Religions and Development plenary session

The Religions and Development Research Programme’s Nigeria country team presented a plenary session at the NASA conference on 6th April 2010, in order to share its research findings with the wider academic community.

The session, which concluded the first day of the conference, was briefly introduced by Prof Carole Rakodi, Director of the Programme and chaired by Prof Olakunle Odumosu of the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Nigeria country coordinator. The following researchers made brief presentations of published or emerging findings from six of the eight research topics on which research has been carried out in Nigeria.

Religion plays complex and important roles in politics and governance in the Nigerian context, although assertions about its roles are not always based on empirical research. Abubakar Oladeji (NISER) presented some of the findings of the Religion, Politics and Governance in Nigeria research on behalf of his co-authors, Insa Nolte (Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham) and Nathaniel Danjibo (NISER). Case studies of Kano, Anambra and Oyo States (including key informant interviews) demonstrate that the relationships between the Nigerian state and religious organizations are often asymmetric and unstable: Christianity and Islam provide groups and individuals with moral frameworks on which to base their demands and critiques of the state; Christian and Muslim organizations both contribute to and challenge state institutions, such as law and education; and religious leaders are not immune from complicity in patronage politics.

Research on the role of religion in violent conflict has concentrated, internationally and in Nigeria, on inter-religious conflict and its causes. Research on the role of religion and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in post-conflict transformation, including relief, peace-making, rehabilitation and prevention of further violence is, however, rare. Research in the cities of Jos and Kano was summarized by Shedrack Best (Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies, University of Jos). Noting that there has been much research on inter-religious conflict and its causes, he reported on victims’ perceptions of the psychological, economic and political reasons for the attacks they had suffered during recent violent episodes, described some of their coping strategies, discussed the role of FBOs in relief and reconstruction, and analysed government responses. While FBOs provide relief in the immediate aftermath of the violence to members of their own religion, they are little involved in attempts to prevent future violence. Victims expect the state to restore security, provide relief and redress, and address long term development needs, but expressed disappointment because of its failure to fulfil these responsibilities.

Assertions that religious organizations are well placed to contribute to decision making because of their strength, influence and grassroots base have been examined by focusing on their role in policy consultation processes. Louis Chete (NISER) reported the outcomes of a project concerned with the involvement of religious organizations in policy consultation processes, on behalf of Prof Olakunle Odumosu and other colleagues. In the first part of this project, FBOs’ limited involvement in the process of preparing the Nigeria Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), the
country’s equivalent of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme, was ascertained and explanations sought. It emerged that while most religious organizations were happy with the policies in the NEEDS (and SEEDS, the State-level equivalent), they were critical of the limited progress made with implementation. Thus in the second part of the project, a NISER team worked with a group of FBOs to develop their qualitative data collection skills, assemble data on the reasons for implementation failures in the agriculture and health sectors given by local informants, identify the roles FBOs would be able to play in improving implementation and communicate these to government as an input into the policy review process.

Based on an assumption that indigenous social movements are needed to produce deep-rooted and lasting social change, but that religion may be an obstacle to progressive change, research examined the engagement of religious organizations in the women’s movement in Nigeria. Fatima Adamu (University of Sokoto) summarized two case studies of attempts by the women’s movement to achieve legal reform: the domestication of the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and legislation to safeguard widows’ rights in Anambra State. The former eventually failed, in large part because, although Christian organizations support the broad principles (except for equality), they oppose particular clauses (mainly those dealing with reproductive health and sexual behaviour). The latter succeeded, with the strong backing of the Roman Catholic church, especially its women’s organizations, which mobilized grassroots support for the legislation, tackled traditional authorities that might have opposed it and formed an alliance with secular women’s organizations.

It is suggested that FBOs make a distinctive contribution to development, especially at the local level, and so should be prioritized as development partners by governments and donors. Ayodele Jegede (University of Ibadan) presented preliminary findings from a study being conducted by a team that includes Ukowa Ukiwo (University of Port Harcourt), Comfort Davis (independent researcher) and Prof Gbenga Sunmola (University of Ibadan, team leader). The research is examining the development activities of FBOs and NGOs in Lagos and Kano States, by means of case studies of selected Christian, Muslim and ‘secular’ organizations involved in HIV/AIDS-related programmes, with a view to examining whether ‘FBOs’ do in fact have distinctive characteristics in terms of their motivations, organisation, activities and perceived effectiveness. Initial findings indicate that FBOs do tend to have a number of distinctive characteristics (for example, mission statements that explicitly refer to their religious motivations, the ability to draw on locally mobilized funds as well as funds from external donors, a sense that their accountability is to God, a preference for staff from their own faith tradition and the use of religious symbols) although there is no simple distinction between ‘faith-based’ and ‘secular’ organizations in a country where few people claim to be neither Christian nor Muslim.

Diagnoses of the reasons for the prevalence of corruption in developing countries and attempts to reduce it have, in recent years, neglected the ethical and moral dimension that it is assumed accompanies religious belief. Preliminary findings from a qualitative study of public servants’ attitudes to corruption were presented by Mohammed Aminu Fagge (Bayero University, Kano) on behalf of Antonia Taiye Simbine (NISER, team leader) and Remi Aiyede (University of Ibadan). He noted that Nigerian public servants seem to have a dual approach to morality, in which the morals associated with their religious values may inform their private lives, but are set aside in public life. Although there is perceived to be a general decline in morality and corruption is defined very
broadly, the purloining of state resources is widely practised and condoned. This is attributed to the lack of a fear of God, a perception that government resources are not used in the interests of all citizens, the desire to emulate others who have amassed wealth in this way and the willingness of religious organizations to accept donations of funds that are known to have been accumulated illegally.