The Role of Faith in the Non-Profit Sector in Pakistan

Seminar held on April 28, 2010 at the Regent Plaza Hotel and Convention Centre, Karachi

Faith-based organizations are a diverse and misunderstood category within the non-profit sector in Pakistan, as elsewhere. However, organizations that are inspired by faith are also important development actors. Under the auspices of the Religions and Development Research Programme, a half-day seminar was organized in order to shed light on this highly complex and contested category in the Pakistani context. The seminar brought together a range of actors, including representatives of non-religiously affiliated non-governmental organizations, local charities, faith-based organizations, researchers, activists and bureaucrats, to share the findings of two research projects: ‘Mapping the terrain: the activities of faith-based organizations in development,’ and ‘The development activities, values and performance of FBOs and NGOs.’ Mohammed Waseem (LUMS), the coordinator of the Religions and Development Research Programme in Pakistan, introduced the seminar and provided an overview of the programme’s activities in Pakistan. The presentation was followed by a question and answer session and a discussion about the possibilities and dangers of engaging with faith-based development projects.

The first presentation was given by Asif Iqbal (Social Policy Development Centre) and was entitled ‘Mapping the terrain: the activities of faith-based organizations in development’. He provided a national overview of the number of faith-based organizations working in Pakistan, as well as the different types of organizations that fall into this category. He argued that FBOs are a sub-set of non-profit organizations that deliver social services, which identify themselves or are affiliated with a particular religious congregation, or engage in promoting religious beliefs or administering religious services. The presentation covered Muslim, Christian and other minority FBOs and outlined the nature and scale of activities of each set. The findings show that FBOs are a significant part of civil society, comprising a third of all non-profit organizations. FBOs in Pakistan are generally engaged in service provision and are run through fees and local philanthropy rather than receiving government or donor support.

The second presentation was given by Nida Kirmani and Sarah Zaidi and was entitled ‘The role of faith in charity and development in Karachi and Sindh’. The presentation began with a background to the debates surrounding FBOs, highlighting the perceived opportunities and risks of working with these types of organizations. Sarah Zaidi then outlined the study, which compares a range of organizations engaged in charity and development, some of which are clearly ‘faith-based’ and others which have a more ambiguous relationship with faith. She outlined the six organizations profiled in the study in terms of their mission, organizational structure, funding, scope of activities and relationship with religion. Nida Kirmani highlighted the emerging findings of the study, which show how charity and philanthropy are deeply intertwined with faith in the Pakistani context. However, she pointed out that there is a spectrum of religiosity amongst the organizations profiled and a division between foreign-funded NGOs, which speak the language of development and rights, and locally-driven charities, which are more focused on providing services and immediate relief.

The presentations were followed by a general discussion moderated by Ayesha Tammy Haq, based on the themes highlighted by both studies. Questions discussed included the reasons for the University of Birmingham and DFID’s interest in the role of religion and development, problems with
defining FBOs in the Pakistani context, dilemmas of using religion as an entry point when studying development, and the nexus between religious organizations and a perceived rise in conservatism in Pakistan. Participants raised concerns about the growing divisions between religious groups and sects in Pakistan and the lack of spaces for collective engagement with issues. Some participants also identified a need for collaboration between FBOs of different faiths and between FBOs and NGOs.

The seminar was concluded by Khalda Ghaus (SPDC), who highlighted the importance of both studies as pioneering research on the non-profit sector in Pakistan. She also pointed to the need for more research in this area, for example to examine the ideologies that drive FBOs and their agendas. Dr. Ghaus ended her remarks by asking how to move from social welfare and social protection to social development in Pakistan.