

## **Bringing Back 'Faith' in Discourses of African Civil Society: Views from a Convening in Nairobi**

*By Jacob M. Mati, PhD, Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP), University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, ISTR Board of Directors and ISTR Africa Regional Network Coordinating Committee Member*

Faith has been a key in the historical development of modern Africa, and is bound to remain so for many years to come. Indeed, some of the most prominent manifestations of civil society in Africa are Faith Based Organisations (FBOs).<sup>1</sup> FBOs have and continue to fulfil critical functions in Africa's social development and politics manifested through service provision policy advocacy as well as on issues of human rights and democratization. Despite its presence as an inescapable factor in the continent's development, faith has not been accorded adequate attention in social scientific analysis. The recent ISTR Africa Network regional conference held in Nairobi on 11-13 July 2013 was an important corrective of this relative neglect.

This conference was a success in more ways than one. For beginners, the conference involved a good mix of participants drawn from both the academy as well as practitioners. Secondly, the papers presented reflected a rich diversity of the influences of faith on Africa's development and governance trajectories. The papers presented in the conference included the influences of faith and religion to volunteerism, giving and philanthropy. Another theme to attract papers was faith and conflict. Here, the papers illustrated both the 'good' and 'bad' influences of faith in conflicts in Africa. Specifically, while faith has been instrumental in mobilising resources, both human and material, for interventions aimed at solving African conflicts in places such as Northern Kenya and Uganda, faith has also been a key fuel to emergence and sustenance of violent conflicts. In this regard, religious extremism manifested in organisational forms such as the *Boko Haram* in Nigeria and the *Al shabab* in Somalia, are influenced by faith. That being said, faith has also influenced interventions in development programmes in most African countries. This theme was aptly illustrated by a couple of papers on the same. The theme on faith and governance in Africa also attracted a wide array of papers, ranging from the role of religious institutions in African countries democratization struggles of the last two decades. Specifically, the papers looked at the contentious role of faith in countries such as Kenya in the constitutional reforms, religious leaders as public intellectuals leading in struggles against apartheid in South Africa, and even more recently, in the still unfolding events in Egypt. Indeed, the keynote address delivered by Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya, one of the constant faces in the struggles for state reforms in Kenya, delved into this very theme.

The conference also involved a cultural event on the second day of the conference. The quality of dancing to Kenyan tunes powerfully delivered by Nisisi band, seen from some of the participants was phenomenal. On the last day of the conference participants were also offered an opportunity to visit two civil society organisations in Kibera. These organisations are the Community Organizers Professional Association of Kenya (COPA-K) and the Muungano wa Wanavijiji Federation. The talks given by the respective leaderships of these organisations illustrate a deep commitment in fighting injustices and in transforming the material conditions of residents of Kibera.

The journey to this successful conference started from the deliberations during the 10<sup>th</sup> ISTR global conference in Siena when the Africa regional network member's meeting resolved to

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<sup>1</sup> Following Mbiti, J., 1975, *Introduction to African Religions*, Heinemann, London, we use this term liberally as encompassing formally constituted religious orders with foreign and indigenous origins as well as the pursuit of faith through spontaneous gatherings and preaching.

explore the role of faith in contemporary manifestations of civil society in Africa. After that, the ISTR Africa Regional Network coordinating committee were guided, in their preparatory work, by this mandate. Several people and institutions played a key role in ensuring the idea came to fruition some who deserve special mention. Professor Alan Fowler had managed to convince Ousainou Ngum, the Executive Director of Agency for Coordination of Research and Development (ACORD) - a Pan African civil society development organisation- to attend the Siena conference. Moreover, he managed to charm him into the Africa regional network meeting. In the Siena ISTR Africa Regional Network meeting, Mr. Ngum tentatively committed ACORD to co-hosting the conference with a yet to be identified academic institution in Nairobi. When the University of Nairobi's Institute for Development Studies (IDS) agreed to co-host the conference, ACORD devoted its staff time in ensuring that this conference came to fruition. We are specifically grateful for the support from Kristin Seljeflot and Wilkister Oluoch for all the support. From IDS, the Director, Prof. Winnie Mitullah, was equally instrumental in this hosting and we thank her most sincerely for her time and devotion. From the ISTR Africa Network, many people worked behind the scenes in developing the call for papers, in reviewing proposed paper abstracts, and in raising funds to support the conference. We would like to specifically single out Richard Wamai, Dineo Seabe, Alan Fowler, and Ronelle Burger. Margery Daniels at the secretariat was as usual a great source of support at all the stages. We thank her most sincerely for the support, especially in fundraising, grant management, and reporting. Finally, the conference would not have happened without the financial support of Trust Africa, the Ford Foundation Eastern Africa programme Office in Nairobi and the ISTR global secretariat. To both organisations, we say *ahsanteni sana* for yet again putting your trust in ISTR Africa regional network.

A key outcome of the conference was an undertaking by participants to turn the papers presented into Working Paper under ISTR and if possible, a special issue of a journal. I (Jacob Mati) am working towards making this happen. I have already received a couple of papers, whose reviews will be commencing in the coming weeks. Moreover, the conference participants also resolved to hold the next (2015) regional conference in West Africa. We are grateful that Paul Opoku-Mensah, together with Christiana Atibil and Hippolyt Pul have agreed to steer the preparations and hosting of this in Accra, Ghana in 2015.

Once again, thank you all, participants, donors, ISTR global secretariat and hosts who made this happen. We look forward to the days ahead, with new energies ejected into the association.