

World Faiths Development Dialogue

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Photo: World Bank

The World Faiths Development Dialogue was set up in 1998 as the result of an Inter-faith Conference on Poverty and Development. This conference was chaired jointly by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the president of the World Bank. The aim of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is to enhance dialogue and action on development policies, both within the religious communities themselves and between the communities and multilateral development institutions.

The main focus of the World Faiths Development Dialogue up to now has been the nature of poverty itself and on the need to adopt a more holistic approach to development processes. All religious traditions agree that, in order to be sustainable and meet people's needs, these must include not only the economic, but also the cultural, social, environmental and spiritual aspects of life.

In order for this to be achieved, a purely scientific and technological approach to knowledge is insufficient. We also need to turn to an understanding of reality beyond what is immediately perceptible and measurable. The WFDD is at present discussing the draft of a paper on Cultures, Spirituality and Development. This paper aims to demonstrate that if people's culture and spirituality are ignored, any development activity may lead to processes that will shatter their very identity.

In three countries World Faith Development Dialogue initiatives have been initiated. In Ethiopia an inter-faith group has been set up with a focus on food security. In Tanzania, religious institutions are working on health policies. In Guatemala representatives of Evangelicals, Catholics, Jews and Muslims together with indigenous spiritual leaders, are discussing a paper on the values that should underlie the process of rebuilding the country after 36 years of armed conflict.

World Peace Summit

In order to try and draw nearer to the United Nations, the WFDD agreed to organise three workshops on poverty at the Millennium World Peace Summit for Religious and Spiritual leaders, which took place in New York at the end of August 2000. Despite the participation of people from the World Bank and the UN Development Programme in one of the sessions, the discussion touched little on the theme

of co-operation with these bodies. This would seem to indicate that the religious communities still felt quite removed from them.

There were, however, many general calls to improve global and national policies, above all related to the distribution of the world's wealth in favour of the poor. The suggestions included taxing transnational corporations, cancelling the debts of the poorest countries, and reviewing the way through which the UN and other bodies channel their money. The present injustices and growing gap between rich and poor is unacceptable to all religious communities, whether understood from the point of view of the inter-relationship between all human beings, or from that of all people being the children of the Creator.

Governments and international development agencies were urged to be more respectful of local cultures and the rights of indigenous people, to adopt policies which do not destroy either social structures nor the natural environment, and to make the poorest children the top priority of their agenda. Moreover, there were calls to both North and South to stop the arms trade.

Priorities

Predictably, education emerged as a high priority for the religious leaders. Educational courses need to be embedded in the values shared by all the faith traditions, such as peace, justice, and a spirit of service and honesty. There was also considerable discussion about the need to bridge the gap between religion and science.

However, it was on the need for personal transformation as a prerequisite for any social change that all religious and spiritual leaders

were most united during the World Peace Summit. Only through achieving a state of internal equilibrium and/or by drawing nearer to God, can sound judgements be reached and wise actions taken. The promotion of values, based on the vision of the world as one family, is the basis of the joint actions of religious traditions with the development agencies. The next step of the WFDD is to see how some of these aspirations can be defined more closely, so they can form the basis of specific actions that will lead to social change.

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Participants of the World Peace Summit, celebrated in New York, August 2000

Photo: World Bank