The potential for civil society development by religiously motivated international partnerships

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U.S.-based organizations involved in international activity enjoy an appreciable degree of autonomy from government, particularly since their financial support comes largely from private donations. A recent study by Kerlin & Reid (2005) reported that private contributions to U.S.-based INGOs far exceeded revenue from either government grants or service fees. Due to their independence from government aid, these groups enjoy wide latitude and discretion in their programs.

Religious organizations, in particular, mobilize considerable resources to support various activities in countries across the globe, some with the expressed intent of furthering their religious or doctrinal aims (Hoksbergen, 2005; Kniss & Campbell, 1997). Other religious organizations are compelled by tenets of their faith to engage in humanitarian activities as a primary focus, with the overtly religious dimensions of their involvement accompanied by the provision of relief or development assistance. There are many faith-related INGOs widely recognized for their humanitarian efforts like Jewish World Service, Catholic Relief Services, and Church World Service. However, many religious denominations in the U.S. also provide direct support to partner or peer organizations in developing regions of the world. These activities are motivated by a shared faith orientation, but the outcomes are not limited to religious goals. Although millions of dollars are distributed through these partnerships each year, the development activities of these organizations are an understudied aspect of international third-sector research.

Partnerships between international NGOs from wealthy donor nations and local or indigenous groups constitute just one form of NGO involvement in the developing world. Most INGOs form linkages with organizations "on the ground" in host countries, but true partnerships between them are less commonplace (Fowler, 1998). In a development system heavily reliant on donor support and direction, equitable or "authentic" partnerships that reflect mutually beneficial engagement between NGOs are difficult to sustain.

Development is often not the primary or even avowed goal of these partnering relationships (Hefferan, 2007; Lacey & Ilcan, 2006). In general, these partnerships are designed to foster mutual understanding between church members in the U.S. and their co-religionists in under-resourced and often remote regions of the world. Confronted with the dramatic disparities between economic circumstances in the global North and the situation of those in developing regions, however, many such partnerships may evolve into quasi-development relationships. And although the development activities undertaken may be modest, the impact of empowering organizations and institutions—especially in weak state situations—may be considerable. This paper asks, what is the potential of such partnerships to play a discernible role in the growth of civil society in developing regions of the world?

This paper describes the international partnering activities of one U.S. mainline denomination, the Episcopal Church. Many of the 110 regional bodies (known as dioceses) of the Episcopal Church engage in a variety of partnerships with peer institutions in countries throughout the developing world. A survey effort is underway to determine the scope, scale and intent of these varied relationships, in part to ascertain whether the investment of time and resources contributes even in limited ways to the strengthening of civil society in developing regions of the world.

To frame the analysis, the study utilizes concepts from the literature on civil society (Edwards & Foley, 1998; Hoksbergen, 2005; Ottaway & Carothers, 2000; Peterson & Van Til, 2004; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004) as well as institutional theory, particularly whether isomorphic pressures lead these organizations into imitating the familiar processes of development organizations (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

In keeping with the conference theme for the ninth ISTR meeting in Istanbul, this paper hopes to contribute to our understanding of both the challenges and opportunities
presented by religiously motivated development efforts. The global economic crisis has no doubt impaired the ability of many groups to sustain their funding; a study conducted at the present time will likely reflect the financial pressures that constrain their activities. To be sure, the importance of civil society increases under such circumstances. In particular, whether NGOs from better-resourced nations will be likely to continue support for their partners in developing nations is deserving of research attention.


