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Faith in development:
What difference does faith make for
Christian NGOs working in
Bangladesh?

A research thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of

Master of International Development

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2018
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Abstract

Religious organisations are the oldest social service networks known to humankind. However, the underlying topic of religion and development has been mostly ignored in development literature until more recently. Rapprochement between proponents of secular development and supporters of religious-based social transformation is called for. Some writers claim faith-based organisations (FBOs), of which Christian NGOs (CNGOs) are significant actors, add value, make distinctive contributions and offer comparative advantages over secular NGOs. Seven motivational, organisational and institutional advantages claimed are that FBOs: reach and are valued by the poorest, have a long-term presence and low costs, offer an alternative to secular development theory, and motivate voluntarism and civil-society advocacy. Three spiritual advantages claimed are that FBOs: offer spiritual / religious teaching; hope, meaning and purpose; and transcendent power (prayer). In contrast, two possible disadvantages claimed are that: religion is part of the problem for development and churches are difficult to work with. Other writers claim a lack of evidence regarding theses claims.

My research investigated six CNGOs in Bangladesh, with the research question being: ‘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?’ This sought to determine if the operating characteristics that the literature claims attribute to FBOs, were applicable to the CNGOs. The research method was primarily deductive, using the CNGO research data to test existing literature definitions, typology and claims. With much FBO literature seemingly sourced from broadly Christian cultural contexts, this research expands on this by researching CNGOs in a Muslim majority country, home to a very small Christian minority.
CNGO representatives were interviewed using a structured questionnaire including qualitative and quantitative questions.

The research findings conclude that the Bangladesh CNGOs’ faith identity critical to their vision and mission, results in some perceived differences compared with secular NGOs. These are found in the CNGOs’ operating characteristics including distinctive contributions (to various degrees) in the seven motivational, organisational and institutional ways and three spiritual ways, along with one of the two possible disadvantages, claimed in literature. However, claiming advantages (or disadvantages) for FBOs over secular NGOs, without better evidence, is subjective and prone to bias, reflecting the claimant’s positionality. The question of comparative advantage between NGOs of various types (faith-based or secular), requires a universal evaluation methodology able to assess and score any NGO operating in any project context. Until this exists, I suggest the literature claims of FBOs having comparative advantages (or disadvantages) should be reframed as distinctive operating characteristics.
Acknowledgments

After New Zealand, Bangladesh is my second home, having lived and worked there for thirteen years from 2002 to 2015. To my Bangladesh friends and colleagues from that time, thank you for teaching me the practice of church-based community development during our work with very poor people in rural villages. Our partnership was genuine as we learnt to understand each other and work together. They were challenging, but good days. Thank you to my New Zealand church and friends who believed in, trusted, prayed for, supported and financed my family and I to live and work in Bangladesh for that time. Without you, none of this would have happened.

A huge thankyou to the six Bangladeshi Christian NGOs involved in this research, who gave willingly of their knowledge, skills, experience and time. Thank you for your friendship and patience as you assisted yet another foreigner with their research. God bless you, as you continue to work with the Bangladeshi poor.

To the Massey University Institute of Development Studies folk, thank you for the learning and reflection beginning back in 2000. It has been quite a journey, with a few detours along the way. Thank you to my three thesis supervisors, Dr Robyn Andrews, Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers and Dr Vicky Walters. Without your suggestions, advice and reviews this thesis would not have been completed.

I give thanks to the wise person inspired by God to write: ‘The righteous care about justice for the poor…’ (Bible, Proverbs 29:7). This continues to inspire multitudes of Christian-faithed development workers all over the world, toiling to work out God’s preferential bias for the poor.

And finally, to my wife Claire, and two children, Sam and Lucy, thank you for your loyalty and patience. I dedicate this thesis to you.
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments.......................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... vii
List of Tables ................................................................................................................. x
List of Figures ................................................................................................................. x
Glossary of Terms .......................................................................................................... xi
Glossary of Abbreviations ............................................................................................ xii

Chapter 1: Introduction................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Background, rationale and research question ......................................................... 1
  1.2 Analytical and conceptual framework ..................................................................... 2
  1.3 Positionality of the author ...................................................................................... 2
  1.4 Significance of the research .................................................................................... 3
  1.5 Research methods ................................................................................................... 3
  1.6 Thesis outline ......................................................................................................... 4

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Analytical / Conceptual Frameworks for Researching Religion and Development ................................................................. 5
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 5
  2.2 Development and religion in development literature .............................................. 5
  2.3 Religion rediscovered - The rise of FBOs .............................................................. 6
  2.4 Secular development challenged by religion ......................................................... 7
  2.5 Analytical and conceptual framework for researching religion and development ... 9
    2.5.1 Development frameworks - a review ............................................................... 9
    2.5.2 Finding an analytical and conceptual home for Christian NGOs .................... 12
    2.5.3 Religion and Development (RAD) - an emerging analytical framework .......... 12
  2.6 FBOs’ faith identity ................................................................................................. 15
  2.7 FBOs’ operating characteristics - claimed advantages and disadvantages ........ 16
    2.7.1 FBOs’ motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims .......... 17
    2.7.2 FBOs’ spiritual advantage claims ..................................................................... 19
    2.7.3 FBOs’ disadvantage claims ............................................................................. 20
    2.7.4 Issues of comparability, context and evidence ................................................ 22
  2.8 Proselytizing development? ................................................................................. 23
  2.9 Summary ................................................................................................................. 24

Chapter 3: Bangladesh Development / Religious Context and the Six CNGOs Researched............................................................................................................ 25
  3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 25
  3.2 Bangladesh beginnings ............................................................................................. 25
Chapter 4: Research Methodology ................................................................. 39

4.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 39
4.2 Research question .......................................................................................... 39
4.3 Ontology and epistemology ............................................................................. 40
4.4 Positionality .................................................................................................. 40
4.5 Significance of the research ............................................................................ 42
4.6 Exploratory research ......................................................................................... 43
4.7 Research methods .......................................................................................... 44
  4.7.1 Testing theory - deductive reasoning ......................................................... 44
  4.7.2 Quantitative and qualitative methods ......................................................... 45
  4.7.3 Structured questions ................................................................................... 46
  4.7.4 Interview questions - design, revision and testing ....................................... 46
  4.7.5 Triangulation for data validity .................................................................. 47
  4.7.6 CNGO selection and sampling .................................................................. 47
  4.7.7 CNGO and interviewee recruitment ............................................................. 49
  4.7.8 Personal or official representation? .............................................................. 50
  4.7.9 Skype meetings ........................................................................................ 50
4.8 Ethics, partnership and security ..................................................................... 50
  4.8.1 Partnership, participation and protection ..................................................... 50
  4.8.2 Massey University ethics process ............................................................... 51
  4.8.3 Security issues .......................................................................................... 51
  4.8.4 Dhaka Terrorist attack .............................................................................. 52
  4.8.5 Relationship, trust and goodwill ................................................................. 53
4.9 Supervision and reflection ............................................................................... 53
4.10 Data analysis .............................................................................................. 54
  4.10.1 Use of interview extracts ......................................................................... 54
4.11 Summary ..................................................................................................... 55
Chapter 5: Bangladesh CNGOs’ Perceptions of Faith Identity Influence on their Operating Characteristics ................................................................. 57

5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 57
5.2 Faith identity ......................................................................................................... 57
5.3 Church linkage ....................................................................................................... 57
5.4 Motivational, organisational and institutional advantage claims ...................... 59
  Claim 1: Reach the poorest ....................................................................................... 59
  Claim 2: Valued by the poorest ............................................................................... 61
  Claim 3: Long-term sustainable presence ............................................................... 63
  Claim 4: Efficient development services ................................................................ 64
  Claim 5: Alternative to secular development theory .............................................. 66
  Claim 6: Motivate voluntary service ....................................................................... 67
  Claim 7: Encourage civil-society advocacy ............................................................. 70
5.5 Spiritual advantage claims .................................................................................... 71
  Claim 1: Spiritual / religious teaching ..................................................................... 72
  Claim 2: Spiritual / religious hope, meaning and purpose ....................................... 73
  Claim 3: Spiritual / religious transcendent power .................................................. 74
5.6 Comparative disadvantage claims ....................................................................... 76
  Claim / question 1: Is religion part of the problem for development? ................... 76
  Claim / question 2: Are churches difficult to work with for development? .......... 78
5.7 Summary ............................................................................................................... 81

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations ....................................................... 83

6.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 83
6.2 Faith identity - The 1st difference ....................................................................... 83
6.3 Church linkage - The 2nd difference ................................................................... 83
6.4 Operating characteristics - The 3rd difference .................................................. 84
  6.4.1 Motivational, organisational and institutional operating characteristics .. 84
  6.4.2 Spiritual operating characteristics ................................................................. 87
  6.4.3 Disadvantages claimed .................................................................................. 88
6.5 Reframing FBO ‘comparative advantages’ to ‘operating characteristics’ .......... 90
6.6 Recommendations for further research ............................................................... 91

Appendices ............................................................................................................... 95

Appendix 1: FBO faith identity typologies ................................................................. 95
Appendix 2: Research Questions 1 - Questionnaire / survey - Demographics & Context ........................................................................................................... 98
Appendix 3: Research Questions 2 - Structured interviews - Religious identity & faith difference ......................................................................................... 102
Appendix 4: Research Thesis - Information Sheet .................................................... 108
Appendix 5: Research Thesis - Participant Consent Form ........................................ 111

References .............................................................................................................. 113
List of Tables

Table 1: Bangladesh Christian NGOs - Description, origin and history ................................. 32
Table 2: Bangladesh Christian NGOs - Demographics - projects, participant / beneficiaries, budgets, staff .................................................................................................................. 35
Table 3: Matching research questions with research purpose ................................................. 44

List of Figures

Figure 1: Key development frameworks over time ................................................................. 11
Figure 2: Religion and Development (RAD) framework for analysing the relationships between religion and development .................................................................................. 14
Figure 3: South Asia and Bangladesh map ............................................................................. 25
Figure 4: An interactive model of research design ................................................................. 40
Figure 5: From knowledge to change - the goals of research ................................................ 43
Figure 6: Cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning .......................................................... 45
# Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awami League</td>
<td>Bangladesh political party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangla</td>
<td>Bangladesh national language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>A person from Bangladesh. Ethnicity may be Bengali or Tribal. Bangladeshi is both singular and plural.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong Hill Tribes</td>
<td>Various ethnic groups located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in south-east Bangladesh, bordering with Myanmar. The majority are Buddhists with some Hindus and Christians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat-e-Islami</td>
<td>A socially conservative Islamic political organisation founded by Abul Ala Maududi, an Islamist socio-political philosopher and theologian, in British occupied India in 1941. The party exists in a number of countries, maintaining global links. The Bangladesh party is the biggest Islamist political party in the country, but after much violence in 2013, it was deregistered by the Supreme Court.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microcredit</td>
<td>Credit-based small loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronage</td>
<td>The giving of advantage from a patron (individual or organisation) to a client (family, friends, ethnicity, political party or religion), while excluding others. The advantage could be encouragement, privilege, money, a job or some other opportunity resulting in advantage for the receiver. Political patronage typically involves the use of public resources to reward a person for their political support. In a patron-client relationship, the client is dependent on the patron who controls the resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia Islam</td>
<td>A smaller branch of Islam believing that the Islamic prophet Muhammad selected Ali ibn Abi Talib to be his successor. Refer to Sunni Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Islam</td>
<td>Islam’s majority group believing that the Islamic prophet Muhammad did not select his successor. They believe Abu Bakr was the correct successor. Sunni and Shia disagree with each other’s views of who was Muhammad’s legitimate successor. This later developed into theological and political differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>Pakistan’s official language, imposed on Bangladesh during the time when Bangladesh was East Pakistan. It is also spoken by the Bihari people in Bangladesh, along with five states in India.</td>
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## Glossary of Abbreviations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BNGOAB</td>
<td>Bangladesh Non-Government Organisation Affairs Bureau</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNGO</td>
<td>Christian NGO (usually refers to the six Bangladesh CNGOs involved in this research, although sometimes refers to CNGOs in general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>District Commissioner (Government local representative)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRR</td>
<td>Disaster Risk Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBO</td>
<td>Faith-Based Organisation (often operating in some sort of development way)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index (UNDP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal (UN internationally agreed development goals from 2000 to 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official development assistance (provided by one or more countries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRSP</td>
<td>Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTA</td>
<td>Parent Teachers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAD</td>
<td>Religion and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMG</td>
<td>Ready Made Garment (clothing production factories)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal (UN internationally agreed development goals from 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>Self-Help Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMC</td>
<td>School Management Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tk</td>
<td>Taka (Bangladesh currency)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDF</td>
<td>Village Development Forum (graduated self-help groups arranged into secondary level People’s Institutions to enable a long-term mentoring and monitoring presence)</td>
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