**Religion and Sustainable Development Conference, World Bank**

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Panel: *Cross-cutting Issue 3:* ***Legal, political, and religious freedom challenges and opportunities to religious engagement***  
I want to start by just acknowledging how far we’ve come – to a point at which it is normative to see peace and development work as closely linked, and religious engagement as a necessary component of development and peace. These assumptions have not always been the case. Recall that once upon a time, just a few decades ago, peace was believed to be achieved solely by political elites, and upon construction of a liberal state. And to the degree peace and development were linked, it was to the extent that most assumed more development equaled more peace, or in other words: as development agencies continued to reduce poverty, strengthen economic systems, and create public goods, violent conflict would disappear. Religion wasn’t even a twinkle in the eye of the discussion, meanwhile.

So thank God we’ve come this far, and may we keep keeping on. It can only make us more effective.

But now let me get to my marching orders. I want to reflect on lessons about who and how we engage the religious sector in this work.

1. The consequences of which religious actors are engaged –

I’m sure many of you have seen what I have -- that in many of the places we work, Western aid and peace organizations tend to engage the same sort of religious actors time and again. These are often older men, and they have tended to be more Christian. There are reasons for this. One, most religious authority around the world is vested in men. So if you want the most visible and most institutionally powerful authorities, you’re going to be dealing with men. As for the Christian element, I find this is often a consequence of two things: 1) Westerners tend to have linkages to Christian communities, who often speak English as a consequence of missionary education, and have more Western institutional relationships. 2) Christian communities have historically been more institutionally involved in peace and development work, especially at the internationally-funded level – large FBOs that receive a lot of funding from the West. (this is changing, Sarvodaya, Islamic Relief, etc.)

These two trends have consequences. First, it has meant that religious peacebuilding further marginalized women from peacebuilding and development initiatives. Given the increasing evidence of links between gender inequality and violent conflict, we must be careful that even as we work to engage religious actors in peace and development work, which can no doubt help with creating stability and reducing poverty, we aren’t undermining those objectives by fueling gender disparities – empowering actors and institutions that marginalize women and restrict their rights. Happily there are a lot of women religious leaders out there doing great work whom we can do a better job supporting. Katherine and I have a book coming out on the topic, highlighting many of these women.

The other sticky issue is that peacebuilding has been equated with Christian work. Monks in Sri Lanka who become involved in peace work are often labeled “Christian monks,” which affects their legitimacy amongst the community – and religious actors’ legitimacy and authority within local communities is one of the very things that make them such effective potential conduits for peace. Add to this the sensitivities about proselytization already mentioned. It can create an antagonistic atmosphere, especially in post-colonial societies where communities are wary of forms of neo-colonialism and missionizing. We must be cognizant of both these sensitivities as we choose whom to engage from within the religious sector in this work, so as not to undermine key aspects of the wider peace and development agenda.

1. How the religious sector is engaged is important

Not all religious engagement is good religious engagement. As the international community has begun to dip its toes into religious engagement, it has sometimes taken short cuts that backfire.

The first is this: development or peace organizations instrumentalizing the religious leaders, which religious actors are particularly sensitive to. They don’t want to be invited into a project already designed and conceived without their input, in order to offer their blessing. They want to help shape the peace and development agendas. I’ve been seeing hints of this instrumentalist approach to religion in some of the conversations regarding CVE [countering violent extremism] recently – in which religious leaders are seen primarily for their ability to serve as vehicles for messages, and little more.

The second point I would make here is about the interfaith dialogue. I’m a big fan of interfaith dialogue to build community connections and resilience and create more tolerant societies. But conflict is often, at root, about structural issues – political and economic injustices, broken governance structures, legal and other institutional forms of discrimination. So interfaith dialogue, and religious engagement generally, has to connect to these structural issues in order to be effective. In fact, I’ve found too often that disempowered or marginalized religious communities are frustrated or pessimistic about interfaith dialogue projects that do little to transform their real or perceived unjust situation.

Where the growing edge of the field truly is right now, I sense, is understanding how the religious sector and its work on development and peace work can be better integrated with other related sectors to ensure more meaningful transformation – not just on social norms, but on those political and legal as well, in ways conducive to human flourishing.

One example from USIP’s work that I think touches on many of these points, and speaks to the challenge we are addressing in our panel, is our *Women’s Rights in Islamic Constitutionalism* project. This initiative engages with three groups of actors key to effecting positive social change: legal advocates, political activists, and religious scholars. We are bringing these actors together in countries in which the constitution is currently being drafted or reformed within Islamic frames, in order to ensure that women’s rights are protected and advanced. The hypothesis we work on is that in those places where a human right is being obstructed on religious grounds, these three sectors must find ways to work together in order to proceed through the right legal avenues, to mobilize political pressure and communities, and to find religious argument and law in support of these rights. We based this lesson from the marriage equality movement in the U.S.

It is this kind of work – initiatives that are bringing the religious sector into productive engagement with sectors with whom they might not otherwise engage, and that is conscious of pushing beyond simplistic or easy forms of religious engagement, that I think is most exciting right now.