



Workshop on Global Development and Institutions Inspired by Faith in Bangladesh

BACKGROUND

On January 26-27th World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and the Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University convened a small consultation in London to discuss objectives, outputs, and potential entry points for a multi-year research program in Bangladesh and broadly outline a way forward. The consultation brought together leading scholars and development practitioners working at the intersection of religion and international development in Bangladesh (see Annex 1). Their diverse perspectives and expertise provided a nuanced portrait of contemporary Bangladesh and situated this potential research endeavor within the existing knowledge base. Discussions also helped to identify and contextualize deeply embedded development challenges and explore their important but often obscured religious dimensions.

The wide-ranging discussions over the course of the two-day consultation complemented and added important context to WFDD's prior desk research. There was general enthusiasm for the project, grounded both in increasing sensitivity to religious dimensions of many challenges facing Bangladesh and the dearth of up-to-date research around them. There was support for the formation of a working group, with members of the consultation group forming the core.

OVERVIEW OF DISCUSSION

Religion, Politics and Current Tensions

Religious conflict and tensions in Bangladesh are a growing concern, both domestically and internationally. While these tensions are seen as threatening development programs at many levels, it was agreed that Bangladesh, with its strong tradition of pluralism, has not seen the same level of religiously inspired communal violence seen elsewhere regionally. The focus in discussions therefore was on the root causes of current points of conflict. Some stressed that casting current tensions as solely inspired by religion obscures complex fault lines in modern Bangladesh, notably rural-urban, class, and political divides; religion is used in service of a range of causes. Radical messages and divisive religious rhetoric gain traction especially when communities feel voiceless. Within an admittedly deeply dysfunctional democratic political system, direct engagement on development issues allows religious leaders to voice opinions on the future of their country.

Caustic political divisions may be an inescapable reality in the Bangladeshi context, and religion has become a central element in the country's political theater. Politicians in Bangladesh have looked for issues that resonate with the public, and given the great importance of religion in the lives of many,

the subject has become a political football, used alternately to legitimize and discredit political actors. While many Bangladeshis believe religion has a public role to play, they disagree with its current use in politics. In order to navigate the many sensitivities and partisan actors, a careful and informed research strategy with clearly defined objectives is essential. An understanding of the political form religion takes also highlights the potential benefits that might come from a thorough and professional review that takes development objectives as a point of departure and explores non-politicized expressions of religion in civil society.

WHERE ARE THE KNOWLEDGE GAPS?

A key consultation objective was to identify knowledge gaps. Even at a very basic level a general lack of appreciation of the full religious diversity of the country was, it was generally agreed, a significant blind spot (not least among international development actors). The fact that Bangladesh is 90 percent Sunni Muslim accentuates the false narrative of homogeneity that ignores important Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian minorities as well as the great diversity within Islamic traditions themselves. Recognizing this diversity in a meaningful way might help take some of the wind out of divisive majoritarian political rhetoric and open space for inter- and intra-religious dialogue that could help create a climate characterized by more tolerance and respect. There was a strong desire for a non-political public dialogue on religion and development that is inclusive and visible.

Another important gap in knowledge involves the activities of grassroots faith-inspired organizations in Bangladesh, which current estimates suggest are numerous and widespread, representing a range of faith affiliations and community development approaches. There has been very limited exploration of their practical work, but there is considerable interest both in academic and development communities. These organizations are often innovators, able to do more with less, and operate on a “break even” model.

Through discussions there emerged several cases in which religious leaders have been successfully engaged in secular development projects and were able to inspire significant behavior change in their communities on issues such as child marriage and hand washing. Taking stock of such successes and distilling best practices (perhaps even regionally) could benefit future engagement efforts. It will be important, though, to learn from successes, but also from failures, miscues and false starts so as not to repeat prior mistakes. Despite considerable pessimism regarding the politicization of religion in Bangladesh, those working on such grassroots initiatives seemed more optimistic about the role of religion in civil society. A pertinent issue is how and how far knowledge gaps hinder meaningful collaboration between faith and development communities.

APPROACHES AND ENTRY POINTS

The discussion also explored research approaches, given the nature of the religious and political backdrop mentioned above. Participants agreed that it is neither realistic nor, indeed, ethical to seek to attempt to change the basic fabric of Bangladeshi society. The goal must be, rather, to work with culturally influential figures and institutions to promote shared development goals. There are obvious sensitivities around any appearance of “instrumentalizing” religious figures by external

development actors. In light of this fact research should have a two-pronged focus: knowledge creation and stakeholder engagement. Particularly where and when it is intended to influence policy, research should be a collaborative and participatory process. It will also be important in the Bangladeshi context to take an inclusive approach and to be conscious not to alienate, which will make research design and breadth of exploration critical considerations.

Direct engagement with religious leaders, particularly in a context such as Bangladesh, requires considerable sensitivity and adequate time to build trust. Such research thus necessitates a long-term approach. In order for dialogue to be productive, there is a need to meet religious leaders where they are. One example, touched on in discussions, was the general perception that Islamic leaders oppose women in the workplace; however, some cited responses suggesting that their concerns may involve primarily a desire that women be appropriately dressed in the workplace. Adding nuance to such perspectives informs where and how to engage on potentially sensitive subjects and identifies entry points for conversations. A suggestion was that engagement should provide space for religious leaders to save face in interactions that may lead to shifts in strongly held social and moral beliefs.

A research program in this area, even more than others, must be grounded in a nuanced appreciation of the political terrain, but cannot be seen as associated with political actors. The advice was to build partnerships that take a long-term view and can outlast sporadic political crises. Given the political challenges, there were some differences in views as to the appropriate and feasible potential engagement with the government. High-level government connections might provide traction, and more specifically opportunity to influence policy and funding of various initiatives. Indeed, there is potential to tap into focal priorities of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, including a major focus on gender. Whatever the level of engagement with government, it is clear that skillful navigating of the political landscape must be a primary consideration.

NEXT STEPS

The next step for WFDD/Berkley Center is to elaborate a detailed research program, both a “base level” mapping exercise that can be accomplished with existing funding, and a broader initiative for which additional financing will be sought. The base level research program would focus on a mapping of the development-related activities and ideas among religious communities combined with field surveys of attitudes of a sample of religious leaders. The full research program would focus on religious dimensions of leading development issues, building on the insights reflected below. The research would involve fieldwork in association with partner institutions (BRAC University and others), both qualitative (interview based) and quantitative (surveys). Significant links will be explored with other Berkley Center faculty and programs, notably Jose Casanova’s work on secular/religious issues and the regional dimensions of religious tensions.

TOPICS SUGGESTED FOR IN DEPTH EXPLORATION

Education

Issues of education were seen as central to the future of Bangladesh and while enrolment numbers are high, quality of education is a significant current challenge. Given the historical importance of

madrassa education, much of the current religious tensions center on religion's changing role in education. Thus addressing education, carefully, is a clear priority.

Despite considerable interest (particularly among international development partners) Bangladesh's madrassa system has not seen a systematic exploration. Various surveys and research efforts have contributed to a somewhat fragmentary picture. It was agreed that despite concerns, there is no evidence that extremist ideologies are being propagated through either of the two main madrassa systems: the government-funded 'Alia or the independent Quomi. However, there is little understanding or oversight of curriculum and some suggested that many *ulama* are not familiar with the broader canon of Islamic theology and its historical foundations, even in Bangladesh; however there was the impression that *ulama* would generally have a positive attitude towards reform.

One suggestion is that research could support a "counter discourse" drawing on the work of moderate international Islamic scholars, translated into Bengali. This could highlight themes of religious tolerance and respect for multiple viewpoints. One suggestion was to help develop a critical three volume series with commissioned essays as a beginning of this counter discourse, though there is a need for an institution that critically examines Islamic thought in Bangladesh and provides space for discussion on such topics.

The government plans to introduce a religion and morality module into the public curriculum and this process is also worth following.

Good Governance and Corruption

Despite considerable strides on many development indicators, grave and deeply seated governance challenges in Bangladesh are a major roadblock to future progress. The country ranks 136th out of 175 countries surveyed in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index for 2013. Several commented on the sense of disenfranchisement among many Bangladeshi citizens and a general perception that politics can be a very profitable enterprise for those involved. It was suggested that religious leaders, in their capacity as guardians of the moral order, could potentially play a far greater role in efforts to address this entrenched challenge. Since many religious traditions are consistent with democratic values and extoll anti-corruption messages this topic warrants creative attention.

Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

Given recent tensions, conflict resolution and peacebuilding stood out as an area where faith engagement will be critical. This is also an area where religious minorities can and have played a major role, perhaps most notably Bangladesh's Catholic community. Caritas has been a leader in innovating extra-judicial conflict resolution mechanisms that build on local religious and cultural institutions to resolve disputes through dialogue. These avenues for dialogue can also be tapped into to promote participatory community development projects. Caritas and Dhaka University could both be important strategic partners for an exploration of faith-based conflict resolution strategies.

Gender

Development projects that work to empower rural women have traditionally been a major point of contention between religious and secular actors in Bangladesh. The consultation discussed several

possibly ways to approach research on this critical topic that respect the sensitivities that surround it. It was suggested that if gender is to be a focus, the exploration must be inclusive and take the family as a unit; if men feel left out of the process they are more likely to resist such projects. This inclusive focus is all the more important as women's employment in the garment industry is changing traditional household roles with men taking on increasing domestic responsibilities. Exploring local women's understandings of empowerment and how religion is perceived as facilitating or hindering that process could offer relevant insights. Here the class dimension is critical as it shapes women's experience of and approach to religion in powerful ways.

Child Nutrition

Bangladesh lags significantly in nutrition and the statistics are nothing short of alarming: UNICEF estimates child stunting at 36 percent and wasting at 16 percent during the period 2007-2011. Participants saw the issue of child nutrition as a means to engage with rural women and faith leaders on a non-politically charged issue. A strategy to promote faith engagement on this issue is well worth exploring.

Roles of media, faith linked and secular

Media roles (traditional, social etc.) are widely seen as important but their religious dimensions have not been explored. Sermons, for example, are now widely available on mobile phones; increasingly the way religious messages are spread is changing. Media play significant roles, positive and negative, and dialogue with some journalists could open new avenues for collaboration. The knowledge gaps here would be an important gap to fill.

RESEARCH PLAN

Preliminary mapping

The preliminary mapping phase would take place over several months, building on thorough desk research and insights gained from the consultation and supplemented by work on the ground in Bangladesh. It will involve qualitative interviews with a range of key informants drawn from faith and development communities and relevant government entities. These conversations will help to establish a fuller picture of the roles faith actors currently play in development efforts, both formally and informally. A central goal would be a thorough stocktaking of the diverse faith traditions of Bangladesh and well as the many sub-currents within faiths themselves, which are often obscured in development literature.

The focus will be on faith leaders and organizations, autonomous entities of various kinds (national and transnational), and what can be gleaned about faith communities at the local level (including for example women's and youth groups). The review would highlight key figures and institutions and help build relationships that will be instrumental for future investigation. Development sectors where faith actors have particular influence will receive special attention.

This exploratory mapping phase would lay the groundwork for more targeted future studies that might focus on topics put forward during the consultation.

WFDD/Berkley Center are developing a more robust research plan based on information collected to date and working out arrangements to formalize institutional partnerships in Bangladesh

ANNEX 1 : LONDON CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Habib Ahmed

Dr. Habib Ahmed is a professor and Sharjah Chair of Islamic Law and Finance at the business school at Durham University. Prior to Durham University, he worked at the National Commerce Bank and the Islamic Research and Training Institute of the Islamic Development Bank Group in Saudi Arabia; he also taught at the University of Connecticut, National University of Singapore, and University of Bahrain. Ahmed's research interests include Islamic economics and finance, contemporary applications of Islamic commercial law, and non-profit organizations, and he has authored/edited more than 65 publications, including *Product Development in Islamic Banks* (2011) and *Role of Zakat and Awqaf in Poverty Alleviation* (2004).

Imtiaz Ahmed

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed is a professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka. Prior to that, he has taught at Sageesse University, University of Paris XI, Yokohama City University, Carleton University, and Jahangirnagar University. His research interests include South Asian politics, religion and culture, tolerance and terrorism, the politics of development, refugees and migration, and women and the environment. His publications include *Contemporarising Tagore & the World* (2013), *Women & Militancy: South Asian Complexities* (2011), and *Terrorism in the 21st Century: Perspectives from Bangladesh* (2009).

Sadiq Ahmed

Sadiq Ahmed is a development economist and co-founder of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, established in 2009, where he worked with a team to develop the Bangladesh Sixth Five Year Plan and the Bangladesh National Social Protection Strategy. Ahmed previously spent 1981 to 2009 at the World Bank, serving as country director for Pakistan and Afghanistan and chief economist for the South Asia region; he also lead key missions to Egypt, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Ahmed first worked as a lecturer in economics at Dhaka University in 1974, followed by a stint at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies as a research fellow. He has lectured extensively on key development topics at a number of institutions, from the Foreign Policy Training Institute of the US State Department to the Bangladesh Defense College. Dr. Ahmed received his M.Sc. from the London School of Economics and Ph.D. from Boston University.

Masooda Bano

Masooda Bano is University Research Lecturer at the University of Oxford's Department of International Development. She is also a research fellow at Wolfson College. Bano is currently working on a project that examines female Islamic education movements across the Muslim world since the 1970s through support from the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowships on Ideas and Beliefs, which are part of the Global Uncertainties initiative. Her expertise includes South Asia, female Islamic movements, madrasa and religious education, and development. Bano is the author of *The Rational Believer*:

Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan (2012) and *Breakdown in Pakistan: How Aid Is Eroding Institutions for Collective Action* (2012), as well as numerous other articles and book chapters.

Benedict D'Rozario

Benedict D'Rozario is the executive director of Caritas Bangladesh, the national branch of Catholic relief and development organization Caritas Internationalis. He has been working for Caritas Bangladesh since 1987, assuming the role as the executive director in 2005. D'Rozario serves on the government of Bangladesh's National Steering Committee for Rural Development Policy and is a member of the Humanitarian Advisory Council of Caritas Internationalis in Rome.

Samia Huq

Samia Huq is an assistant professor at the Department of Economics and Social Science at BRAC University, Dhaka. Her ongoing research concerns Islamist women and their engagement with policies relevant to gender and development, tracing the cultural history of Bengali Muslim women in the 1950s and 1960s, and debates around modernity and secularism in the South Asian context. Dr. Huq spends half of her time involved with research at BRAC Development Institute (BDI). She has worked on women's Islamic discussion circles in Dhaka, exploring women's involvement with informal religious groups and their engagement and contestation with textual forms of Islamic piety. Dr. Huq was involved in the South Asia Hub of Pathway's of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium and coordinated BDI's conference on Islam and politics, "Transcending Binaries: Islam and Politics in South Asia," in December 2010. Huq holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Brandeis University.

Lamia Karim

Lamia Karim is an associate professor and associate head of anthropology at the University of Oregon. Her research interests are in globalization, modernity, gender, and social movements. She is the author of *Microfinance and Its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh* (2011), which is a radical critique of the relationship between women and microfinance in Bangladesh. She is currently working on a new book manuscript entitled *Body in Change: Female Muslim Modernities in Bangladesh*. Her research has received support from the National Science Foundation, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and a Fulbright Scholarship. She is also the recipient of two Rockefeller Postdoctoral Awards.

David Lewis

David Lewis is Professor of Social Policy and Development and head of the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has worked as a researcher, teacher, and consultant on international development issues for 20 years, specializing in development policy and management. His publications include *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society* (2011) and *Anthropology, Development and the Postmodern Challenge* (1996, with Katy Gardner). Lewis holds a B.A./M.A. from the University of Cambridge and a Ph.D. from the University of Bath.

Ian Martin

Ian Martin has spent decades working at international organizations to promote human rights and peace. He has served as Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in East Timor (1999), Nepal (2007-2009), and Libya (2011-2012). He has also served in peace operations and human rights missions in Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ethiopia/Eritrea. Martin was secretary-general of Amnesty International from 1986 to 1992. He worked for the Ford Foundation in Islamabad and Dhaka during the last year of undivided Pakistan and the first year of independent Bangladesh (1970-1972).

Ali Riaz

Ali Riaz is professor and chair of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University. He has previously taught at universities in England, South Carolina, and Bangladesh. He also worked as a broadcast journalist in the BBC World Service in London, and he served as a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in 2013. Riaz's expertise is in South Asia, Islam, and politics, and his publications include *Islam and Identity Politics among British-Bangladeshis: A Leap of Faith* (2013), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (2010), *Religion and Politics in South Asia* (2010), and *Faithful Education: Madrassah Education in South Asia* (2008). Riaz earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Hawaii under the East West Center fellowship.

Pola Manzila Uddin

Baroness Pola Manzila Uddin is a champion for women's rights in the United Kingdom and internationally and life peer in the House of Lords. Born in Bangladesh and raised in London, she was honored with a peerage in 1998 and has served in the United Kingdom's parliament for the last 15 years. During this period she has chaired the All Party Parliamentary Group on Bangladesh for seven years, as well as charging several Government Task Forces and Committees.