

Religions
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Canterbury to Cameroon: a new partnership between faiths and the World Bank

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The World Bank is probably the world's most important development institution. In 2002, it distributed more than US\$19.5 billion and currently oversees 158 projects in 83 countries; its work affects hundreds of millions of people. The same is true of religious bodies and their affiliated NGOs worldwide. While it would be impossible to estimate expenditures by faith-based groups with any accuracy, one could easily argue that the influence of religion is even more pervasive than that of the Bank. In addition to a strong showing among international development NGOs, faith-based organisations (FBOs) form the core of civil society in many developing countries; some estimates, for example, hold that faith leaders in Africa have direct access to 90 per cent of the population (Sugden 2002). Thus it is significant to note that the past five years have witnessed a major shift in the Bank's policy towards faiths and faith-based NGOs, particularly those involved in development.

Beginning with a meeting between Bank president James Wolfensohn and world faith leaders in February 1998, the Bank has begun a deliberate programme of interaction with FBOs. There have been more high-level meetings, regional conferences involving faith leaders and mid-level Bank staff, and specific roles for faith groups in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Multi-Country AIDS Program (MAP).

The Bank's change of attitude is important at two levels. First, its public policy of partnership with faith groups represents part of a historic shift at the World Bank. Second, any successful partnerships between the Bank and faiths will link the world's largest development actor with certain key non-governmental development bodies and a significant source of ground-level access and credibility.

Unfortunately, little information is readily available on the Bank's policy towards world faiths, largely because of deliberate decisions on the part of the Bank. Concern that close cooperation between a secular body and faiths may be perceived negatively in the West has led the Bank to confine much of its discussion about such relations to a special Intranet not readily available to outsiders. Most public press releases have been short and generally uninteresting, while field research has been delegated to the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), an independent NGO co-founded by the Bank and the Church of England. Meanwhile, turnover among key staff at the World Bank has delayed any significant field-level implementation of new policies towards the faiths, leading to the perception that the ongoing dialogue is unlikely to have any real impact on the Bank's operations.

We shall argue that this perception is mistaken. By tracing the history of Bank–faith relations, we shall show that the current Bank interest in faiths is the result of other long-term shifts that are unlikely to be reversed, such as interests in poverty, popular participation, and the environment. We shall also argue that, despite uncertain beginnings, high-level Bank–faith dialogue is having a clear impact on the Bank’s operational work and that this impact will probably expand over the coming years.

Early roots of Bank–faith dialogue

The framework for Bank–faith collaboration was actually laid by largely secular lobbying forces in the mid-1980s. The Bank first recognised the growing importance of the non-governmental world in 1982, when it established a commitment to explore cooperation between NGOs and the Bank. Little of note was accomplished. Simultaneously, however, a growing number of Western NGOs were becoming aware of the negative impacts of the Bank’s lending policies in the developing world. Initial lobbying was dominated by environmental concerns. However, advocates for the poor, women’s rights, and other social causes were also gaining strength. The watershed came in 1985–1986, when these forces succeeded in obstructing the seventh funding replenishment for the Bank’s International Development Association (IDA).

The IDA, while part of the World Bank Group, uses public funds to address social issues outside the scope of the Bank’s original charter and which may involve economically unprofitable lending. Its funding is replenished approximately every three years, following a vote by IDA member governments. During the negotiations for the seventh IDA, lobbyists in the USA forced through a 25 per cent cut in its funding, the first the Bank had experienced. In taking stock of its defeat, the Bank recognised that a significant amount of negative pressure had been exerted by nascent advocacy NGOs. It quickly moved to mitigate its new vulnerability by placating its strongest opponents and engaging others in dialogue. In 1987 the Bank created the Environmental Department and brought together Northern NGOs to discuss how the Bank might ‘engage constructively with them’ (Long 2001:21–22). Here, for the first time, we find faith groups mentioned specifically; the Bank listed ‘Poverty/Church groups’ as a single category in its liaison strategies (Kapur et al. 1997:386). Bread for the World, a Christian NGO based in Washington, DC, was involved in these early lobbying efforts. World Vision was also approached by the Bank in 1987.

The trend towards poverty reduction and popular participation

The involvement of faith groups at the Bank in 1987, while noteworthy, barely constituted a toehold for future influence at the Bank. The more significant shift was the Bank’s adoption of poverty reduction as a core value, something again accomplished mostly by secular forces. Poverty reduction had been a core value under Robert McNamara, the Bank president from 1968 to 1981, before falling by the wayside. It was reinitiated under Barber Conable in the late 1980s, but mostly as a means of placating critics. It truly became a core value again under Lewis Preston, president from 1991 to 1995. The new vision was influenced by the increasingly popular holistic models of development, and included everything from gender equity to clean water as important battlegrounds in the fight to alleviate poverty (Kapur et al. 1997:374).

Popular participation had also been added to the Bank’s agenda by political pressure, but some Bank staff perceived that participation could also be a tool for development. Robert Putnam’s work on the development of democracy in Italy, published in 1993, popularised

the concept of civil society as a force for democratic development. The hiring of large numbers of non-economist social scientists (or 'nessies') to manage the Bank's new pro-poor agenda probably helped transfer this concept from academia to the Bank and, with it, the recognition that popular participation would foster constructive engagement with civil society groups.

The growing need for operational aid

Implementation of the new poverty-alleviation agenda required operational resources that the Bank did not have. To acquire them, the Bank began forming operational partnerships with an unprecedented number of NGOs. Not only did the Bank draw upon the NGOs' physical resources and field staff, it also used their expertise in planning and analysis. This close cooperation developed a precedent for NGO access to Bank staff that would subtly expand the influence of both secular and faith-based NGOs over the next decade.

Wolfensohn 'discovers' faith groups

The focus on poverty faltered towards the end of Lewis' tenure, as the Bank became distracted by its efforts to aid Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. Direction was restored by the appointment of James Wolfensohn as president in 1995. More than any of his predecessors, Wolfensohn was deeply and publicly committed to poverty reduction, as well as to popular participation and local control of Bank projects. His influence is difficult to overstate; NGO and Bank staff alike consistently cite him as a central force for change at the World Bank. Among other things, his consistent, public commitment to poverty reduction helped assure long-term Bank staff that the new agenda was more than a passing fad. This assurance was a prerequisite for real change in Bank practice; without it, there would have been little incentive for field staff to deviate from their traditional, big-loan mindset (although the traditional mindset persists nonetheless among many staff).

Shortly after taking office, Wolfensohn began a series of visits to Bank project sites in developing countries. While such visits traditionally involved meetings with high-level officials in urban enclaves far from the actual projects, Wolfensohn deviated from the norm. In the words of John Mitchell, former head of the World Development Movement who had been recruited to the Bank in the early 1990s, Wolfensohn wanted to see 'what was really going on. . . . He was very good at seeing also a range of NGOs and what we now call civil society people within the country' (interview with the author, 3 June 2003). These visits clearly communicated the new president's priorities to other Bank staff, and Bank reports over the next two years note the rapid development of new ties between the Bank and Southern NGOs, including the appointment of numerous NGO liaison officers as World Bank country staff.

The visits also affected Wolfensohn. Mitchell notes: 'I think that he saw faith groups also played a very special role, particularly [for] some of the poorest groups. They were also some of the most trenchant critics of the World Bank. . . . Coming from that perspective, he was very keen to know what their criticisms were, and so on . . .' (interview with the author, 3 June 2003). The visits apparently convinced Wolfensohn of the importance of faith groups and their potential as partners for the World Bank.

The Church of England and the first dialogue

In 1996 the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC) held a meeting on faith and the environment at Windsor Castle. The organisers invited both Andrew Steer, director of the Bank's Environmental Department, and George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury.

Steer was a Christian, and during the conference he and Carey began discussing the possibility of a dialogue on the involvement of faiths in development. Upon his return to Washington, DC, Steer approached Wolfensohn and received the go-ahead to begin planning a meeting.

Shortly thereafter, Steer became country director for Vietnam and passed the project to Alex Rondos of the Bank's NGO unit and John Mitchell, who was then involved with the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and happened to be a churchmate of Steer's. Along with Andrew Rogerson of the Bank's London office and Martin Palmer of the ARC, the two held several preliminary meetings with the Archbishop's staff. Among other things, the group was responsible for selecting a representative cross-section of world religious leaders.

The dialogue finally took place at Lambeth Palace on 18–19 February 1998 and was co-hosted by Wolfensohn and Archbishop Carey. Jubilee 2000, the international debt-relief movement, was gaining momentum and the meeting was preceded by an acrimonious exchange in the press, as the two leaders sparred over the Bank's handling of debt. The Anglican press predicted a 'vigorous dialogue' marked by friction between the two men (ACNS 1998a). The outcome was quite different. Wolfensohn and Carey discovered that they had a strong personal chemistry. Following the dialogue they announced plans to establish joint working groups on development issues and to involve faiths in the preparation of the Bank's annual reports (ACNS 1998b).

An expanding partnership

The months following the dialogue witnessed a noticeable curtailing of Canterbury's criticism of Bank policy. In July 1998 Wolfensohn addressed a worldwide meeting of Anglican bishops, during which Carey publicly described the Bank president as his friend. They hosted another faith dialogue in Washington, DC in 1999. That year they also launched the WFDD, an NGO established 'to promote a dialogue on poverty and development, both among the different faith traditions and between them and development agencies', not as a tool of the ongoing inter-faith dialogues but rather as a joint partnership between the Bank and the Church of England (WFDD 2003).

The Bank and the Church of England also co-sponsored the Churches of Africa/World Bank Conference on Alleviating Poverty in Africa, held in Nairobi in March 2000. Shortly thereafter, the Bank established its own internal office for faith relations, the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, headed by Katherine Marshall and initially attached to Wolfensohn's office. This initiative resulted directly from Wolfensohn's decision to 'take the world faiths dialogue and essentially turn it into a more concrete institutional form' (author's interview with Katherine Marshall, director and counsellor to the president, 4 June 2003). Staff from the Church of England helped in the office's establishment.

Dissenting faith voices

The friendly relations between Canterbury and the Bank were not representative of faiths as a whole. The issue of debt was a major sticking point. In reducing its criticism of the Bank's handling of Third World debt, Canterbury was breaking noticeably with faith-based advocacy NGOs and even its own bishops. Anne Pettifor, former director of the secular, but heavily faith-supported, Jubilee 2000 UK (and now director of Jubilee Research) recalled Wolfensohn's address to the July 1998 gathering of Anglican bishops with particular disgust:

The Archbishop of Capetown was going to make a speech about the debt. [Wolfensohn] flew in in some bloody fancy jet, he had lunch with the Archbishop, marched into a hall, delivered a really petulant speech attacking the church and attacking Christian

Aid [which had just shown a film on debt] ... and then walked off the stage. And the Archbishop of Canterbury kept saying 'This is my friend Jim Wolfensohn. I really like Jim. Well, he's a lovely guy'. And then [Wolfensohn] got on his jet plane and left. And the Archbishop of Capetown had yet to make his speech. (Author's interview with Ann Pettifor, 13 May 2003)

Pettifor's reaction seemed to be shared by several bishops, some of whom noted to the Anglican press that Wolfensohn had spent more time defending himself from perceived attacks than he had actually addressing the issue of debt.

The event highlighted the Bank's sensitivity to criticism and its sceptical attitude towards faith-based advocacy NGOs. Since 1996, when a public education campaign by the Debt Crisis Network, which would later become Jubilee 2000, prompted the Bank to create the HIPC initiative, faith-based advocacy groups had been formidable opponents to many Bank policies. In an effort to sidestep their influence, the Bank limited the February 1998 faith dialogue to religious representatives, excluding members of NGOs. According to John Mitchell, this was initially intended as a short-term restriction that would allow the Bank to form relationships directly with the faiths rather than through intermediaries. However, the institutionalisation of the faith dialogue in 2000 appears to have codified this exclusion, thereby insulating the Bank from some of its fiercest critics. While the Bank publicly credits Jubilee and others with bringing about helpful change in Bank policy, faith-based advocacy group leaders interviewed for this article complained of being consistently frustrated in their interactions with Bank staff.

Mired in discussion

The focus on world faith leaders has also had the effect of isolating the faith dialogue from operational effectiveness. In conducting research for this article, it was difficult to identify clear links between resolutions made at faith dialogues and concrete joint operations because, by the Bank's own admission, few direct links exist. One reason for this is that many faith groups channel their development work through associated NGOs that are not under the direct control of faith's 'world leader'. Thus faith leaders are isolated from sources of operational impact, and operational NGOs are excluded from the discussions that might prompt them to initiate new projects with the Bank. The problem seems mirrored on the Bank side, with relatively few operational staff becoming involved in the dialogue. The participants in the dialogue themselves finally seemed to recognise the problem in October 2002 when, nearly five years after their first meeting, they noted that 'the time has come to move to action' (World Bank 2002b).

The dialogue's emphasis on discussion and the exclusion of operational groups has also obscured the importance of the dialogue to those groups themselves. Several of the large faith-based NGOs contacted in research conducted for this article were unaware of the dialogue's existence, let alone any impact it had had on their work. Some, like World Vision, have been organising research and conferences that parallel the work of the WFDD without establishing any connection to the semi-official faith body. None of the faith-based operational NGOs contacted could articulate any clear impact that the dialogue had had on their own relations with the Bank. However, some seemed hopeful that it might eventually yield favourable dividends, and at least one, World Vision, seemed to be monitoring the process.

Ramifications of the Bank-faith dialogue

The most significant impacts of the Bank-faith dialogue are obscured from the public eye because they have occurred within the Bank itself and been obstructed by unrelated events.

The Nairobi conference held in 2000 generated much more specific resolutions than any of the multi-faith dialogues before or since. Few of these resolutions came to fruition because Robert Calderisi, World Bank country director for Cameroon and one of the major Bank participants in the conference, retired shortly thereafter. However, before doing so, he did involve churches in a new AIDS initiative and, working with local faith representatives, facilitated a dialogue between faith and government officials on the issue of healthcare.

Neither of these two projects was specifically planned in Nairobi and, while AIDS featured in the conference proceedings, the sort of faith–government–Bank ‘trialogue’ that Calderisi hosted did not. Calderisi’s actions in the absence of any clear resolutions in this regard highlight the greatest strength of larger dialogue between faiths and the Bank: it gives ground-level actors the freedom to initiate interaction with faiths and FBOs.

The importance of faiths is a clear and daily reality for those who work in the developing world. The Bank’s poverty-alleviation and popular participation agendas have given Bank staff the need to work with local faith leaders and faith-based NGOs. The Bank’s public recognition of faiths, particularly in the pronouncements of its president and in his regular dialogue with faith leaders, gives Bank staff the freedom to act on that necessity.

Current Bank projects involving FBOs

The Bank has important partnerships with several faith-based NGOs, including a long-standing partnership with Interchurch Medical Assistance in the fight against river blindness and several projects with World Vision. However, partnerships with Western NGOs seem, as yet, largely unaffected by the Bank’s new policies. The impact of the faith dialogue is most clear where local faith representatives are involved. These include the PRSPs and other local consultations, MAP, and capacity building through the Dialogue Office.

The PRSPs and other consultations

The PRSPs, a worldwide, participatory review of Bank policies, were launched in September 1999. The PRSPs specifically included faiths among the civil society groups to be consulted. A sourcebook for World Bank staff conducting such consultations (PRSP and otherwise), published in 2000, also included several specific references to religious groups and faith-based grassroots organisations. Research by the WFDD into the effectiveness of the PRSP process indicates that faith groups are being closely consulted in certain countries. In countries where they are not (of which there are many) blame seems to lie mostly with government suspicion of faith groups, which are often perceived as political competitors. This is a problem that is not likely to be remedied quickly; and other complaints, especially that the Bank has excluded its controversial macro-economic policies from the topics under public discussion, indicate that the Bank’s commitment to popular participation has still not fully matured. However, the political pressure for popular participation, combined with the prevailing belief that participation is necessary for healthy development, means that the issue will stay on the agenda. Now that faith groups have been written into Bank guidelines for staff conducting consultations, faith involvement is likely to stay as well.

Multi-Country AIDS Program

In September 2000, the Bank launched the Multi-Country AIDS Program for Africa (MAP), which was followed by a similar programme for the Caribbean in June 2001. MAP’s goals include increasing the involvement of civil society. In Africa, especially, this has meant

working with FBOs. Unfortunately, this portion of MAP has had only middling success. A draft copy of the MAP2 proposal, following the first round of the project, noted: '[f]ew community funds are operating yet. . . . Funding has been slow to reach implementing agencies and communities' (World Bank 2002a). This parallels complaints from NGO field staff that even Bank funds specifically earmarked for faith groups rarely make it to their intended recipients. Funds are generally held up by national governments. Sometimes the problem is simply corruption but often, as with the PRSPs, governments are reluctant to empower potential political competitors.

The Bank seems to be tackling the problem from several angles. Combating corruption has been a long-standing commitment for Wolfensohn, undertaken despite the established principle of non-interference in the internal politics of client states. The Bank is also seeking to sponsor 'trialogues', similar to that hosted by Calderisi in Cameroon, whereby the Bank can mediate between government officials and civil society organisations. Lastly, the Bank and certain partner organisations are devoting resources to capacity building to enable more local groups to qualify for Bank funds. The MAP2 proposal notes a partnership with USAID specifically for capacity building for 'faith-based institutions' (World Bank 2002a).

Capacity building through the Dialogue Office

The failure to disburse the money designated for faith groups has been rather embarrassing for the Bank. Therefore, the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, the Bank's official channel for dealing with faiths, has initiated a series of workshops to build relationships with, and develop the capacity of, FBOs working to fight AIDS. The first was held in Addis Ababa in May 2003 and specifically addressed the role of faiths in HIV/AIDS initiatives in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Katherine Marshall, director of the Development Dialogue, worked with Ray Martin, head of Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH), to develop the guest list. Martin and others believe that the failure to disburse the funds is not just one of capacity building but also one of excessive bureaucracy. The Bank's bureaucratic requirements overwhelm many would-be applicants. CCIH is lobbying the Bank to simplify the process (author's interview with Ray Martin, 5 June 2003). It has as yet been unsuccessful, but CCIH's involvement with Marshall's workshop indicates some potential for the organisation, and perhaps others like it, to exert more influence.

The path ahead

One additional factor, mentioned frequently by those interviewed for this article, is the Bush administration's stated preference for faith-based initiatives. None felt that the administration's proposals had had much direct impact on Bank policy; rather, it was felt that they had served to draw attention to the broad contributions that faith groups have already been making. The issue is worthy of mention, however, since while George W. Bush remains in office, the contributions made by faith groups is likely to be a topic of public debate, particularly within the USA.

In the longer term, the involvement of faith groups may depend on the legacy of another president. James Wolfensohn's commitment to poverty reduction and popular participation has really provided the framework within which Bank-faith relations have flourished. Now that the dialogues have opened the door to consultations with faith leaders and the involvement of faith groups as operational partners, the trend is unlikely to be reversed. Faith groups are simply too prevalent in most developing countries for Bank staff arbitrarily to exclude them from inclusive, participatory development projects. The real question, then, is how long the

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Bank's commitment to holistic development will last. That question is clearly beyond the scope of this article, but recent history indicates that as long as the movement towards participatory, pro-poor development grows, faith involvement is likely to grow with it.

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