

Accelerating collaboration, partnership and common cause across public and faith sectors

Conference on Religion and Sustainable Development: Building Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty, July 2015

We have talked for years about ‘public/private’ partnerships and now see this as the norm, and see great fruit. This conference presents a unique moment and opportunity to accelerate the growth of transformational ‘public/faith’ partnerships, in the common cause of ending extreme poverty and promoting sustainable development.

1. **The role of faith in human development is pervasive finding corporate expressions in countless ways:** the plethora of faith-inspired NGOs (such as Tearfund, the organisation I have led for 10 years); ubiquitous faith ‘assets’ such as schools, clinics and hospitals; faith networks with global and local reach; and deeply rooted local, national and international advocacy efforts. This is increasingly accepted and acknowledged.
2. **The role of faith goes way beyond these ‘corporate’ expressions. Far more fundamentally faith operates at an individual and personal level, conferring identity, influencing mindsets and behaviours, shaping social norms, defining the narratives we inhabit, and grounding our social networks and relationships.** This process is mediated in numerous ways, through our sacred texts, through our faith leaders, through congregational relationships. This dynamic is especially relevant in the contexts of people living in poverty - here faith is not a side-show, it is integrated into the fabric of life. Throughout my career - in banking and industry, at McKinsey, as a senior public servant, and now at Tearfund - I have been fascinated by what drives human behavior. Indeed, understanding this is widely recognised as an essential key to effective organisational leadership and commercial enterprise.
3. **Traditional economics makes sweeping, simplifying assumptions regarding what drives human behavior** (rational expectations, perfect information, self-interest, utility optimization, etc.). These have helped inform macro level policy. At a micro level things are far more complex and subtle. The 2015 World Development Report ‘Mind, Society & Behaviour’ underscores this point, observing that standard economics has a liability. *“It ignores the psychological and social influences on behavior. Individuals are not calculating automatons. Rather, people are malleable and emotional actors whose decision-making is influenced by contextual cues, local social networks and social norms, and shared mental models. All of these play a role in determining what individuals perceive as desirable, possible, or even “thinkable” for their lives.”*
4. Echoing this, I offer a testimony in two parts - drawn from 10 years at Tearfund.
 - a. **Possibly the greatest challenge - and opportunity - to sustainable, ‘whole-life’ human development at community level is this: How do we change mindsets and behaviours in ways that bring human flourishing?** How do we shift social norms, perceptions of identity, underlying values, the narratives that people inhabit? How do we reinstate human dignity, self-worth, purpose, hope? How do we strengthen the relational capital and local social networks that are so influential to all the above, and key to resilience? This leads many of us into unfamiliar disciplines - behavioural economics, social anthropology, neuro-science, and so on.
 - b. **The role of faith is very powerful, for better and for worse, in shaping all of the above factors** - identity, norms, narratives, values

and, flowing from these, behaviours, mindsets, relationships and networks.

5. **Over the last 10 years I have sought to do everything I can to ensure that faith influences individual and corporate behaviours and mindsets in ways that bring life, not death** – that enable people living in poverty to flourish and communities to be restored.
6. **Across Tearfund’s networks we have pursued this agenda in many ways.** We find that these initiatives bring more visible ‘whole-life’ transformation, in more sustainable ways, at significantly lower cost than alternative more traditional approaches. For example:
 - Influencing theology to embrace fully the centrality of serving the poor and confronting injustice, and challenging Church teaching when it is at odds with scripture, undermining human dignity and worth;
 - Drawing out the implications of scripture on identity, social norms, narratives, networks, and applying scripture to the practical challenges of tackling poverty and injustice;
 - Confronting the Church and its leaders on matters of injustice, prejudice and stigma, especially when this is evident within the Church;
 - Envisioning, equipping and supporting tens of thousands of local churches to love and serve their communities;
 - Building wider faith networks to advocate at local, national and international levels;
 - Producing and disseminating practical resources and tools grounded in scripture, to educate, equip and inspire the wider Church to action against poverty and injustice;
 - Convening, engaging and equipping faith leaders to see and embrace their central role.
7. **My recurring frustration, in pursuing this agenda, is this: I have found it incredibly difficult to engage public sector institutions,** who I know are passionate about the same poverty reduction agenda. Typically I encounter high-level support and encouragement that invariably does not translate into front-line action or policy change. As I reflect on the underlying causes of this ‘stand-off’, I recognize that both the ‘faith’ and ‘public’ sectors have struggled to understand one-another, to see things from an alternate perspective, to move beyond fear and even prejudice.
8. **But I also see many, many opportunities to break-through these misconceptions and build deep, trusted partnerships** – built around a shared commitment to do all we can to serve people living in poverty. Let me list a few that I hope this conference will explore and act on.
 - a. Shifting from generic, high-level dialogue to practical, specific, front-line oriented continuous learning. When we bring practitioners, policy makers and academics together around specific thematic issues and geographies, our experience is that practical ideas are shared and ongoing learning flows. I expect this conference to model this with ‘deeper dives’ into sexual & gender-based violence, and humanitarian assistance & disaster relief.
 - b. Reimagining our collective approach to building evidence on the role of faith in community development, and to communicating this evidence. Above all we need a collaborative and practical approach to building ‘evidence’ that both the public and faith sectors craft together. This might include: what we understand by evidence, what ‘robust’ looks like, how we assess the intangibles associated with behaviours and mindsets, how we create learning communities, and so on.

- c. Naming and confronting fears and prejudices, that both public and faith sectors hold of one-another. We must get to the bottom of what fuels such attitudes and confront obstacles to understanding, dialogue and action. Public sector fears may include proselytism and weak accountability mechanisms within the faith sector. Faith sector fears may include prescriptive approaches that undermine the inherent strengths of the faith sector, and exporting of 'Western' cultural norms that conflict with faith principles and teaching. We need to get open and practical.
 - d. Finding more common language and frameworks that bridge our differing contexts and perspectives. I am encouraged here, for example by the direction of this year's World Development Report on 'Mind, Society & Behaviour', and the recommendations highlighted in McKinsey's report for this conference. But there is far more to do.
 - e. Exploring and experimenting with ways to make it easier for Governments and multi-laterals to engage with typically fragmented faith networks.
 - f. Broadening the focus of the public sector to focus not simply on faith-based NGOs, faith 'assets' (such as schools and hospitals) and senior faith leaders, but also on the vast capacities that lie within local congregations, and on the role of faith at a local level in influencing behaviours - in the formation of values, social norms, behaviours, attitudes, social networks, perceptions of identity, etc.
9. **I hope and expect of this conference a decisive shift to move far beyond high-level rhetoric to practical, gritty, meaningful action that leads to lasting, fruitful collaboration across the public and faith sectors.** The vast majority people living in poverty are people of faith – rightly, I believe they are demanding this of us. The opportunities are huge. We must not let them down.

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