RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*A German-South African dialogue on
historical and current challenges*

Editors
Renier Koegelenberg
Udo Hahn

**KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG**

EVANGELISCHE AKADEMIE
TUTZING

EFSA

UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: the role and responsibility of churches and religious communities

A World Council of Churches (WCC) perspective

Isabel Apawo Phiri¹

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank our hosts, the Protestant Academy of Tutzing and the Ecumenical Foundation of South Africa (EFSA), for inviting me to be being part of this conference to reflect on 25 years of democracy in South Africa and to discuss religion and the state: “Cooptation or Cooperation, the Relationship of Religion and the State. A South African-German Dialogue”. You have invited me to participate in the panel and in particular to contribute to this debate with a focus on *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: The Role and Responsibility of Churches and Religious Communities*. My comments will predominantly be based on the experience and perspective of the World Council of Churches (WCC), an ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948, which today brings together 350 Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well as numerous united and unified churches, Mennonites, friends,

¹ Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri is Deputy General Secretary for Public Witness and Diakonia of the World Council of Churches. She is an honorary professor at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classical Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where she was also dean and professor of African Theology and Feminist Theology. She was general coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 2003-2008 and is a former editor and co-editor of the *Journal of the Centre for Constructive Theology*, which became the *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* in 1989-2014.

congregations, followers as well as indigenous and African churches. It is the largest and most inclusive Christian organization in the world. It represents more than 560 million Christians in over 120 countries.

However, I also speak as an African woman who has championed gender equality in academic discourse, for example, during my stays in Malawi, Namibia and South Africa. The year Mandela was released from prison I applied to study for a PhD at the University of Cape Town. South Africa has since then become my second home, alongside Malawi and Zambia. Therefore, I will also refer to experiences I had in South Africa as I reflect on the *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: The Role and Responsibility of Churches and Religious Communities*.

My talk is divided into three parts. First, the role and responsibility of churches and religious communities in the *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development* is based on who we are as churches and what we do. Second, I will rely on the essence and methodology of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which prioritizes prophetic work in collaboration with members of the WCC, with ecumenical partners or other denominations, and with people of good will. Thirdly, I would like to mention some of the challenges that may emerge when working with state and non-governmental organisations.

Who we are and what we do as a church and the principle of sustainable development

The fellowship of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and our ecumenical partners have engaged with the *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development*. When WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr Olav Kyske Tviet explained why churches promote sustainable development goals (SDGs), he phrased it as follows:

Churches and other religious communities are not engaged in humanitarian response and development because of the SDGs (or the MDGs), but because of their fundamental faith commitments to respecting human dignity, to serving the community, to protecting creation, and to witnessing to the divine. The faith that is our fundamental point of reference is expressed and brought into action in many ways: in confidence and trust in God, in the content

of doctrine, in the teaching of the tradition, in a commitment to serve and share, in embodying a community of faith and practice, in common witness in words and deeds.²

This means that global goals deal with issues that are central to people of faith, just as we understand each other as people and how people identify with the earth. Faith communities are united in accepting the fact that

- every human being has the right to live a life in dignity, free from hunger and disease;
- it is the right of every human being to develop personally and to live in safety and wellbeing;
- the sacred and divine and their life-giving elements are recognized as such;
- we have a common responsibility to collaborate so that our creed contributes to a more sustainable development of the entire planet.

These are the values of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), whose motto is “Leave no one behind”. In Christian terms, this means “justice for all”. For the World Council of Churches (WCC) this formulation is essentially that of the pilgrimage of justice and peace. This is the framework within which we perform our work. As we continue together on this pilgrimage of justice and peace, we acknowledge the fact that due to differences in doctrine not all churches are able to promote justice for all. This makes it difficult for them to implement all the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Problematic areas include: gender equality, sexual and reproductive health as well as the acceptance and protection of the rights of sexual minorities. Despite all the difficulties, we continue to offer protected places in which to continue discussions on these issues. It is well known that churches influence the position and work of governments on these issues. However, there are more positive examples of how churches and governments or NGOs have worked together to advance the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One example is the way in which UNESCO and the HIV and AIDS Initiative of the World Council of Churches (WCC-EHAIA)

² Cf. the presentation by Pastor Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches at the founding of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) in Berlin on 17 February 2016: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/the-role-of-religion-in-sustainable-development-and-peace/@download/file/TheRoleofReligioninSustainableDevelopmentandPeace.pdf>

work hand in hand to develop a sexual education curriculum whose language is acceptable to the churches.

A significant contribution of many churches has also been the development of tools to help churches understand the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) from a theological perspective, so that they recognize that the implementation of these goals (SDGs) is also part of their calling.

Some examples come from the work of Norwegian Church Aid; the Salvation Army; the EKD; the World Vision Prayer Day for sustainable development (SDG) prayer aids; the Anglican Communion (not yet completed); the Lutheran World Federation “Awakening the Giant” project; and the World Council of Churches (WCC) “Faith in Action” project.

With regard to the above-mentioned tools, the churches are aware that they can only advance sustainable development by knowing that they are a part of those who actually made it possible for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be formulated. At the same time, they consider these Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from a prophetic perspective. Thus, the churches have already pointed out that the SDGs do not address the roots of poverty in a very fundamental way and question the prevailing political and economic models. Churches have agreed that the goals represent the will of the world community to move towards a sustainable world order.

Acknowledging the importance of the sustainability discourse, the World Council of Churches (WCC) along with the ACT Alliance are involved in some of the most important faith-based partnership initiatives related to the Sustainable Development Goals, such as the Moral Imperative to End Poverty established by the World Bank (MI), the International Partnership on Religion and Development, which brings together UN agencies, bilateral donors and faith communities.

The methodology of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its collaboration

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is fundamentally concerned with promoting cooperation between churches of different faiths and people of good will.

The concept of the pilgrimage of justice and peace is based on cooperation in the following thematic areas: 1. Peace Building, 2. Climate Change, 3. Economic Justice, and 4. Human Dignity. In other words, it is about partnerships between churches, religious communities, governments and NGOs for a world where no one is left behind. In the sense of the Gospel, this also corresponds to the mission of Christians.

Challenges in cooperation between faith-based organisations and donors

It is also important to outline some of the challenges the church faces in its work with governments and NGOs so that solutions for better partnerships can be developed together.

Churches value equal and respectful cooperation. However, when governments and NGOs visit meetings of faith-based organizations just to share their own visions and expectations, without staying long enough to listen to the contributions of faith communities, it conveys the false impression that this partnership is one-sided. This is particularly true in a scenario where the vast majority of the member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) are in the global South, while the funding partners are in the global North. Therefore, when deciding which SDGs to finance, particular attention should be paid to power dynamics.

Faith communities also stress the need to take into consideration that the nature of the work done by faith communities does not always fit into the three-year cycle of donor funding and often cannot meet their evidence-based requirements. A good example is the work of faith communities in the area of HIV and AIDS. A great deal of the work carried out by faith communities (church congregations, women's groups) consists in helping people who live with HIV to adhere to therapy, eat healthily and maintain a positive attitude towards life. In order to be able to measure the impact of this work, qualitative analyses, statements from stakeholders and their documentation would be needed. However, there is hardly any financing available for these time-consuming tasks.

HIV prevention requires continuous education and counselling of children, adolescents and young adults (especially in a continent such as Africa, where 70% of the population is under 30 years of age) as they go through the different stages in their development which are full of challenges. They are prone to sexual manipulation, exploitation, rape, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, lack of school fees and inability to meet basic needs, etc. In addition to treatment failures, new infection rates of 50% among adolescents and young adults (AYA) have been observed in some countries, mainly because the majority of them attend schools in which there is little trust in teachers, clergy, dormitory attendants, etc., and who in turn also do not have the ability to provide HIV support for pupils. Factors leading to this failure are manifold and faith communities lack the resources to attract young scientists and researchers so that they can reach out to the younger generation, the ones who find it difficult to communicate with adults who have nothing to do with their reality.

The argument of “evidence-based” programmes against HIV and AIDS could be misleading. Donors often provide short-term funding (mainly biomedical programmes), despite the evidence that new infections are not decreasing, and they ignore the long-term effects of health projects of churches that would be more sustainable and cost-effective. Although the best treatment for HIV and AIDS would be prevention (to reduce the risk of new infections), this fact is ignored. Biomedical forms of treatment receive a large proportion of international funding, at the expense of prevention and education programmes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate what I have already stated. When it comes to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), faith communities and the state as well as non-governmental organisations are all on the same side – even though we may speak different languages: “Leave no one behind” or “Justice for all”. Faith communities can in many ways contribute to the implementation of the SDGs if these are presented in a language that is familiar to the faith communities. Partnerships committed to sustainable development objectives should not only be interested in rapid results, but should also consider long-term projects that have a sustainable impact. We need to be self-critical

for better partnerships. We must also jointly define what kind of partnership is the right one for both sides. Partnerships between the faith communities of the global South and the global North are indispensable so that churches in the global North can speak to their governments on behalf of faith communities of the global South.