RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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

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Opportunities and limitations for cooperation from the perspective of national and international church development organisations

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A perspective from Misereor

Peter Meiwald¹

Background

Misereor has been involved in the struggle for democracy in South Africa over many years. This included support for a fasting action in 1983 called “I want to be a human being”. This was informed by years of anti-apartheid work by the Southern African Bishops’ Conference (SACBC) and the South African Council of Churches (SACC).

It entailed a confrontation with the state and with political power (locally, but also in the global context – where the Bavarian leader Franz Josef Strauss defended South Africa). This struggle was also important for guiding the post-apartheid development processes.

Apartheid was rejected – since it selectively used some religious beliefs (based on a skewed perception of Calvinist tradition) to legitimise and accentuate racial differences. In contrast, the struggle by the churches globally emphasised the fundamental equality of all people.

It thus became clear that religion can be used in a different number of ways:

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- It can be a cause of conflict, a breeding ground for conflict, a catalyst for conflict;
- It can be abused in order to legitimise unjust power structures and to exploit and oppress people on the basis of their culture, their gender or their sexual orientation, their ethnic origin or even their religion;
- In a fundamentalist form it can justify resistance against “development” or also enforce a development concept in which individual material prosperity (as a symbol of a life-pleasing to God) is exaggerated in relation to holistic development in justice and solidarity;
- It can be an instrument for peacemakers (immanently postulated in practically all religions) to secure the foundations of development processes;
- It can be used in a holistic way in order to place humans at the centre of the development process;
- It can foster sensitivity to social and ecological challenges by referring to creation and postulating “responsibility for the common household” of God, the whole creation;
- It can counter radical hedonism, radical utilitarianism or even pure arbitrariness with an ethically and morally founded attitude as the basis for a logic of transformation;
- It can support local and grassroots movements, be “close to the people” through structures that have been built over many years, even in peripheral regions, independent of and complementary to state structures.

Thus, religion can sometimes be the cause of the problem, but it can also be part of the solution – if the resources and potentials of religion are positively integrated into development processes.

This latter option has guided Misereor in its work and legacy since 1958. A key policy position was: “Only aid that also changes structures is sustainable aid.” In essence, this is the discourse of mercy and justice (which is reflected in the meaning of “Misereor“!).

This implies a clear commitment to support for the poor and support in solidarity with the “development processes” based on their priorities and expectations – through development support; through advocacy this approach has become a thorn in the flesh of some powerful agencies in society.

Misereor has different spheres of activity that include:

- Supporting basic needs: education, health, water, rural development/sustainable peasant agriculture;
- Strengthening civil society: peace and reconciliation programmes; reduce and stop arms exports, support of refugee work, advancing “Fair Trade” regulations to secure better prices for local farmers;
- Addressing ecology and justice challenges; a critical evaluation of the mining of raw materials; addressing the climate crisis (*Laudato Si*).

Opportunities and (not yet realized) potentials:

- Fostering the intersection of and consensus on religious values, advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); advancing the climate goals for working on ecological-social change by integrating traditional values and traditional knowledge into modernization processes in a religion-sensitive way;
- Integrate the work of religious leaders into the development process with their authority and prophetic voice as agents of change;
- Appreciate religious values as a corrective to purely technocratic project logics in order to achieve improved effectiveness in development programmes – elaborate on added value of faith-based organisations (FBOs) instead of focusing purely on being the better (more efficient) project implementers;
- Strengthen the development of interreligious dialogue and platforms.

Limitations:

Firstly, I want to emphasise that cooperation and partnerships never imply an uncritical relationship. Each role player is entitled to have its own position – which is open to be questioned and criticised.

Secondly, a theological anthropology calls for partiality – in favour of marginalised and disenfranchised people and all those who suffer under neo- and post-colonial structures – which may well contradict politically powerful bearers of state responsibility for development.

Thirdly, a commitment to the global common good stands in opposition to a political commitment to one's own citizens.

Finally, the faith-based organisations (FBOs) and churches are not merely implementers of state policies on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or even vicarious agents of ideological investment growth and promotion policies. As Misereor, our point of reference is the Christian social doctrine, in which humans are clearly given priority over the interests of capital.

Concretely:

- The cooperation between the state (Bundes Ministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, BMZ) and ecclesiastical non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (such as Misereor) depends on the triad of trust, complementarity and critical contradiction.
- In the countries of the global South, Misereor does not cooperate directly with governments, because it operates as a non-implementing, partner-based NGO. Indirectly, however, partner organisations supported by us are located very concretely in the area of conflict between NGO freedom and governmental subordination to local or national development plans and under the constraints of restrictive NGO legislation.
- The (political) goals of southern and northern partners are not necessarily congruent, but are part of the negotiation processes in partner dialogue (e.g. the global dialogue to stop coal mining in the interest of clean energy – “Kohlestopp global”).
- *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis (Vatican) transcends the SDGs in terms of degrowth and a dialogue on values based on emancipation, liberation and breaking with old structures.

Other building blocks:

- The process of (our own) decolonisation continues – how can we work together to break through the colonisation of our minds? Partnerships (with all its asymmetry) can be a reflection group, but there is no “new identity” yet;

- FBOs and churches are also learners in the development process (e.g. human rights as a concept initially had to be gained against the majority opinion of churches);
- Determining the role FBOs and churches can play in the increasingly secularised urban environment of the future?