

POLICY BRIEF

The religious perspective in the strategies governing Swedish development cooperation

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT IN SWEDEN'S STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION?

The purpose of this policy brief is to point out why a better understanding of religion as a factor in development needs to be addressed, as the Swedish government through Sida and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, develops new geographical and thematic strategies. It also introduces practical advice and resources from Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development in the form of relevant documents, training resources, and networks.

Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development is a long-standing collaboration between Act Church of Sweden, Diakonia, Islamic Relief Sweden, PMU, and SMC – Faith in Development. Our aim is to contribute to increased awareness and knowledge about the role of religion in international development cooperation. Knowledge Forum's members and partners have a large network within civil society in

the countries and regions that are now relevant for new Swedish development strategies.

Understanding how faith and religion interact with human rights and sustainable development is a prerequisite for effective and rights-based development cooperation.

BACKGROUND

More than 80% of the world's population identifies with a religion. Religious actors have, for better or for worse, great influence in all areas of development. In many contexts, religious organisations are among the strongest actors within civil society. Their role in societal development can hardly be overestimated. Partly as providers of social services, partly as advocacy actors, and not least as bearers and creators of values, norms, and identities for many people. Shrinking space for civil society and restrictions on the freedom of religion and belief also affect religious actors.

The Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development includes:



Religious literacy is what we call the ability to analyse and choose strategies in a multifaceted religious landscape. This includes the awareness of the role of religion, and knowledge of how society and religious actors interact on different levels. There are many examples of religious actors having a major impact on development cooperation and the maintenance of human rights.

The common experience among Knowledge Forum's members confirms that religion and religious actors and their influence, both positive and negative, deserve greater attention. A religiously literate analysis gives a better understanding, and in the long run leads to better efforts and increased effect of the Swedish development cooperation.

Our experience is that religious actors and their role in development, in many countries or regions, are not sufficiently visible in the current strategies. Knowledge Forum wants to highlight the inclusion of religion and religious actors as an obvious part of every economic, social, political, cultural, gender and power analysis. And in the human rights framework, the freedom of religion or belief, is one of the basic rights and should be included in the analysis of the democratic space.

Several Swedish development strategies are currently being revised. Therefore, Knowledge Forum wants to contribute with some simple tools to create better conditions for Sweden's international development cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that a wide range of religious actors, especially at local but also at regional level, be invited and involved in developing, following up and evaluating strategies, both in analysing the context and giving suggestions for action.

The members of Knowledge Forum and SMC can contribute with networks and analysis, regarding different actors and how they can be involved. Without the participation and analysis of religious actors, important perspectives risk being lost.

Before developing new strategies, we recommend that Sida, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs or Swedish authorities abroad do the following:

1. a basic analysis of one's own knowledge of religious actors in the given context and of one's own role:

- How well do we understand the role religion and religious actors play in our context?
- In which areas do we need to deepen our knowledge?
- How are we perceived by religious actors in the context?

2. an analysis of actors present and how they should be approached:

- Which religious actors operate in our context regarding various issues?
- What motivations and goals do these religious actors have?
- How do they relate to the goals of Swedish actors in the given context?
- Which potential key players for cooperation are there?
- What possible counterforces are present?

3. an analysis of the situation for the freedom of religion or belief:

- How do possible restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief limit the democratic space for religious actors?
- Which actors influence the freedom of religion or belief in your context?
- How are various religious actors affected?
- How are the results of Swedish ambitions affected by the situation regarding the freedom of religion or belief?

4. a review of relevant dialogue methods:

- What methods do we have for conducting constructive dialogues on various development issues with a wide range of actors?



RESOURCE MATERIALS



[Faith-Sensitive Humanitarian Response](#)

Online course at fabo.org developed by, among others, JLI, Islamic Relief Worldwide and Act Alliance.



[Working with Change in a Religious World](#)

Online course at fabo.org on religious literacy. Developed by SMC – Faith in Development.



[Scoping Study: Looking Back to Look Forward](#)

[The Role of Religious Actors in Gender Equality Since the Beijing Declaration](#)

Report from, among others, PaRD, JLI, Islamic Relief Worldwide and Act Alliance.



[Fundamentalisms, the Crisis of Democracy and the Threat to Human Rights in South America: Trends and Challenges for Action](#)

Report from Act Church of Sweden, FESUR and Christian Aid.



[Toolkit: Engaging with Religious Leaders and Faith Communities](#)

Practical tools developed by EU-CORD, ACT Alliance, Caritas Europa and Islamic Relief Worldwide.



[FORB Learning Platform](#)

A rich resource on freedom of religion or belief, with educative films, trainings, exercise and courses. Resources are available in several languages.

The members of Knowledge Forum for Religion and Development are aware that the processes of writing strategies are at different stages and that each context is unique. We want to offer our knowledge and experience in a way that suits the situation.

We look forward to further cooperation for effective and rights-based development cooperation!

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