, or their communities.

The paper concludes that, generally little research has been done on specific operational issues affecting FBOs activities in development. There is need for case studies to specifically examine FBO programs and their impact, and here longitudinal studies could greatly contribute to the study of an effort primarily oriented toward a long time horizon. There is also the need to find out if faith-based organisations bring distinctive advantages to community development. The issue could be readily addressed by comparing faith-based and secular organisations active in the community development.