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TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
AND RESILIENT WASH SERVICES

**Engaging religious organisations in WASH programmes:
a conceptual framework and case study from Zimbabwe**

N. Mallonee, L. Dube & J. Wiles (USA)

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Many WASH actors have had some level of engagement with religious organisations, which is not surprising given the prevalence of religion in developing countries, but there is potential to more deeply engage religious institutions in large-scale WASH programmes. To do so effectively, though, requires a greater literacy around religious ideas and practices. Toward that end, the authors conceptualize a framework that breaks down the concept of “religion” into three components — ideas, practices, and organisations — which interact with each other and influence WASH programmes and outcomes. One aspect of the framework, which is likely most familiar to WASH actors, is how religious organisations influence WASH programmes. A case study for how Living Water International partnered with the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe to implement a district-level WASH programme illustrates this part of the conceptual framework and provides recommendations to other NGOs.

Introduction

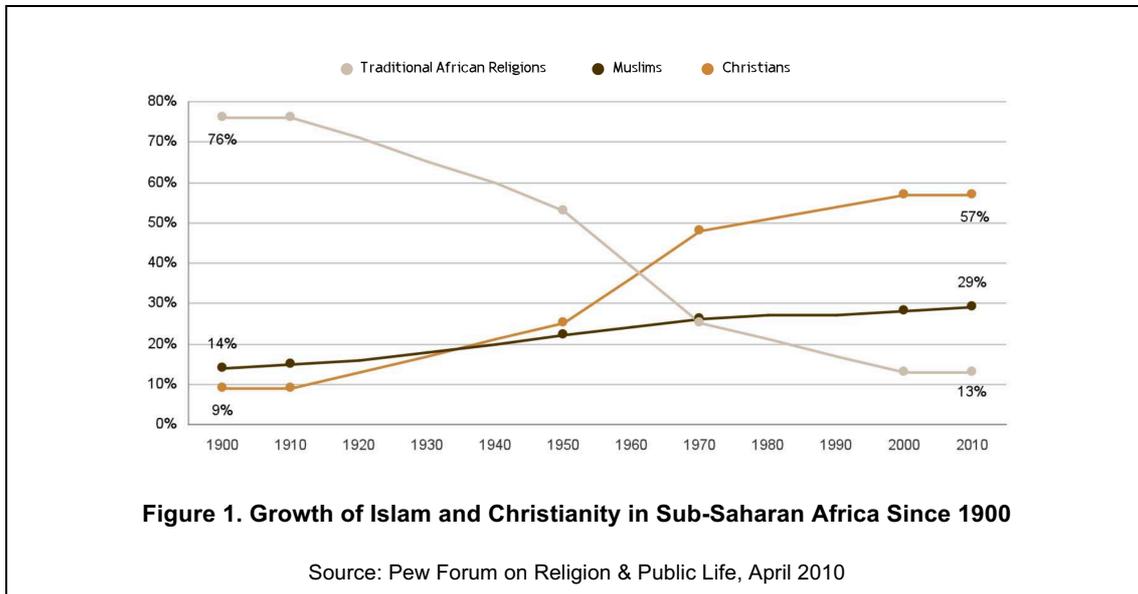
The conversation around religion and development is now readily accepted within the international development community, as evidenced by the rise in research, scholarship and number of initiatives by bilateral and multilateral institutions to better understand and partner with faith-based organisations (FBOs)¹. Discussions on religion and development can be complex and controversial, but it is a valuable topic to explore, particularly as it relates to WASH programmes and outcomes. Carole Radoki, Emeritus Professor in the International Development Department at the University of Birmingham and former director of the DFID-funded Religions and Development Research Programme (2005–2010), provides a concise analysis on global development, religion, and modernity (2015), including the observation that “improved levels of religious literacy are required in order to increase understanding of the ways in which religious ideas, practices and organisations interact with *aspirations* for development and modernity and determine the roles religion plays in the public and private spheres.” Additionally, in a recent policy paper, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) calls for three principles of partnership between faith groups and the agency: transparency, mutual respect and understanding. DFID posits these principles should be applied, *inter alia*, in “building a common understanding of faith and development” and “documenting the impact of faith groups through research and evaluation” (Faith Partnership Principles, 2012).

Thus, the intent of this paper is to 1) increase religious literacy related to how religion—its organisations, ideas, and practices—can influence WASH outcomes and 2) provide an example of one specific type of engagement with religion: multi-level mobilisation of a religious organisation for WASH programmes. Living Water International (LWI), a Christian FBO, has worked in partnership with a national network of protestant Christian churches in the implementation of a district-level WASH programme in Zimbabwe. The experience and lessons learned are documented in a case study below.

Religion, development and WASH

Religious groups are prevalent in most communities in developing countries (see chart below), and their ideas and practices can and often do impact WASH interventions and outcomes. Thus, the question is not

whether WASH programmes and initiatives should engage religious organisations, ideas, and practices, but rather *how* they should be engaged.



Just as the landscape for NGOs engaging in WASH has changed in the last several decades, there are many ways in which the religious landscape, particularly in developing countries, has changed since LWI began operating in 1990. First, there is an increased acknowledgment that modernisation theory—that religious belief would retreat as countries developed and social services were delivered by the state—has not held true (Radoki, 2015). Moreover, as John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge argue in their book *God is Back* that "the great forces of modernity—technology and democracy, choice and freedom—are all strengthening religion rather than undermining it" (2009). Second, there has been an increase in funding for FBOs by western development actors, particularly the bilateral institutions (Clarke, 2007). Lastly, there has been increased research and scholarship around religion and development and a general increase in the desire of larger multilateral institutions to understand the interplay between the two². Despite these changes, there is still a "rubric of modernity" that dominates the mind set of most western development actors (Deacon & Tomalin, 2015). This could cause a general uneasiness in working with FBOs, particularly those that actively promote their religion, even if done in a non-coercive, non-exclusionary way³.

If that premise is true, it could help explain why there appears to be an overall scarcity of research and scholarship on religion and WASH. For instance, a search on the WEDC database for papers with "religion" as a search term returned no results. When searching for "faith," there was one result for a paper from 2017 by Mahbub-Ul Alam et al. on "Water sanitation and hygiene status in the neighbourhood of Bangladeshi Islamic schools and mosques" that advocated for Islamic faith based interventions that promote hygiene practices and safe faeces disposal. When expanding to include specific names of religions (e.g. "Islam," "Christianity," "Buddhism," "Hinduism"), religious groups (e.g. "Muslim," "Christian," "Hindu," "Buddhist"), or religious institution (e.g. "mosque," "church," "temple), there was only one result for a paper by Frank Greaves in 2009 on "The role of the church in improving access to sanitation," which describes different roles churches engaged with Tearfund have taken in community sanitation initiatives.

Most of the research and scholarship on religion and WASH is in the grey literature. For example, UNICEF has written about religion as it relates to WASH in several guides, most notably in its guide on "Partnering with Religious Communities for Children" (2012). Also, Richard Carter and Ronnie Rwamwanja wrote an evaluation for Tearfund on the Kigezi Diocese Water and Sanitation Programme (KDWSP), a Christian FBO that implemented a community water and sanitation programme in south-west Uganda (2006). Finally, Katherine Marshall from the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs at Georgetown University wrote a policy brief (2013) that summarised some of the issues related to WASH and religion and a potential pathway for a larger role for religious organisations:

Water is also an integral part of rituals and the beliefs and teachings of virtually every major world religion and spiritual tradition. Faith leaders and institutions are active on water issues, often in ways that are little known and celebrated. But they have the potential to play far larger roles than they now do in advancing water and sanitation advocacy and programs. This is true at global, national, and local levels. The operational question is how better to leverage this potential, given fierce institutional and disciplinary complexity (Marshall, 2013).

The topic of religion and WASH could be explored in myriad ways. For instance, there is a growing literature base looking at the effects of religious beliefs on health outcomes. One could expand the scope of inquiry to include health outcomes related to hygiene and sanitation practices. One could also discuss the spiritual implications of water in most religious groups, how religious groups can play roles in advocacy for increased WASH funding, how local religious communities can increase the sustainability of services, how religious belief can play a role in increasing stewardship of water resources and even how hygiene education can be incorporated into messages and lessons at religious institutions. As an FBO, LWI has operated with an implicit conceptual framework for religion and WASH that informed its programmatic approach. Below is an initial attempt to make it more explicit through a framework.

Conceptual framework for religion and WASH

When conceptualizing how religion can interact with WASH, the concept of “religion” must first be broken down to its three principal components: organisations, ideas, and practices. “Religious Organisations” can include any type of religious institution, from large international networks (i.e. denominations) to local institutions (i.e. churches, mosques, etc.). These groups, both formal and informal, can influence the ideas and practices of their adherents. “Religious Ideas” are theologies or metaphysical beliefs that often (though not always) translate into practices, which we call “Religious Practices.” As it relates to WASH outcomes, this can be directly seen in how many religions call for some type of religious practice related to handwashing or cleansing. Some even have specific guidance related to sanitation issues. Beyond that, though, we hypothesize that religious ideas and practices can influence WASH outcomes in other, more nuanced ways as well (e.g. culture, social norms, social capital, collective action, etc.).

The interplay between these three areas, shown in the ovals below, and their relation to WASH outcomes is ripe for additional research and scholarship, but beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the case study focuses on the section on the left highlighted by a grey box, which is how religious organisations can be mobilised to participate in and lead WASH programme delivery. While many WASH actors have seen the importance of engaging with religious organisations as stakeholders when planning interventions, or seen their influence when engaging in “systems thinking,” this case study provides an example of the potential value of engaging with them as an implementation partner in a large-scale WASH programme.

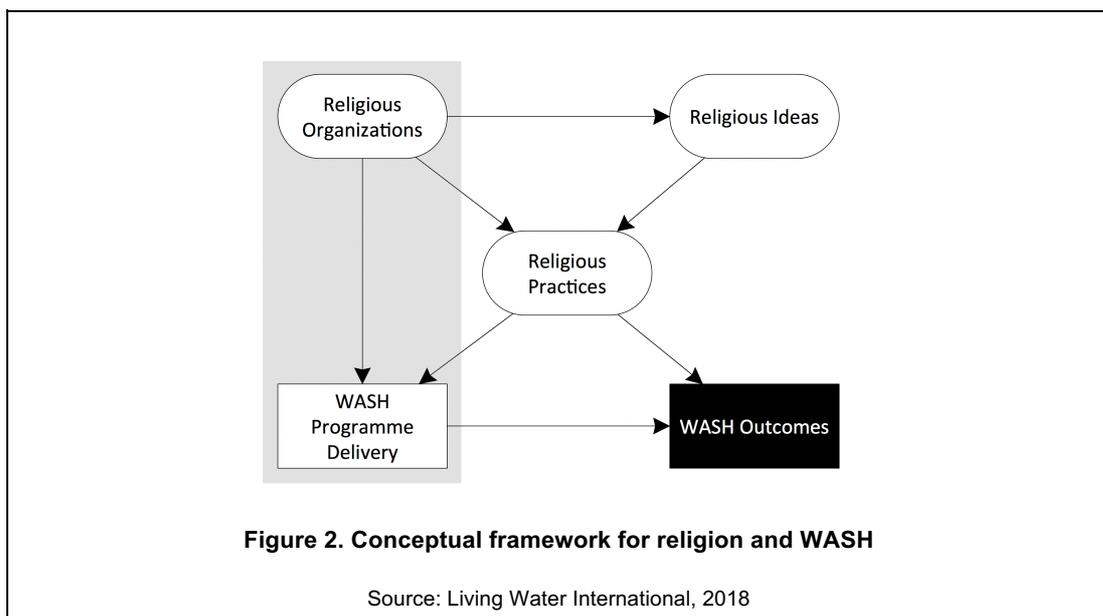


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for religion and WASH

Source: Living Water International, 2018

Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe Case Study

This case study explores the value of mobilising a religious organisation for a large-scale WASH programme. It is not an attempt to ‘prove’ there is greater value in engaging with religious versus non-religious institutions, nor that there is greater value in partnering with a particular religion. Rather, it attempts to demonstrate the value of engaging this group which is influential in the lives of many Zimbabweans; statistics indicate 85% of people in Zimbabwe self-identify as Christian, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) has a membership that constitutes over 600 Christian denominations and organisations representing 33% of the population of the country.

In 2012, EFZ and LWI began exploring the possibility of a multi-tiered approach to WASH that would have implications at the national and district levels, and benefit specific communities where WASH services were underdeveloped. Based on an initial assessment, Epworth, Motoko, and Murewa districts were identified as potential areas for geographic focus. Historically, EFZ had focused on spiritual development and support in these districts, but had little capacity to mobilise local churches for social development. This had been a particular problem in 2008-2009, during a cholera epidemic that was described as one of the worst in Africa, with a cumulative caseload of 98,585 and over 4,000 deaths (Mukandavire et al, 2011). The Epworth Zone was one of the most seriously affected due to lack of access to adequate WASH services. Although the need was desperate, neither EFZ nor the local churches had capacity to intervene at that time.

The WASH initiative began at the national level, where LWI partnered with EFZ’s Humanitarian Relief and Development Commission (HRDC) and the Government of Zimbabwe. EFZ secretariat was already in relationship with the Ministry of Water Environment and Climate, Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and worked in coordination with these to solidify the selection of focus districts, in line with service level data and national priorities.

Of the potential districts, the Epworth Zone was chosen to test a new model of mobilising churches to provide organisation and support for improved WASH services. At the district level, LWI and the national HRDC worked in partnership with EFZ’s district committee to convene leaders from 45 EFZ member churches across Epworth for an ‘envisioning’ workshop aimed at developing shared vision amongst these leaders for the collective impact that their churches could have; this was linked to the WASH priorities of the Epworth Water Supply and Sanitation Committee. In light of the emerging vision and plan, the churches organised themselves, selecting six ‘modeling churches’ (MCs). Each of these served as an example and provided coordination for the other churches in their immediate area within Epworth. These modeling churches assisted with the gathering of baseline data, promoted good sanitation and hygiene practices, served as stewards for the first water systems installed within the program, championed the sustainability of WASH services, and led the ongoing process of reporting activities and outputs. The MCs were also responsible for promoting the programme’s vision and recruiting other churches to participate.

One of these churches was identified as the ‘lead modeling church’ (LMC)—responsible for providing a central point of coordination in the district and taking a leadership role in a training of trainers approach. The LMC would take the lead with the district committee to organise training in facilitation skills, envisioning, and hygiene promotion to the other modeling churches, which would in turn replicate the training in their sections of the district. Leaders within both MCs and the LMC reported that their success in these activities was linked to their members embracing the idea that social development is part of the mandate of their church, and incorporating these practices into the regular rhythm of their collective life and work.

Between 2012 and 2018, the Epworth WASH programme engaged the leadership of more than 100 churches, resulting in 86 sanitation and hygiene promotion initiatives, the rehabilitation of 21 existing boreholes and drilling of 22 new boreholes serving 10,500 users. The quality of this work was recognized by Zimbabwe’s National Action Committee on WASH, who promoted the program as a particularly successful WASH case study. The model was subsequently expanded into other districts in Zimbabwe, resulting in the rehabilitation of 631 existing boreholes and drilling of 209 new boreholes serving 210,500 users.

A mid-term review in 2015 included qualitative interviews and analysis that supported the effectiveness of the program. In particular, it is a common perception of water users that the church actors in Epworth provide unique value in the program, particularly by lending their existing credibility and convening power to support desired WASH outcomes and long-term sustainability. It was also frequently reported that churches were beginning to utilize their newly honed facilitation and training skills to address other social issues in their communities. A final evaluation will provide additional information on the effectiveness of this approach and lessons for how to improve it.

Multi-Tier engagement of religious organisations in WASH programmes

Because of the increasing movement across the WASH sector to focus on national WASH agendas and district-level service delivery approaches, there is unique value in partnerships with multi-tier religious organisations like EFZ. The following are recommendations for an agency like LWI that wishes to engage and mobilise a multi-tier religious organisation like EFZ in a WASH programme.

National

National umbrella organisations and networks like EFZ vary widely from country to country. Therefore, it is critical from the outset to agree on mission, vision, and program priorities. It is recommended that an organisational assessment is carried out to understand the existing strengths, weaknesses, and respective capabilities of both the national religious organisation and the NGO. In particular, many networks express a desire for greater engagement, but lack the necessary capacity and technical know-how a partner NGO can offer. At this level, the national religious group will often have strengths in coalition-building and the ability to advocate for improved national WASH policies and priorities.

District

Many national religious networks have existing administrative entities at the district (or province, or county), like EFZ's district committees, and can effectively link with government entities at that same level. This can lend a powerful organising component to a WASH program by facilitating entry into the district and specific communities within it. District-level engagement can also result in organising mechanisms such as EFZ's 'modeling churches,' and provides credibility to the NGO as a trusted partner as it enters communities.

Community

It is at the community level that religious groups have the most direct link to WASH outcomes and bring high value as partners. They are long-term grassroots organisations already situated in the community, with deep local relationships and knowledge. In most countries, 80% of households would consider themselves members of a local church, mosque, or temple, which lends them high credibility and convening power. In particular, WASH actors should be willing to engage with the religious ideas and practices of people of faith insofar as they influence WASH-related beliefs and behaviors, rather than shying away.

Conclusion

If there is potential to more deeply engage religious organizations in large-scale WASH programmes for better outcomes, then it is necessary for WASH actors to have a greater literacy as it relates to religion and WASH. This includes first understanding that religion has different components—organisations, ideas, and practices—that can influence each other and ultimately WASH outcomes. Also, there needs to be additional exploration around the interrelation of these components for different religions within the context of a WASH programme. While there are general similarities across religions, beliefs and practices can vary between (and even within) specific religions in ways that impact behaviours and outcomes. To increase religious literacy across different religions requires more research and scholarship to better capture what is likely already happening in many WASH programmes.

In our attempt to increase religious literacy through a conceptual framework and case study, in no way do we want to gloss over the complexity and controversy surrounding the issues inherent in any discussion of religion and development. Nor do we suggest that only the Christian faith offers reliable partners. We have had fruitful partnership with those from other religions. Despite differing theologies, having some shared language and values allows us to engage with the religious ideas and practices of community members that often influence WASH outcomes.

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Notes

¹ See Gerard Clarke, 2007 and Faith Partnership Principles, 2012).

² For example, consider the creation of the World Faiths Development Dialogue established at the World Bank in 1998, the Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium at the University of Birmingham (funded by the UK Department for International Development) from 2005-2010, or the creation of the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities in 2012.

³ See Occhipinti, 2017 for more on typologies of FBOs.

Contact details

Nathan Mallonee is Senior Director of Program Development at Living Water International and holds an MPP from Georgetown University. Rev. Lindani Dube is Director of Church Mobilization for the Africa Region at Living Water International, and former General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe. Jonathan Wiles is the Senior Vice President of Programs at Living Water International and is currently completing a PhD at Eastern University.

Nathan Mallonee
Living Water International
4001 Greenbriar Dr
Stafford, TX 77477
nmallonee@water.cc
www.water.cc

Jonathan Wiles
Living Water International
4001 Greenbriar Dr
Stafford, TX 77477
jwiles@water.cc
www.water.cc
