The Role of Religion in Development Cooperation, Sweden, 26-28 April 2009

Sida channels its assistance to civil society organisations through ‘frame organisations’. Several of these are faith-based organisations, including the Swedish Mission Council, Diakonia, the Church of Sweden and PMU Interlife, who jointly organised this seminar. It brought together about fifty representatives of Sida Civil Society Section, the organisers and many of their southern partner organisations (predominantly Christian, from eleven countries).

The aim of the seminar was to
- Visualise the role and importance of religion linked to long term development and advocacy work and humanitarian interventions
- Increase understanding and knowledge of the role of religion in development
- Discuss the positive and negative roles of religion, the impact of religion and whether and how religion can be used for certain purposes
- Explore the implications of the discussion for the organisations represented

There were plenary presentations from Jan Henningsson, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden on “The meaning of religion in the context of development – an interfaith perspective” and Cader Muhammed Muzzamil, Moderator and National Coordinator of SAMADANA/M, the National Centre for Promoting Non-Violent Conflict Resolution and Conflict Handling, Sri Lanka.

RaD was invited to make two short presentations: on the reasons why we consider research on religions and development is important and some of our findings to date.

Frank Ubach, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands, and acting secretary of the Dutch government-funded Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development Policy, updated the audience on the progress in establishing and functions of the Knowledge Forum, which was established to (a) enable dialogue between the Dutch government, FBOs and other development actors and (b) assemble knowledge resources and make them publicly available (through its website http://www.religie-en-ontwikkeling.nl)

Thematic working groups on the role of religion in conflict resolution and reconciliation, reducing poverty and inequality, gender equality and climate justice and development were introduced by Isaiah Dau of the Sudan Pentecostal Church; Ernesto Alayza of Bartolome de las Casas Institute, Peru; Beena Sebastian, Chairperson of the Cultural Academy for Peace, India; and Nafisa Goga d’Souza, Executive Director of LAYA, Viskahpatnam, India respectively.

Participants identified a need to
- Analyse not only development actors’ awareness and understanding of religion (on which this seminar concentrated) but also develop religious actors’ knowledge of contemporary development thinking, policy and practice
- Consider both the role of religion in development and the implications of development policy and activities for religious organisations
- Hold regional inter-religious dialogues to discuss state/religion/development relationships and exchange experiences in greater depth
- Use the analysis of religion included in Sida country contextual analyses to identify issues relevant to the role of religion in development, hold local dialogues and influence Sida policy
- Continue the dialogue between the frame organisations and, on the one hand, their southern partners and, on the other, Sida
‘Walk the development talk’ with respect to transparency, accountability and quality within religious organisations and FBOs, since many are at present hierarchical, authoritarian, non-transparent and unaccountable.

Participants acknowledged

- the importance of research on lived religion and development, to provide an evidence base for policy and practice
- that the values held by members of most faith traditions are sometimes incompatible with common secular development goals
- that FBOs potentially have positive roles to play in development
- but also that religion also often poses obstacles to the achievement of development goals such as gender equality.