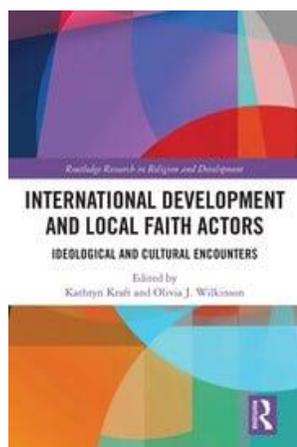


## BOOK REVIEW

# International Development and Local Faith Actors: Ideological and Cultural Encounters

*Edited by Kathryn Kraft and Olivia J. Wilkinson*

Reviewed by Roland Hoksbergen



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Some years ago, I encountered Christian philosopher Charles Taylor's idea that one key quality that differentiates human beings from other animals is that we are self-interpreting. That made sense as I took notice how often everyday conversations revolve around explaining and understanding who we are, what we do, how we should live, and why. Those thoughts came back to me as I read this useful book, because in its consideration of faith-based development organizations (FBOs), it strives to understand and interpret who FBOs are, how they work, and especially, how FBOs from the Global North relate to local faith-based organizations among the poor and marginalized in the Global South.

As the editors point out, the global development establishment is largely dominated by a secular paradigm, which exercises a good deal of influence on people of faith engaged in development work. In this context, people of faith often accede to the secular paradigm and essentially ignore their faith as they emulate the work of the secular professionals in such areas as health, education, food security, and economic empowerment. For people who take their faith seriously, however, this resolution is hardly acceptable.

If our faith is to be relevant to our work, then we must 1) learn how to integrate our faith into our work, and 2) do that in a world in which faith has many expressions, none more objectively legitimate than the other.

It is this second challenge that the editors and contributors to this volume especially take on as they work toward understanding and improving the encounters among international faith-based organizations of the Global North and the local faith actors (LFAs) and local faith communities (LFCs) of the Global South. To help us define and improve these relationships, the editors have assembled an experienced and thoughtful group of academics and practitioners to tell and/or evaluate stories of encounters between organizations in the North and those in the South. In the end, the sixteen contributions lay out the challenges and explain how those relationships succeed or fail to live up to the best descriptions of what North-South relationships should be.

The question of how to structure relationships in the context of faith diversity is especially acute because of all the ways in which those relationships are fraught with the post-colonial power dynamics that tilt toward northern domination. It is indeed hard to disentangle issues of faith from differences and divisions that have roots in geography, culture, education, wealth, and power, many of which result from and still manifest the world's history of Northern colonial and post-colonial domination. Yet if we are to form cooperative and respectful bonds of trust, solidarity, and community with our global neighbors, we must learn how to work together. The stories in this volume provide a welcome effort and many illuminating experiential lessons.

Unfortunately, there is little doubt about the tendency of those from the North to dominate, one recent example being how the development of the Sustainable Development Goals was supposed to be inclusive, but failed badly in achieving that (Ch. 12 by Tomalin and Haustein). Sometimes it is more subtle, as when in the face of "female genital mutilation/cutting" (FGM/C) Northerners too easily accept such terms as "Harmful Traditional Practices" or "Harmful Cultural

Practices” (HTPs or HCPs), both of which firmly plant Northerners on the moral high ground without acknowledging the HTPs in our own cultures. Le Roux and Bartelink suggest that beauty pageants and pornography are among the HCPs of the Global North (Ch. 15). The heart of the issue seems to be how those from Northern FBOs, with the money, technical know-how, networking capital, and educational mastery engage LFAs as peers and partners. The various authors thoughtfully engage this problem, but its depth is on display when the realization hits that all the assembled wisdom in this volume comes from people that Robert Chambers would call “uppers.” Less a criticism of the book than an acknowledgement of what seem to be inevitable realities, this simply points to how hard it is to level the playing field.

By now we can acknowledge that most Northern development professionals, including those from FBOs, have learned how important it is to listen, respect, walk alongside, and partner. To use one of today’s common colloquialisms, “we get it.” But still, this is all so much easier said than done, because at the end of the day, we still want to move beyond hunger, disease, conflict, child and maternal mortality, environmental destruction, gender-based violence, and other maladies that afflict our neighbors around the world. Perhaps the main existential temptation in this climate is for Northerners to treat their Southern neighbors as instruments that can help achieve these good objectives. The strong temptation is for FBOs and other Northern organizations to work with LFAs precisely because LFAs have the local knowledge and local trust that allows them to achieve results. Northern organizations (including FBOs) don’t necessarily want to hear what LFAs have to say. In such a world, however, partnerships are mostly for show and continue to embody structures of domination. They are not what some call “authentic,” meaning that all voices are not only heard, but also accorded equal weight. Instrumental relationships must thus be transformed, and contributors to this book are united in their desire to find pathways toward authentic working relationships that respectfully include LFAs even as they achieve significant gains in traditional arenas of development.

Many of the contributions revolve around a World Vision framework for including all voices, especially those with a faith orientation, and especially when the groups working in a certain region or on a particular issue are of different faiths. The framework is called “Channels of Hope.” The book opens with a story of how World Vision and Islamic Relief cooperated in Lebanon to use the Channels of Hope methodology and then cooperated further to train others in the use of the methodology as the practice of working across faith difference spreads. Participants are typically faith leaders and their wives from all relevant faiths in the

local area. As Eyber and Jailobaeva explain in chapter 14, wives of local faith leaders are influential leaders in their own right, and their voices make a big difference through informal channels. The workshop of several days creates a safe space where participants share their values, their beliefs, and the scriptures that inspire them, and then work toward a common understanding of the issues in their community that they can work on together.

The support this book expresses for the Channels of Hope strategy is based on allowing local participants to build programs that address issues of local concern, even when those are delicate and potentially controversial, like FGM/C, gender equality, or HIV/AIDS. Such locally built and/or influenced programs have more staying power than programs brought in from the outside, almost certainly because local people imagine and build them in the context of their own cultures and belief systems. Ownership and investment lead both to significant achievements and to long-term sustainability.

In most of the stories, faith differences from North to South are contained under the umbrella tradition of Christianity, which anyone in the Christian community knows does not equal agreement on faith-based views and values, thus making Channels of Hope types of programs important even within the same overall faith tradition. Other religions are also represented, but less so. There is one chapter each dedicated to communities of Bahá’í and Muslim faiths, and three chapters that focus on work in communities where Christian and Muslim communities are both strong.

In spite of the many authors, there is a welcome continuity to the writing style and quality. The contributors are experienced, knowledgeable, and sensitive to the significant challenges of being faithful to their own deepest values and beliefs while also being respectful of those of others.

I have two quibbles with the book. One is that World Vision’s Channels of Hope program is never explained or presented in detail, though aspects of the program are brought up throughout. For those who would like a thorough description, you can find that [here](#). The other is that the book, like others in the Routledge series on religion and development, is expensive, though options are available online for both short-term rental and electronic versions. I fear the cost will be a significant barrier to wide readership.

Overall, the book is a helpful guide to faith-oriented practitioners who want to work constructively in diverse faith contexts. The stories are mostly empirically based, from a diverse range of global regions, a variety of organizations, and an array of issues. There is an early chapter on WASH as well as chapters on gender-based topics, child health and protection, peacebuilding, general community

mobilization, and more. Something for everyone in search of an experiential guide to defining, understanding, and improving our development-oriented relationships in a multi-faith world.

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