



Research Programme on Religious Communities  
and Sustainable Development

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Keeping Faith in 2030?

## Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals

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### Abstract:

Religious values and institutions are key to achieving sustainable development in many countries. Yet when studying the role of Faith-Based Organisations in the early implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Ethiopia, India, and the UK, we found very limited engagement on the grass-root level, despite considerable interest. This is due to structural and political constraints, which hinder the activation of religious actors in the implementation of the SDGs in the interest of truly localised, sustainable development. This policy brief presents our key findings and shows how the SDGs can better integrate the potential of religious development actors.



# Keeping Faith in 2030?

## Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals

### Introduction

It is one of the primary intentions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to offer a more grass-roots approach to development, reflecting the underlying commitment to 'leave no-one behind'. This is why the process of setting the goals went beyond the already extensive top-level negotiations and included the largest civil society consultation the UN has ever held through an online survey enlisting the participation of seven million people worldwide. While the goals and targets themselves are general, their implementation is to be localised through the setting of national level indicators and the production of Voluntary National Reviews as well as Voluntary Local Reviews. And for the first time ever, development is understood to encompass the Global North and South alike, as the SDGs integrate development challenges in the areas of basic needs, inequality and discrimination, and unfettered economic growth. Since the goals have been adopted in 2015, the UNDP and other UN agencies have sought to build popular enthusiasm for the goals and to find ways to assist countries find an integrated approach to their implementation.

The sustainability of the SDGs thus is premised on broadening civil society participation and enhancing local ownership during the implementation phase. Religious actors and institutions are essential partners in such an endeavour, because they are rooted in local communities and culture, harbour aspirations and ethical ideals, and are able to mobilise individuals like few other social institutions can. We therefore set out to study how Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) had been involved in setting the goals and the early implementation phase of the SDGs. As part of a project, founded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and implemented in partnership with the Humanitarian Academy for Development, we conducted workshops in Ethiopia, India, and the UK, which gathered representatives from the most important FBOs and academics in each country. This was the first localised study on religions and the SDGs and our full report and policy paper was launched at an event in the UK Houses of Parliament with the Rt Hon Stephen Timms, the Labour Party's Faith Envoy. The policy paper and the individual workshop reports are available for download, and we have since published further academic analysis of our findings.<sup>1</sup>

### Embracing the Goals: Global Advocacy, Local Disengagement

On a global scale, there have been concerted efforts to include faith actors in the setting and implementation of the SDGs. In May 2014, the Interagency Task Force on Engaging Religion for Sustainable Development hosted a conference in New York which brought together UN organisations, major donors, researchers, and FBOs. This was a fairly small conference (40 participants), came late in the process of setting the goals, and the FBOs present were select and few. Since then, however, the task force has followed up with multiple consultations, the formation of a UN Multifaith Advisory Council (2018) and the introduction of the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings at the SDG High Level Political

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://religions-and-development.leeds.ac.uk/research-network/>; Emma Tomalin, Jörg Haustein, and Shabaana Kidy, 'Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019): 102–18; Emma Tomalin and Jörg Haustein, 'Local Faith Communities and the Sustainable Development Goals in India and Ethiopia', in *International Development and Local Faith Actors: Ideological and Cultural Encounters*, ed. Kathryn Kraft and Olivia J. Wilkinson (London: Routledge, 2020), 163–76; Jörg Haustein and Emma Tomalin, 'Religion, Populism, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals', *Social Policy and Society* 20, no. 2 (2021): 296–309.

Forums (2019). Other global initiatives have also centred around promoting faith actor engagement with the SDGs, most notably the International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development, launched in 2016 by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Our local findings contrast sharply with these global initiatives of faith engagement. At all our workshops FBO representatives and religious actors told us that they did not feel included in setting the SDGs. This was most pronounced in Ethiopia where many of the organisations assembled had not yet even heard of the SDGs or engaged with them in any detailed manner. Only one participant had been part of a consultation, but this had come through his work in water and sanitation rather than being involved in any faith-based capacity. In India, our workshop participants also reported that consultations had not reached faith actors. Where faith actors had engaged with the process, they did so as civil society actors, for example by giving feedback to the national consultation on Draft National Indicators. Our UK participants reported some involvement in national consultations, but only in the case of FBOs that already had a ‘seat at the table’ through the UN and other networks. This predominantly applied to Christian organisations whereas other faiths were hardly represented. Engagement with the SDGs themselves was marked by interest and scepticism alike. Participants were keen to find out more about the SDGs and engaged in lively discussions about the goals and targets. Few expected them to make a difference to their everyday work, which would instead remain guided by their constituents’ needs, the mission of their organisation, and the availability of funds. Therefore, faith actors did not look to the SDGs for programmatic guidance, but a number of them did expect them to make a difference in their advocacy and reporting structure over time. For several of our interlocutors, the ability to connect to a global advocacy structure was seen as a potential benefit of the SDGs, in particular if it enabled FBOs to hold national governments to account with regard to how they shape their SDG implementation and set key indicators.







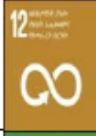






















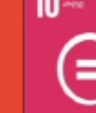


### **Implementing the Goals: State Capture vs. Empowerment**

To date, however, the SDG implementation framework is not set up to deliver this kind of empowerment. The UN process relies primarily on national governments to set local targets, measure baselines and report on subsequent achievements. This is vulnerable to political capture and civil society disempowerment.

In none of the three countries we studied, had FBOs or other religious been consulted in the national implementation process, despite the considerable charitable monopoly they hold. Our India workshop was overshadowed by how the Hindu-Nationalist government has alienated certain religious groups. Some workshop participants looked to the SDGs as a way to make this differential treatment visible, for example through the inclusion of disaggregated data, but the country has not opted for such an approach in its 2017 and 2020 Voluntary National Reviews (ostensibly due to the lack of availability of such data). Political space for civil society organisations is rapidly closing in India, while the government heralds its own development strategy as a perfect embodiment of the SDG agenda. The Ethiopian government, in turn, has ‘streamlined’ the SDGs into its own national development plan that is narrowly focused on economic growth and excludes humanitarian issues. Accordingly, the data provided in the Ethiopian Voluntary National Review for a number of goals does not reflect the respective SDG targets; it only includes what is relevant for the country’s own economic plan. Development assets and processes remain firmly in the hand of government agencies, and our interlocutors reported that in their meeting with government agencies they were being talked down to and expected to take orders rather than contribute constructively to the implementation of the SDGs.

The UK has lacked a coherent SDG implementation strategy from the start, which has foreclosed the forging of strong partnerships with civil society. Calls for a ministerial SDG portfolio have been rebuffed so far, including a letter by 32 faith communities to Prime Minister Theresa May, asking the government to work with them in the implementation of the SDGs. This only earned a tepid response from the Department of *International* Development, a clear indication that the inclusion of faith actors in the *domestic* implementation of the SDGs is not yet being taken seriously.

Therefore, while faith actors in all three countries saw the potential of the SDG process for enabling a broader and critical engagement with development, their experience and our background research shows that they have largely been sidelined by the national reporting and implementation framework.

S/No.	Priority Development Areas of Ethiopia	Sustainable Development Goals
6	Prioritizing urban administration and management to bring about accelerated urbanization and structural change in a manner coping with the accelerated industrialization.	     
7	Prioritizing the transformation of domestic investors	   
8	Prioritizing the development of human resources supported with technological capacity building	       
9	Giving priority to building climate resilient green economy	        
10	Eliminating rent-seeking behaviors and ensuring the predominance of developmental frame of mind.	    

Ethiopia ‘streamlining’ the SDGs into its own development plan (excerpt from Voluntary National Review, 2017)

### Partnership for the Goals: A Problem of Doctrine or Structure?

The faith actors convened in our workshops did not take issue with the SDG framework as such, nor the formulation of its goals. None of the goals were seen as problematic for faith groups and potential issues or conflicts in the achievement of certain goals (especially SDGs 5<sup>2</sup> and 16<sup>3</sup>) were attributed to cultural and political factors, rather than religious values. While some participants noted the

<sup>2</sup> Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

<sup>3</sup> Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

desirability for a greater incorporation of religious values, morals and ethical codes in the formulation of the goals and targets, they did not expect these to be part of such an international framework.

This aligns with the self-understanding of the participant FBOs as primarily professional development actors rather than religious advocates. They therefore expected to be treated like any other non-governmental development organisation and did not argue for a distinct religious approach to development practice. Instead, representatives presented themselves as translators of aspirations and values between global development language, local culture, and religious ethics.

Religious affiliation is not limited to doctrine but often overlaps with communal identities of a particular ethnic, historic, or class-based extraction. Unlike many other development actors, religious institutions and FBOs are therefore closely embedded in local communities and command their respect. This makes them an ideal partner for facilitating a localised, sustainable approach to development. The benefit is mutual. As our workshops have shown, FBOs not only aspire to be professional development actors in the nexus between global frameworks and local needs, they also see the potential of the SDGs for holding their national governments to account: to ensure that they stand by the international commitments they have made, steadily work toward the inclusion of marginalised communities, distribute resources better, and facilitate more realistic monitoring.

While the findings of our project are preliminary and of limited geographic scope, they indicate that these benefits are far from being harnessed by the current SDG implementation structure, due to its over-reliance on state actors.

## Recommendations

### Main Recommendation

Concentrated investment is needed to spread knowledge about the SDG agenda to local faith actors to enable them to participate in the international conversation and mobilise local resources for the sustainable development agenda.

This may include activities such as:

- Conducting further research into the local engagement of faith groups with the SDGs and the challenges they face in partnering with national governments in SDG implementation
- Drawing on the experience of international FBOs and their utilisation of the SDG framework for local development work and advocacy
- Connecting local faith actors and FBOs to hubs of knowledge exchange, such as the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, the Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, or the Kofi Annan Faith Briefing
- Inviting comments by FBOs and other faith actors on Voluntary National Reviews and Voluntary Local Reviews and implementation processes

### Further Considerations

- In this process, faith-actors should not be brought in solely as ‘religious voices’ but as development partners like all others.
- International NGOs and governments need to increase their religious literacy not only in terms of the history, teachings and practices of different world religions, but also with respect to how religions manifest socially and structurally in diverse settings.

- Perceived tensions between certain SDG goals or targets and religious values should be approached by recognising that faith actors can be important mediators for gaining a more specific understanding of such tensions and finding ways of addressing them.
- In building partnerships with faith actors, it is important that they are listened to and included on their terms rather than being instrumentalised to achieve pre-defined development goals.
- Cooperation with faith actors can be hindered by an overly generalised approach. Identifying which faith actors to engage with according to their relative background and expertise, and on what issues, should be given careful consideration.

**TRANSFORMING INDIA THROUGH Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas**

**Development for all Framework**

Strategy	Core Principles
<p><b>Build India's productive capacity through an investment-driven supply-side approach</b></p> <p>Hard Assets Transportation, Manufacturing, Power, Housing, Telecom</p> <p>+</p> <p>Soft Assets Education, Skill-Building, Judicial System, Regulatory Institutions, Entrepreneurial Ecosystem</p>	<p><b>Pro-Poor-</b> poverty eradication as a moral imperative</p> <p><b>Pro market-</b> pro competition and innovation</p> <p><b>Empowerment</b> not entitlement</p> <p><b>Minimum government, maximum governance</b> – rule based, policy driven decision making</p> <p>Strengthen <b>Team India!</b> – <b>Cooperative federalism</b></p>

/BJP4India +BJP

India's framing of the SDGs (BJP poster from 2016, online)

## Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch

### **Religionen und die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung**

*In vielen Ländern des globalen Südens ist die Integration religiöser Werte und Institutionen ein Schlüssel zur Nachhaltigkeit in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit. Dies legt die Frage nahe, inwiefern es bislang gelungen ist, religiöse Akteure in den UN-Prozess um die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung (SDGs) einzubinden. Bei der Setzung der Ziele hat es hier auf globaler Ebene durchaus Bemühungen gegeben, doch scheint dies keine wesentlichen Auswirkungen auf die Implementierung der Ziele auf lokaler Ebene gehabt zu haben. Im Rahmen eines kleinen Forschungsprojekts in Äthiopien, Indien und Großbritannien haben wir festgestellt, dass abgesehen von wenigen Ausnahmen religiöse Entwicklungshilfeorganisationen nicht in den Prozess der Setzung und Implementierung der SDGs eingebunden waren. In Äthiopien und Indien boten unsere Workshops für viele Teilnehmende sogar die erste Gelegenheit, sich mit den Zielen auseinanderzusetzen. Wie der her vorgelegte Bericht zeigt, liegt dies nicht an fehlendem Interesse, sondern an der Struktur der Implementierung der SDGs, die sich maßgeblich auf nationalstaatliche Prozesse stützt. Damit unterliegen die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung den jeweiligen nationalen und lokalen Religions- und Entwicklungspolitiken, was die direkte Aktivierung und Einbindung religiöser Akteure und Institutionen in allen drei Ländern verhindert. Der Bericht stellt die wichtigsten Erkenntnisse unseres Forschungsprojekts vor, und zeigt auf, welche Interessen und Anliegen die von uns konsultierten religiösen Organisationen an die Implementierung der SDGs herantragen. Er schließt mit Vorschlägen, wie der gegenwärtige Graben zwischen der globalen Nachhaltigkeitsrhetorik der SDGs und der Einbindung lokaler religiöser Akteure überwunden werden kann.*

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