

Faith in development:

*What difference does faith  
make for Christian NGOs  
working in Bangladesh, a  
Muslim majority country?*

Presentation to DevNet 2018

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# Intro... *some things to consider...*

- Religious organisations are the oldest social service networks known to humankind, *but...*
- Underlying topic of religion and development has been mostly ignored in development literature
- Rapprochement between proponents of secular development and supporters of religious-based social transformation is called for

*‘It’s time that religion, spirituality and faith were taken seriously as factors shaping development and around which development can be shaped’ (Lunn, 2009)*

# Background, rationale and research question

- Worked in Bangladesh CNGO development - 2002-2015
- Collegial wonderings; suspicion of motives and outcomes; secular development vs Christian mission
- How do Christian NGOs working in Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country, perceive that their faith identity influences their operating characteristics, making them distinctive from secular NGOs?
- *Do the literature claims (made by some) that FBOs make distinctive contributions, offering mostly advantages (and some disadvantages) compared with secular NGOs, apply to the Bangladeshi CNGOs?*

# Method

- ‘Religion and Development’ (RAD) framework
- Religious lens and development lens
- Deductive - testing existing literature claims - FBOs
- 6 CNGOs, Skype interviews, structured questionnaire, qualitative, quantitative
- FBO literature sourced from Christian cultural contexts ≠ Muslim majority country (90%), Christian minority (0.3%), persecution and violence
- Security - generic blurring

# Faith identity

## *CNGOs...*

- Strong, explicit and open Christian identity
- No obfuscation to communities or government
- Critical for CNGOs' vision and mission
- Important to their stakeholders
- Organisational profiles

# Church linkage

## *Distinctive...*

- Projects hosted by local churches
- Use local church's land and facilities
- Long-term sustainable presence
- Physical presence and social entry point
- Spiritual or prayer support

# Operating characteristics - *difference*

Assessing literature claims (made by some) for FBOs of *advantage and disadvantage* compared with secular NGOs...

- Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)
- Spiritual advantage claims (x3)
- Disadvantage claims (x2)

(James, 2009; James, 2011; Lunn, 2009; Rakodi, 2012; Tomalin, 2012)

***Apply to the Bangladeshi CNGOs?***

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

1. Reach the poorest? *(due to social and physical infrastructure, such as local church facilities based in the poorest communities, through which development activities may be implemented)*
  - CNGOs often hosted by local churches in remote areas
  - Work with previously neglected Tribals
  - 'Savings-based loans' better than microcredit
  - Work with 'settled' poor not transient poorest x
- >>> CNGOs reach very poor people, but do they 'reach the poorest'?  
Literature claim superlative term 'poorest' is problematic.  
Recommend rewording claim to they 'reach the very poor'

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

2. Valued by the poorest? *(due to a mix of living and working in poor faith-based communities and observable religious motivation to serve the public good, rather than for personal or political gain)*
  - CNGOs said - people value who they see benefit them
  - Built on 200 year mission history of health, education and agriculture
  - Some Muslims may prefer a Christian faith development worker
  - 8 episodic, past-tense stories - thanks for assistance and relationship
- >>> CNGOs valued by poor people, of any religion they work with.  
Literature claim superlative term 'poorest' is a problem. Recommend rewording claim to 'valued by the poor they work with'



# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

3. Long-term sustainable presence? *(due to linkage with religious institutions embedded in local communities, eg: churches and mosques, which generally last longer than civil-society organisations)*
  - CNGOs leave, but local host churches continue a long-term development presence (of some sort)
  - Requires churches motivated and capacity built in development
  - Church microscopic, very poor, discrimination from Muslim majority
  - Can secular funding build churches in community development ?
- >>> CNGOs believed host churches offer long-term development presence after projects end. Nature and usefulness - lacked evidence in literature and my research

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

4. Efficient development services? *(due to faith communities subsidising services and channelling resources through their existing networks)*
- CNGO field staff live very simply in poor project villages
  - Projects hosted by church facilities - lower set-up costs
  - Low cost community partnership and empowerment model - capacity building self-help groups
  - Denominational CNGOs pay lower salaries, limiting inequalities across denominational staff, resulting in rapid turn-over of entry-level development staff x
- >>> CNGOs offer low cost, value for money development. But denominational CNGOs have competing demands

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

## 5. Alternative to secular development theory? *(due to spiritual and religious concepts of values and meaning)*

- CNGOs' faith identity shapes their vision, mission and operating characteristics - cross-cutting values formation - Biblical values
  - Field staff live in poor project villages - models Jesus' incarnation, identifying with humanity
  - CNGOs *a priori* believe all people made in God's image, full of creative potential
  - Biblical Great Commandment (love God and neighbour) motivates
- >>> CNGOs reveal different aspects of Biblical approach to development, alongside conventional secular development ideas

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

## 6. Motivate voluntary service? *(inspired by their faith to assist fellow human beings)*

- Regular local volunteers not prevalent - poor need money to live - *'paid volunteers'* x
  - CNGOs and foreign donors motivate 1000s (inside and outside country) - time, money, knowledge, skills, resources and facilities
  - Expectations that staff have Godly vocational calling
  - 4 stories examples of volunteerism - different people, ways, places
- >>> CNGOs strongly motivated volunteerism, but... nature of the volunteerism (who, what, where) needed further exploration beyond my research field question

# Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims (x7)

7. Encourage civil-society advocacy? *(through their extensive network of individuals, congregations and related organisations)*
- Minimal national level advocacy - urgent local poverty alleviation x
  - Limited advocacy due to culture of patronage and corruption x
  - Safety concerns - microscopic religious minority - discrimination from Muslim majority
  - Local-level rights-based advocacy, empowering 'rights holders' (poor and marginalised) to receive development entitlements from 'resource holders' (government and such like)
- >>> CNGOs minimal national level advocacy. Public advocacy easier if equality, tolerance, rule of law, and political and religious freedom. Local-level rights-based advocacy to improve services for the poor

# Spiritual advantage claims (x3)

1. Spiritual / religious teaching? *(to assist development outcomes, as religious teaching includes important development principles, such as justice, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation and stewardship)*
  2. Spiritual / religious hope, meaning and purpose? *(helping change values and attitudes to facilitate good community development)*
  3. Spiritual / religious transcendent power? *(which energises human spirits, and prayer to assist participant / beneficiaries and development change)*
- >>> CNGOs agreed with 1, 2 & 3.

# Disadvantage claims (x2)

1. Is religion part of the problem for development?  
*(a negative force holding back development - perceived as: divisive, regressive, irrelevant, insensitive and proselytising)*
  2. Are churches difficult to work with for development?  
*(indicated by 'interference, patronage and control' and 'welfare-orientation, discrimination / favouritism towards members, hierarchical leadership and organizational cultures, unprofessional staffing, and weak management systems')*
- >>> CNGOs disagreed with 1, agreed with 2 (patronage culture)

# Conclusion

- Faith identity - *critical to CNGOs' vision and mission - results in some perceived differences compared with secular NGOs*
- Operating characteristics - *include distinctive contributions (to various degrees) in the 7 motivational, organisational and institutional ways and 3 spiritual ways, along with one of the 2 possible disadvantages, claimed in literature*
- Better evidence needed - *claims are subjective and prone to bias, reflecting the claimant's positionality*
- Universal evaluation methodology need - *assess and score any NGO (secular or religious) operating in any context*
- Until then... *Recommend that FBO 'comparative advantage' (or disadvantage) claims... be reframed as distinctive 'operating characteristics'*



























**NUMBERS**

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6	16	26	36	46	56	66	76	86	96
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**THE ALPHABET**

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