Visit to Birmingham by Quentin Wodon, Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, World Bank

Quentin Wodon, recently appointed Adviser and Manager of this World Bank programme visited Birmingham on 19th March, 2009 to learn more about the RaD programme’s work and explore possibilities for collaboration. He also gave a seminar on some of his programme’s recent work to an audience of staff and students.

The programme is prioritising analytical work that can provide inputs into World Bank policies and operations. The work is designed to test some common hypotheses about faith-based organisations, focusing particularly on their role in service delivery. Aiming to make better use of existing datasets, the unit is commissioning analyses of the contribution of FBOs to service delivery, their performance and levels of user satisfaction with their operations. For example, case studies have assessed whether Roman Catholic schools in Venezuela serve the poor and perform better than public schools; whether the private costs to students of attending government schools are lower than those attending faith schools, enabling poorer students to attend the latter; whether poor pupils are better served by faith schools in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo; and whether the perceived poorer performance of madrasas providing secondary level education in Bangladesh is borne out by the data. The analyses show, he concluded, that sometimes faith schools are more likely to serve poor pupils but sometimes they are less likely to do so, and also that their performance compared to public sector schools varies.

The programme is also examining the impact of faith on ethics and behaviour, including labour force participation, participation in education, altruism and attitudes to corruption. For example, a study in Uganda found that additional untied grants to non-profit health centres were used to increase the services provided and slightly reduce their cost to users, and in Cameroon the national household sample survey showed that the propensity of staff in faith-based facilities to accept bribes was less than in government facilities, despite their lower wages. Amongst other topics future work will examine the relationship between religion and happiness/subjective wellbeing, as well as the role of religious organisations as sources of support on which people draw in times of crisis.

If findings demonstrate that faith-based organisations do in certain circumstances perform better, the implications for policy and practice will have to be carefully considered, he suggested: it would not be desirable for the faith-based sector to be parallel and separate from the public sector, nor for support for it to weaken the public sector.