‘Assessing the Contribution of Faith-based Organisations in Development: Mythical or Real?’
Workshop held at the Civicus World Assembly, Montreal, August 22, 2010

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) are attracting increasing attention within development circles as being closer to the poor, more efficient and cost-effective, and more sensitive to people’s spiritual needs than secular NGOs. At the same time, many continue to be suspicious of FBOs as being potentially divisive, discriminatory, and of pressuring people to convert. This workshop aimed to shed light on the category ‘FBOs’ through the presentation of research conducted on FBOs and NGOs in Pakistan and Nigeria.

Following a brief theoretical introduction to FBOs, Comfort Davis presented the findings of research conducted with FBOs in Nigeria. Her presentation focused particularly on People Oriented Development, the Evangelical Church of West Africa (POD-ECWA), an organisation that works primarily on HIV/AIDS and is based in Kano State. Comfort explained the difficulties faced by this particular Christian FBO working in a Muslim context. She also discussed its ‘holistic approach’ to development, which caters to the whole person rather than being focused on meeting specific needs.

Nida Kirmani then presented the findings of research conducted on FBOs and NGOs in Pakistan, outlining case studies of six organisations in Karachi. These organisations represent a spectrum from those focused on charitable and welfare activities to those working on long-term development. Religion is intertwined to a varying extent within the work of charitable organisations, while it is less prominent in those organisations that focus on long-term development. Her presentation argued that in the Pakistani context, the most significant distinction is between charitable organisations that rely on individual donations and professional development organisations that rely on institutional funding.

This was followed by a discussion amongst the 20 participants in the workshop, who represented a range of civil society organisations (both secular and faith-based), as well as representatives of donor agencies. Participants were asked to reflect on a series of questions including:

- What types of FBOs exist in your country? What kinds of partnerships exist between FBOs and NGOs?
- What is distinctive about FBOs compared with secular NGOs?
- What are the potential advantages of working with FBOs as development partners and what are the potential challenges/risks of partnering with FBOs (or for FBOs themselves) in particular contexts?

It was agreed that it is extremely difficult to generalize about NGOs and FBOs because variation in these categories in different contexts. However, several broad points were raised during the discussion including:
It is often difficult to distinguish between NGOs and FBOs:

- There is often little or no distinction between FBOs and NGOs, especially in those contexts in which religion is highly influential in social life
- FBOs have become less faith-based and more like secular NGOs in many contexts, and many FBOs are highly professionalized and take a ‘secular’ approach
- The distinction between ‘professional’ and ‘local’ organisations is often more significant than that between ‘secular’ and ‘faith-based’ organisations
- Elite organisations in many contexts tend to be secular and have greater access to funding than local organisations, which are often faith-based

FBOs are highly organized and networked:

- FBOs often form highly organized and influential networks, which can mobilize in difficult and repressive circumstances, such as during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa
- Church networks often provide effective means of communicating in emergency situations
- Religious leaders can act as gatekeepers to particular communities, and are therefore important development partners

FBOs are often ‘closer’ to communities:

- FBOs often share a common base with the communities in which they operate
- They are more integrated within communities than secular NGOs
- They have a long-term commitment to the communities in which they work
- FBOs can act as a stepping-stone for those interested in getting involved in the development sector, because of their links within communities

FBOs also have several potential negative attributes:

- FBOs can be exclusionary in their approach
- There is a particular naivety amongst staff of some FBOs because of their ‘higher calling’, which may lead them to take unnecessary risks
- Some FBOs display a lack of awareness and sensitivity to people of other faiths.

A general observation was made that there were very few FBOs present at the CIVICUS World Assembly or amongst the Civicus Board of Directors. This was seen to be a reflection of the belief that FBOs are exclusionary in nature. However, there was a general consensus that CIVICUS should make more efforts to include FBOs in its networks, because there is no evidence that they are more exclusionary than secular organisations, and because of the positive characteristics attributed to many
FBOs. Also, a truly pluralistic approach to development must also include religious organisations alongside secular organisations.