Swedish Mission Council's Religious Literacy Policy

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1. Background

This Policy was adopted by the Board of the Swedish Mission Council (SMC) on 6 March 2019 and applies until further notice. It was produced by SMC staff in cooperation with representatives from SMC's member organisations. SMC's Management Team is responsible for monitoring the application of and evaluating the Policy.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the Policy is to describe SMC's understanding of religious literacy and its significance in development cooperation and humanitarian aid contexts. The Policy serves as guidance in development projects, humanitarian interventions, information and communication activities, and internship programmes. The Policy also applies to SMC's own operations.

3. SMC's view of religious literacy

3.1 The world is religious

Religion and belief are aspects of the lives of people at all levels in society. They influence how people think, act and understand the world. Religion and belief also affect interpersonal relationships and norms, and are integrated into values, cultures and social structures.

The majority of people in the world define their faith or belief as religious, with religion[1] and religious faith being a natural aspect of their daily life. Statistical studies show that more than 80 percent of the global population identify with one or more religions. Demographic trends indicate that this number is increasing.[2] Other statistical studies show that the majority of the people in the world believe that religion plays an important role in their life.[3] Religion is both theological statements and a way of life. The way people practice religion does not necessarily always involve actively subscribing to a religious dogma, but it can still be regarded as a form of religious practice.

In large parts of the world, religion is an integrated part of society; religion and religious ideas influence people's everyday lives even if they do not regard themselves as religious. The way in which the state and society interpret and understand religion affects people and how they are able to live their lives. It also means that states have different attitudes to the right of all people to freedom of religion and belief.

3.2 Religious literacy

General religious literacy

Religious literacy[4] is the basic ability to understand in the ways in which religion and belief influence a society and its development. It involves recognising religion and belief as explanatory factors, without diminishing or exaggerating their significance, and understanding how they interact with other factors in the contexts of people's lives.

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[1] Within the sociology of religion, we find reference to the so-called *substantial* or *functional* definitions of religion. The first addresses what a religion or a religious culture *is;* in other words the content-related aspects that are often to do with issues of transcendence. The latter is about what a religion *does;* in other words what functions it fills in society and/or for individuals. It is also possible to discuss religion using the terms "folk religion," "personal piety" and "syncretism", and the relationship between *religion, tradition* and *culture*. SMC has no particular definition of its own, but recognises the value of a broad view of religion that includes substantial and functional aspects, and how religion relates to politics, culture and tradition.

[2] Pew Research Centre, *The Changing global religious landscape* (April 2017)

[3] Pew Research Centre, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World* (June 2018)

[4] *Religious literacy* is an established term in academic literature. See also https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/our-approach/what-is-religious-literacy. In addition to direct knowledge about religion itself, literacy includes understanding how religion relates to political, social and cultural factors, and how to act based on these aspects.

Religion, religious ideas and faith-based actors[5] are significant in people's lives at the individual, organisational and societal level. Therefore, all those working to promote social change, regardless of whether they live faith-based lives or not, need religious literacy in order to understand, navigate and act in a relevant way in a complex world.

Religious literacy also allows people to make conscious and conflict-sensitive decisions. Actors who are literate in religion reflect on their own identity and the values and belief systems they are influenced by, and how others perceive them in local contexts.

An actor's *general religious literacy* can be deepened and applied in three specific and partly overlapping ways:

Contextual religious literacy

In order to be relevant to individual initiatives, projects or programmes, general religious literacy must be explored more deeply and contextualised. *Contextual religious literacy* means having an understanding of and being able to relate to the religious actors and leaders present in specific contexts. It is also about understanding which religious values and power structures the people working on a project need to consider and relate to in order to achieve the goals that have been set.

It is also important for an actor coming from the outside to learn about how they are perceived by other actors in the particular context.. This type of self-understanding makes it possible to have a better understanding of and to more successfully develop local partnerships. It also makes it easier to relate to local actors, religious values and power structures.

Applied/practical religious literacy

In order for religious literacy to be applicable in development cooperation and humanitarian work, *practical and applied religious literacy* are also needed. This means – based on knowledge and understanding – developing conscious strategies to work with religious and non-religious actors and to relate to the various power structures and religious values the project comes into contact with. It is also important to understand how to work on practical matters with faith-based or non-religious organisations.

Examples of this include determining how to arrange inter-faith training in a respectful way according to the principles of religious freedom, or how to gain the trust of a religious actor that an organisation is not used to working with. Another example is finding ways to ensure that both women and men are heard in

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[5] SMC chooses to use the term "faith-based organisations" (FBO). A FBO is defined as an organisation or group of people whose fundamental principles or value systems are based on religious faith (or another conviction). They can also be defined further by, for example, placing them in the following categories: 1. Faith-permeated organisations 2.Faith-centred organisations 3.Faith-affiliated organisations 4.Faith background organisations 5.Faith-secular partnerships, (*Sider and Unruh, 2004*)

religious contexts or determining how an organisation should handle its own religious or belief principles in contexts where these principles are not shared.

Religious literacy combined with human rights

In relation to human rights, it may be necessary to use religious language in order to reach a target group. This is particularly important in contexts where human rights are regarded as an entirely secular and foreign system. When actors *combine* religious literacy with knowledge and acceptance of human rights, the right conditions are created for a deeper understanding of the target group's human rights. Providing opportunities for theological reflection or a forum for dialogue about human rights based on various religious interpretation traditions can help to promote this deeper understanding.

The ability to use religious language in relation to human rights can be described as a type of *bilingualism*. Actors who command both religious language and the language of human rights can serve as interpreters between religion on the one side and public international law and development assistance on the other. This creates better conditions for more focused, meaningful and deep discussions about important development issues.[6]

3.3 SMC's four approaches to religious literacy

SMC is an umbrella organisation for churches and organisations that, from a Christian foundation, are working to promote sustainable development, justice and poverty reduction. One of our main strengths is our knowledge about and experience of how religion and faith-based organisations – based on their own identities and assets – motivate, legitimise and mobilise groups and communities.

At SMC our faith and identity inspire and motivate us, and allow us to understand the need for religious literacy in the context of human rights and humanitarian rights. They also inspire and motive us in our endeavours to improve development efficiency.

SMC's faith and identity as a foundation

For SMC the Christian faith is a driving force for development and enables us as an organisation and as individuals to participate in God's mission for a just, sustainable and redeemed world.[7] Since we have many years of experience of partnering with faith-based organisations, we have seen and can understand how religious faith and belief can motivate, impact and guide both individuals and organisations.

The theological premise for our work is that all people are created in God's image and therefore have equal and inviolable human dignity. Based on the holistic vision we have for our mission, we share our faith in words and deeds and we

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[6] Jakobsson "For Better and for Worse", 2019

[7] *"Together for Change"*, the Swedish Mission Council's strategic focus for the years 2017 to 2021

work for a just, peaceful and sustainable world where human rights are respected.[8] To achieve this in a respectful way, religious literacy is necessary – both in contacts with those of the same faith, but also those with different beliefs than our own.

Based on a rights perspective

According to a rights perspective, or human rights based approach (HRBA), all people have both the right and the ability to participate and shape their own development. Since religion is an integral part of the lives of the majority of the global population, development actors who want apply a human rights based approach must relate to and understand religious institutions and power structures, as well as the beliefs of individuals and the right to freedom of religion and belief. Religious literacy is needed in order to work according to the rights based principles of participation, non-discrimination, responsibility, accountability and transparency.[9]

Based on humanitarian law

In order to fully respect and act in line with the *humanitarian principles* in humanitarian law (humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence), a humanitarian actor must be well aware of the religious and belief structures that exist among the people and local communities impacted by a disaster[10]. It is also necessary for actors to make carefully considered choices in relation to their own religiosity and beliefs to avoid, for example, improper religious influence or discrimination. Religious literacy is thus a core aspect of effective and relevant humanitarian work.

Based on development efficiency

Strategic partnerships with faith-based actors provide great opportunities for efficient, sustainable and conflict-sensitive development cooperation and humanitarian initiatives. Faith-based organisations often have large international and national networks and long-term relationships. They are often the first ones on the ground in disaster situations and have significant social capital in the form of their networks and legitimacy. These assets help to ensure that initiatives are efficient and relevant, and that advocacy processes are effective. Religious and faith-based organisations have the ability to mobilise people and drive change – for better and for worse. Religious literacy can therefore also add value to development processes. Within a faith-based organisation there may be elements that simultaneously promote and prevent the desired development, but in different areas or at different levels. Religious literacy can help us to understand this complex situation and make it easier to manage.[11]

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[8] SMC's value foundation
[9] The Swedish Mission Council Rights Perspective Policy
[10] The principles in the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief Principal Commitment* which tell us to "respect culture and custom" (No. 5) and "build disaster response on local capacities " (No. 6) also relate clearly to the need for religious literacy in humanitarian crises
[11] See Jakobsson or Patring, "For Better and for Worse" (revised edition 2019)

4. SMC's theory of change and religious literacy

4.1 Religion, values, culture and context

SMC's theory of change is based on the fact that change happens in the interplay of factors at the *social, organisational* and *individual levels*. In rights-based initiatives and programmes supported by SMC we focus on actors that operate at all three levels. They may or may not be faith based, but all of them are affected by, and interact with, the local context where culture, norms, values and religion are important factors (see the diagram below).
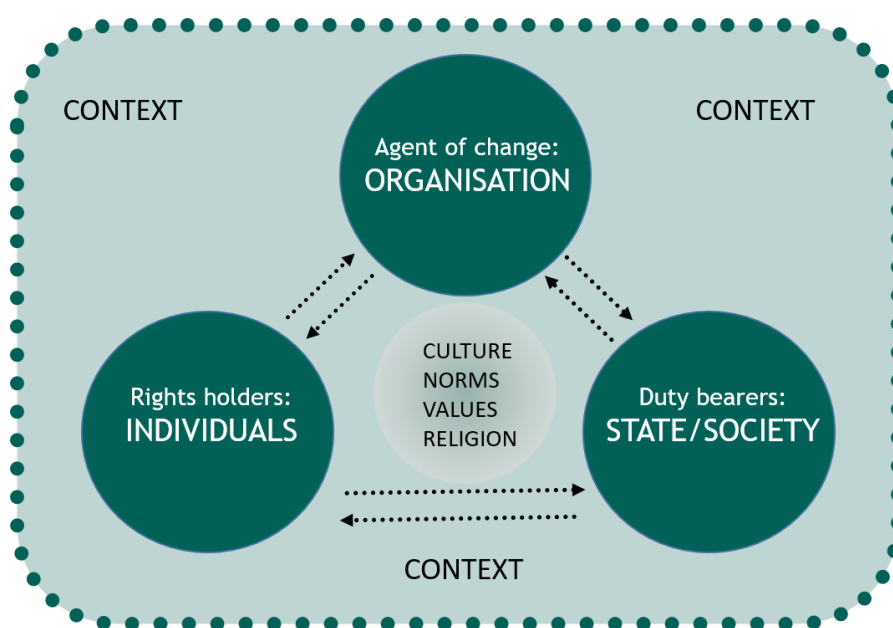

Religious literacy helps us to identify relevant actors and to understand how they are affected by and help to create the culture, norms and values that exist in the context in question. Research and experience show that religious beliefs are important in shaping culture, norms and values, and, importantly, they add existential values such as meaning and hope.[12]

To illustrate this connection we can take the example of a development intervention that was initiated to protect women and children from being exposed to *direct violence*. Violence towards women and children is often enabled by social structures that prevent them from demanding their rights and living in a safe environment, i.e. *structural violence*, but also by religious and cultural norms and values that justify and rationalise both structural and direct violence,

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[12] Nordstokke "For Better and for Worse", 2019

i.e. *cultural violence*.[13] To prevent direct violence it is necessary to change behaviours by, for example, having better protections and laws. But it is just as important to influence the norms and values that justify and rationalise structural and direct violence. Religious literacy can be both a resource and an essential tool to advance the conversation and promote the value-influencing processes that are needed at the societal, group or individual level.

In order to influence and change values and social norms, people must have freedom of religion and belief in their community. Freedom of religion and belief is one of the core freedoms of opinion that enable people to criticise values and norms among both moral and legal duty bearers.[14] If groups or individuals do not have the right to form their own belief system and act in accordance with it, they are forced to comply with existing norms, regardless of whether these are destructive or constructive. SMC therefore believes that an active effort to strengthen freedom of religion and belief is an important tool to bring about positive change in society.
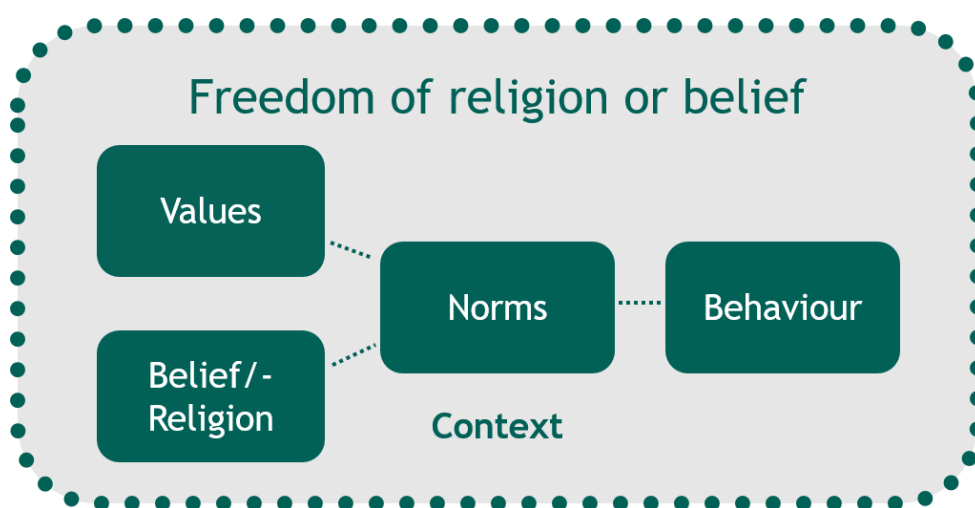
4.2 State/society

From a human rights perspective, states are legal duty bearers. However, it is common for states to delegate responsibility for certain legal duties to faith-based organisations, such as matters relating to family law where the rights of women are often significantly affected. The way in which state actors relate to religion may vary. If a country has a defined state religion, large portions of society may be affected by things like religious family law, blasphemy laws, state subsidies, and which religious/faith-based organisations have legal legitimacy etc. States may formally treat all religions equally, but in reality favour one particular

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[13] Galtung, Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, Johan Galtung, *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167-191

[14] Patring, "For Better for Worse", 2019

religion – usually the majority religion – over the others. States may be entirely neutral to the religions that exist in their society. They may accept religious pluralism officially while also banning all public expressions of religion. The relationship that state duty bearers have to religion therefore has significant consequences in terms of what religious communities, faith-based organisations and individuals are able to do.

Religious literacy gives us knowledge and awareness of duty bearers' attitudes to religion and faith-based organisations. It helps us as development actors to understand the conditions under which local rights holders, our partner organisations and ourselves as external actors can operate.

4.3 Individual

Religion and belief affect the most fundamental aspects of people's lives every day. They may affect who we choose to live our lives with and how we choose to live them. They may affect how we raise our children and whether or not we believe we have the right to choose how many children we have. They may affect the type of education we choose for our children and who we turn to for guidance on life's difficult issues. They may affect when we can, and want to, work or take time off. They may affect how we regard our ability to discuss things rationally and accept new information, but also how we view our responsibility to society as a whole and the future of our planet. They may affect how we see life here and now, life after death, and existential values such as meaning, hope and love. They may also affect how we create or solve conflicts and how we regard wealth and poverty – both material and spiritual.

The religion and beliefs of individuals will therefore always be important factors in various types of social development. Similarly, the ways in which states and organisations relate to religion will always impact individuals. Religious literacy is a crucial tool for enabling us to understand this relationship and is also necessary to help us choose strategies to support individual human rights. In meetings with individuals or groups with beliefs different from their own, development actors should focus particular attention on combining religious literacy with curiosity, respect and sensitivity. This means being willing to listen to the values and religious ideas that an individual or a group presents as an explanation for certain behaviour, while also standing firm in one's own identity and values. This also allows us to accept each individual's right to freedom of religion and belief.

4.4 Organisations

SMC regards civil society organisations as primary agents of change, with their ability to mobilise and support rights holders at the individual level in demanding their rights, and to ensure that duty bearers at the state and community level take their responsibility seriously. In many cases, faith-based organisations, through

their religious identity and practices, can open doors in development cooperation and humanitarian aid contexts.

Religious meeting places such as churches, mosques and temples help to organise people in locations where there are no other social institutions. Sometimes faith-based organisations have existed in a local community for hundreds or even thousands of years. Few can match their longevity and endurance. Their presence can help provide the continuity in development projects and humanitarian work that other actors lack.

Religion and faith-based organisations contribute both *tangible* and *intangible* assets to social development. Material assets may include buildings, personnel and structures to organise activities such as trauma counselling, healthcare and education. In many locations, faith-based organisations are responsible for providing much of the healthcare services and education. Examples of religious organisations' intangible assets are ceremonies and rites such as prayer and liturgy, or meaningful stories and narratives about people's origins, futures or what a good society looks like. Research shows that these types of intangible assets are important in healthcare, social, gender equality and peace efforts. They also help to make communities and individuals more resilient, including having the ability to withstand destructive forces and to recover from, for example, a humanitarian disaster.[15] But there are also many examples of religious actors – either consciously or unconsciously – standing in the way of progressive social development and undermining human rights on theological grounds.[16]

Faith-based organisations are in many contexts those who, from a rights perspective, are described as *moral* duty bearers. Unlike *legal* duty bearers they do not, from a purely legal perspective, have the same obligation to protect, advocate for and fulfil human rights as, for example, the state has under the rule of law. However, they always have a responsibility to respect human rights within the democratic space defined by the legal state. Faith-based organisations should therefore always consider what moral responsibility they have to ensure that all people's human rights are respected. This is especially important in contexts that lack democratic systems where, due to the challenges that exist, religious actors bear a greater practical responsibility as service providers and constructive parties in the country's development processes. Religious literacy improves the ability to analyse accurately the organisations and civil society actors that exist in a particular context.

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[15] See Jakobsson, "For Better for Worse" (2019) and the reference to Duncan Green's article about lessons from disaster interventions in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami. Local communities that received aid to rebuild their mosques recovered much faster than communities that did not.

[16] Azza Karam "For Better and for Worse" (2019)

5. Application and operationalisation

In earlier chapters, we presented our view that religion and belief affect the ability to bring about development and change at different levels. We explained what SMC means by religious literacy and that the right to freedom of religion and belief is essential in order to apply religious literacy in practice. We have also shown what aspects of this type of literacy are important in development and humanitarian initiatives. The Policy thus provides guidance for all those who wish to initiate, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate such initiatives and applies to SMC, its member and partner organisations, as well as other actors involved in development and rights-based work internationally.

For SMC, the Policy is applied and operationalised in the process of channelling grants for long-term development programmes, humanitarian interventions, information and communication projects, and internships. This includes ensuring that these activities meet their respective grant requirements.

In grant applications at the organisational, programme and project level, we want applicant organisations to provide thorough project descriptions including an analysis of context, actors and power structures. Their choice of strategies and partners should be based on this analysis. Since religion and belief are important factors in all societies, general religious literacy is required in all projects and we want applicant organisations to indicate how it has informed the choices they have made. Often contextual and/or practical religious literacy may need to be applied to achieve the goals established for the project. This may mean that the project's actor analysis describes how religious literacy has informed the choice of relevant actors and how the applicant organisation has reflected on its own identity and any impact this may have had on its choice of strategies, methods and the ability to reach its goals.

In contexts where the democratic space for civil society is limited, it is important to see how this impacts freedom of religion and belief. In certain situations, faith-based organisations may be affected more than other parts of civil society; in other situations, faith-based organisations may have greater flexibility to act or may themselves be the oppressive actor. In these cases religious literacy and "bilingualism" is even more important in both project planning and implementation.

In line with this Policy, religious literacy is an important skill for SMC's staff and for SMC's activities. We therefore ensure that our staff members understand what religious literacy means and why it is important in order to be a relevant actor in the context of development cooperation and humanitarian aid. We also ensure that our staff members have thematic expertise in the areas of religion and development, and freedom of religion and belief. They must also have relevant methods and tools at their disposal to use in quality assurance of projects and when working on capacity development with member and partner organisations. The Policy also forms the basis for preparing messages and positions to use in

external communication and in advocacy aimed at decision-makers, officials and other development actors.