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Avoiding 'White Elephants' – Fruitful Development Cooperation from the Perspective of African Initiated Churches in South Africa and Beyond

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Abstract:
Independent and Pentecostal Churches initiated in Africa – subsumed here as African Initiated Churches, AICs – represent large parts of the population in many African countries. They are rooted in the communities and can hence be understood as experts for people's daily needs and challenges as well as for the kind of support and development interventions needed. However, religious actors outside the mission churches are often not recognized as potential partners by international development organizations. Despite this lack of recognition, AICs are already active as development actors themselves. AICs see the human being in its physical, social and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, they support their members and the wider community through prayer and counselling, but also through various social service activities. This article highlights the perspective on development cooperation of AICs themselves. Focusing predominantly on the South African context, it seeks to outline the ideas of South African AICs for fruitful development cooperation. While it turns out that the interviewed church leaders show interest in collaboration with development agencies, this does not come without conditions such as equal partnership, transparency, accountability and respect for their religious identity.

Avoiding 'White Elephants' – Fruitful Development Cooperation from the Perspective of African Initiated Churches in South Africa and Beyond[1]

Introduction

During the last decades, both academic literature and development organizations have shown an increasing interest in the role of religious communities in processes of social and economic development as well as their potential for development cooperation (GIZ 2015; Swart and Nell 2016). Within this framework, religious communities are recognized as local actors with whom development cooperation should collaborate in order to effectuate sustainable change (BMZ 2016; Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb forthcoming). They often reach people and provide basic infrastructure where states are not able to do so. However, in the context of Sub Saharan Africa, many faith communities outside the traditional mission churches are not recognized as potential partners by international development cooperation. Their potential for sustainable development, but also their critical perspective on development cooperation, are not taken into consideration.

African Initiated Churches (AICs), here used to describe both African Independent Churches and African Pentecostal Churches, are the fastest growing churches in Sub Saharan Africa. In many countries, they reach large parts of the population. Previous research has pointed out their relevance for development and development cooperation (Turner 1980, 1985; Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). Taking this as a starting point, this article highlights the perspective on development cooperation of AICs themselves. Focusing predominantly on the South African context, it seeks to outline the ideas of South African AICs for fruitful development cooperation.

We first describe the churches' engagement with the community. AICs offer a wide range of spiritual and social service activities to support their members and the wider community. International development organizations often have a secular understanding of development and see development-related activities and spiritual activities as separable. Hence, second, a special focus will be put on the AICs' perspective on such kind of separation. This leads, third, to a broader discussion of the churches' ideas for fruitful development cooperation. Their criticism and concerns with regard to development cooperation as well as their conditions and advice for potential partnerships with international development agencies will be highlighted.

The paper is based on interviews and focus group discussions with AIC leaders conducted by the authors in South Africa in 2016. In total, 14 individual interviews and 6 focus group discussions were conducted. The focus groups were attended by 3 to 20 church leaders and between 2 and 53 additional church members. While the sample cannot claim to be representative for all AICs in the country, attention was paid to keeping it as diverse as possible in terms of size, location (e.g. rural or urban

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[1] This paper is a pre-print of the article "Avoiding 'White Elephants' – Fruitful Development Cooperation from the Perspective of African Initiated Churches in South Africa and Beyond", forthcoming in *Spectrum – Journal of Contemporary Christianity and Society*.

area) and categories of the churches (such as international Pentecostal-Charismatic, local Pentecostal-Charismatic, Zionist, Apostolic, Ethiopian). The material from South Africa is complemented by a focus group round of 6 AIC leaders from Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa conducted in Berlin in May 2017.

Knowing and tackling people's needs: AIC's support to members and community

During the interviews and focus group discussions, the church leaders were asked to name the major problems in people's lives. Chart 1 shows their manifold responses.
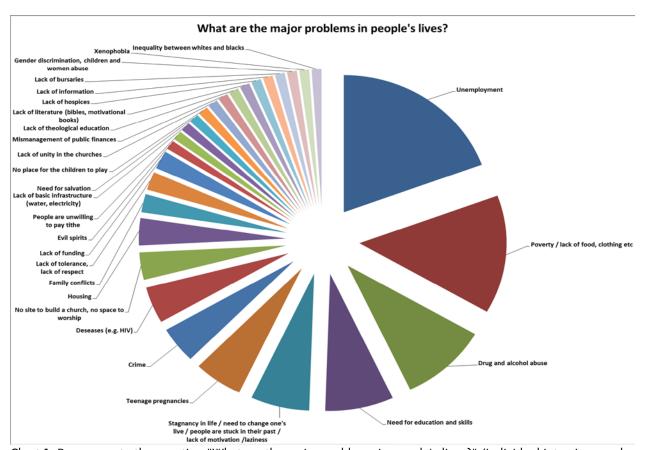

Chart 1: Responses to the question "What are the major problems in people's lives?" (individual interviews and focus groups combined).

Unemployment and poverty were clearly seen as the most pressing issues. They were named in 9 out of the 14 individual interviews and in all focus group discussions. Beside these material needs, social problems, for example alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancies and lack of education, were mentioned, too. Moreover, personal and spiritual problems such as stagnancy in life and the need for healing also feature on the list.

The answers given to the question "How does your church support the community?" show a close relation to the needs identified. AICs do not only see peoples' problems and challenges, but also respond to them.
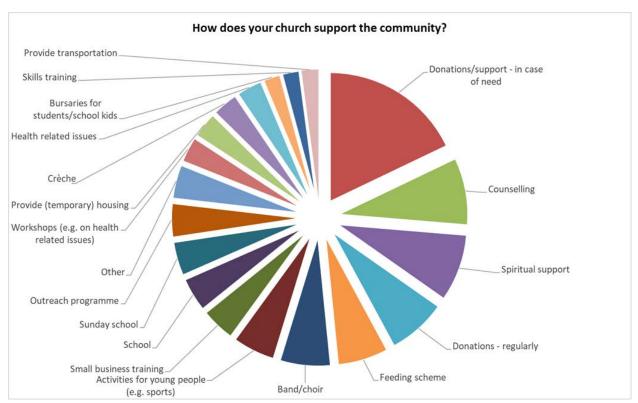
Chart 2: Responses to the question "How does your church support the community?" (individual interviews and focus groups combined).

The activities offered strongly depend on the churches' sizes and capacities. Even small churches provide support in situations of need – often also regardless of people's membership in the congregation. They donate food, clothes and money for school fees or funerals to families in need. Several interviewees explained that this informal help is all they can afford. Other AICs have been able to institutionalize such activities. They regularly collect donations among their members and run regular feeding schemes. With respect to social issues, many churches offer counselling and spiritual support such as prayer or funeral services for deceased members of the community (also those that were not members of the church). Counselling mainly addresses couples with marriage and family problems and, in some cases, people affected by HIV/AIDS. Several churches also offer activities targeting young people such as sports, drama or debates. Also choirs and bands were often named in this regard. Church leaders consider it important to address the youth in order to keep them away from crime and drugs, one of the major problems identified. In 5 out of 14 individual interviews, church leaders underlined the need for education. Four churches out of those interviewed run their own schools and several offer small business trainings. The emphasis on education and skills training is closely linked to the reasoning that one needs knowledge and skills to find a job and become self-sustainable. It is a direct response to the most fundamental problems identified – poverty and unemployment. As one church leader pointed out:

> "You see, once you capacitate people on that [skills development], what it will mean is that the people become self-sustainable. Once they become self-sustainable, it becomes easy for them to be able to live, to be able to stick to their principles of faith because they will be having support of their own, every time." (Interview 2016/IX)

In addition to the projects conducted by the church as an institution, in nearly all AICs interviewed, there are activities organized informally by the members themselves (cf. chart 3).

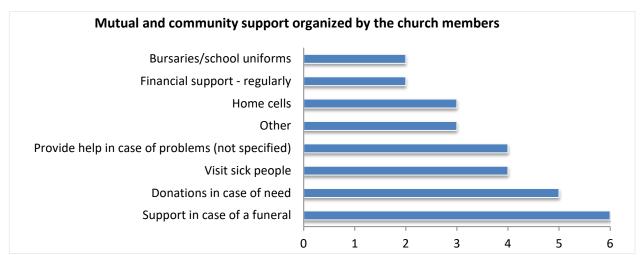**Mutual and community support organized by the church members**

Chart 3: Mutual and community support organized among the church members (responses from individual interviews and focus groups combined)

Again, there is an emphasis on support or donations in specific situations of need and on spiritual support. In many churches, members form home cells that function as a forum for joint prayer and discussion of problems as well as mutual support. Such support is often provided on an ad-hoc basis, for example in the case of a death in the family in order to cover the high funeral costs, to support the family spiritually and to provide helping hands. In many AICs, members form funeral societies or savings clubs for small-scale capital accumulation (Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Bompani 2010).

Concerning both the activities initiated by the church leadership and the informal activities initiated by and among the members, spiritual support was named along with social service activities (which would qualify as development activities in a secular sense). This indicates that support for members and the wider community is understood in a comprehensive and multidimensional sense.

The interrelation of spiritual and social service activities

It emerged from the interviews that social service activities and spiritual activities are not only both seen as important, but also as strongly interrelated (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb forthcoming): "I see them as one [...]. For me being a spiritual person, being a pastor, you have to be social relevant" (Interview 2016/IX). Moreover, it was emphasised that both sides are necessary for long-lasting positive change. One church leader explained: "You need to change the whole person" (Interview 2016/I). He underlined that teaching skills is not enough, "because it will be a waste of time and money if you train people without their lives being changed". The interviewee further elaborated that if a development activity only provided a person with technical skills without being accompanied by moral and spiritual guidance, one would not know what he or she would use the skills for. In the worst case, the person could even use the skills for destructive purposes. The church leader illustrated his reasoning by giving the example of an engineer who would use his or her know-how to build weapons. Similarly, another church leader described the spiritual aspect as an additional value that differentiated the churches' work from the work of NGOs:

"The NGOs are taking care of people but they do not take care of the spiritual part of the human being. So we are taking care of the people [...] but we go beyond: We also look at the spiritual well-being of the persons [...]. We run similar programmes, but we do more by adding the spiritual level." (Interview 2016/XIV)

This holistic understanding of the person and the related notion of holistic support are illustrated by the concept of healing, which plays an important role in many AICs. Healing can be understood as a process to overcome adversities, be they spiritual, material or social – in short, all aspects that are affecting the quality of life in a negative way (Pretorius 2004; Schoffeleers 1991). Various studies have identified the need for healing as one of the major reasons to join an AIC (Schoffeleers 1991; Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Thomas 1997; Pretorius 2004; Schlemmer 2008; Bompani 2010; Öhlmann 2015). During individual interviews, more than a third of the respondents (5 out of 14) referred to healing or the transformation of people's life when they were asked to describe unique features of their church and reasons for its attractiveness to people. The holistic concept of healing mirrors the AICs' holistic understanding of people's lives and their comprehensive approach to support and development. AICs empower their members "to solve their spiritual, material and social problems through spiritual, material and social means" (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016).

AICs' views on fruitful development cooperation

The churches' priorities

The interviewees were not only asked about their current activities but also invited to project what they would do first if they could get support from international agencies. Chart 4 shows all church leaders' priorities mentioned at least twice during interviews and focus group discussions.

Churches' priorities if they could get support from international organizations
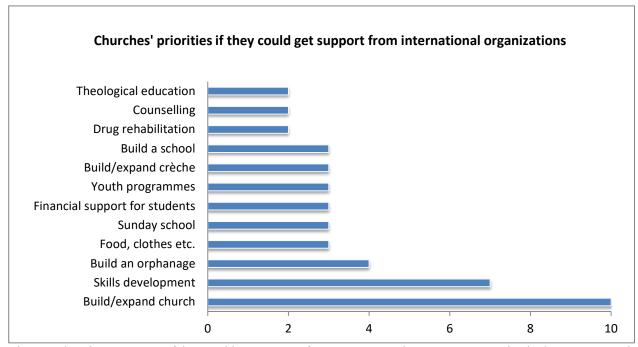
Chart 4: Churches' priorities if they could get support from international organizations (individual interviews and focus groups combined). Horizontal axis indicates how often an item was mentioned.

It clearly turns out that the vast majority of interviewees prioritizes the construction of a church or the expansion of the existing building. Many congregations lack such a building (cf. also chart 1) and gather in private houses, shacks or in the open. At the same time, it is worth noting that this priority was never the only one mentioned. It was always accompanied by the wish to broaden the scope of activities offered or to create facilities for church members and the wider community. The emphasis on skills development illustrates once again that education and training are highly valued by AICs. Following this perspective with regard to possible development programmes, one interviewee emphasized: "We don't want to find ourselves depending on handouts every time" (Interview 2016/IX).

As many AICs do not own additional buildings besides the church building (if they have one), the wish to expand the church and to expand the activities goes hand in hand. Yet, from the perspective of the vast majority of international development organizations, it would be difficult to support the construction of a church. The main argument is that development programmes funded with government funds must be neutral towards all religions. Thus, they cannot be used to support religious actors in their religious work and especially not in propagating a specific religious point of view. This is illustrated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's policy on religion: "Within the scope of our cooperation, no activities are allowed that serve to spread or preach a religion" (BMZ 2016).

The fact that international development organizations often require a separation between spiritual activities and social service activities was also discussed with the interviewees. Seven out of the 14 church leaders interviewed individually considered such a separation possible. Some respondents even thought it would be advantageous as it would allow their development activities to reach more people: "Yes, we really think it's a good idea because it is not everyone who is a Christian. For example, when we have a project of a computer lab, we cannot expect people to be praying and preaching. That is a development project" (Focus group 2016/V). Other interviewees were sceptical and pointed to practical difficulties: "How are they separated? Because if I am a Sunday school teacher I use the Bible and other books for development" (Focus group 2016/II). Furthermore, the fact that the church building often is the only building available for both spiritual and social service activities poses a challenge to a clear-cut separation between the two.

The main argument against a separation was that people "need both sides to lead a good life and for their transformation to be long lasting" (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). As one church leader noted, both sides should be balanced: "No, I don't think it should be separated. [...] Remember I said there must be a balance, yes." In fact, previously during the interview, she had already underlined that "balance" is needed between "[t]he preaching, the teaching and also the giving, yes, helping other people" (Interview 2016/IV).

Several church leaders pointed out that the activities could be separated in time. Spiritual activities would not have to be left out completely. One church leader exemplified that a representative of a development organization could well conduct a workshop without including any prayer, because such prayer could be held by the pastor afterwards. This could be a starting point for discussions between international development agencies interested in partnerships with religious communities and AICs.

Advice and conditions for development cooperation with AICs

Nearly all interviewees were open for potential cooperation with development organizations. However, one of the church leaders criticized the way development programmes are executed. In order to be sustainable, i.e. long-lasting, they should be conducted by local actors or at least in close cooperation with them (Gräb 2014). While this is also recognized by development organizations, the interviewee emphasized that it is often not put into practice. He pointed to buildings that remain unused once the standard project period of three years ends. "[S]ome of the buildings are becoming 'white elephants' [...]. [I]t is useless for foreign donors to come and donate by building something there and leaving it there under no church or no organization" (Interview 2016/XIV). As he further elaborated:

"It sounds nice to say, 'it's for the community,' but who will take care of it? But if it is under a particular church, a church with a good registration, that building will serve its purpose for I don't know how many years [...]. [W]alk around the whole South Africa, and see those many buildings that are built and donated to the community, they are 'white elephants'. Let them add the institutionalized care area under the name of a particular church and let the church be a registered church."

It is noteworthy that the interviewee emphasized the need for the church to be registered. It shows that he does not define churches per se as trustworthy institutions, but rather only those churches that fulfil certain requirements.

In order to capture their criticism and concerns as well as their insight for development cooperation, interviewees were asked to name conditions for a fruitful cooperation from their perspective.
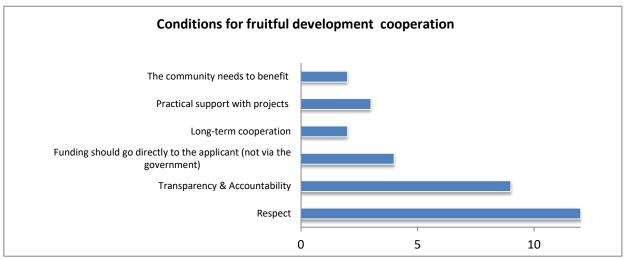

Chart 5: Church leaders' conditions for fruitful development cooperation (responses from individual interviews and focus groups combined)

The answers indicate a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability. Nine interviewees underlined the need for clear information, for example about the objective of a specific project or the use of funds. This goes hand in hand with the fact that 4 interviewees emphasized that funds earmarked for development cooperation should not be paid out to or via the government, but directly to local actors. Another pivotal point is the demand for long-term cooperation. A general scepticism towards the South African government was perceptible in many interviews and interviewees often warned about corruption. Moreover, two interviewees independently underlined that not only the church, but also the community should benefit from the support. The most frequent condition for

development cooperation to be fruitful was the need for mutual respect. During interviews, focus groups conducted in 2016 as well as the focus round in 2017, interviewees highlighted that churches have to be seen as equal partners.

In addition to the discussion about possible conditions, at the end of every interview and focus group, participants were asked for an advice they would like to give to agencies envisaging to cooperate with AICs (cf. chart 6). Some issues previously identified as prerequisites for fruitful cooperation were also listed as pieces of advice (not necessarily by the same people). Besides transparency and the necessity to send financial support directly to the applicant, the need for respect was also named in both categories. It should be emphasized that in 13 out of the 17 times, mutual respect was mentioned as either condition or advice, it was further specified as respect for the religious identity of the church. "They should respect our religion" (Focus group 2016/III). Church leaders pointed out that any potential cooperation with development agencies should not require them to compromise their religious beliefs.

> "We will have a problem if the person comes and says, [...] 'this is what you are going to teach from now, you are going to stop teaching this and you are going to teach this.' As long as they are not going to change the structure of God, we don't have a problem." (Interview 2016/VII)

In 7 cases, respect, understood in this sense, was mentioned as the sole prerequisite. "Don't ask me to compromise my beliefs. That is all. If I am not asked to compromise my beliefs, I am ready to go" (Interview 2016/IX). One interviewee even stated not to have any condition for cooperation, but then qualified his answer. "We will welcome any helping hand as long as it does not change us from our vision and mission statement, which is to preach the Word of God" (Interview 2016/II).
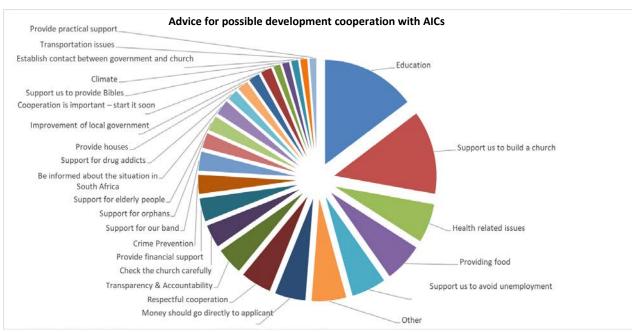

Chart 6: Church leaders' advice for potential development cooperation with AICs (responses from individual interviews and focus groups combined)

Chart 6 shows all advice given for possible development cooperation with AICs. Most interviewees pointed out thematic areas in which development cooperation would be needed most. Having the major problems (cf. chart 1) and the church leaders' priorities (chart 2) in mind, it is no surprise that the needs for education and church buildings were highlighted again. Also, advice to support churches

to provide food and avoid unemployment reflect the major problems. Educational issues were named by 24 respondents. Six of them referred to the need for bursaries or other financial support for children to go to school. Another point worth noting is that 4 out of the 10 interviewees who advised to support health related issues explicitly mentioned the need for prevention of HIV/AIDS or care for people living with HIV/AIDS. Information on the disease is crucial in the view of the church leaders interviewed. Two of them independently referred to the biblical verse in Hosea 4:6 "My people are dying because of lack of knowledge" (Interviews 2016/IV and 2016/VI) in the context of HIV/AIDS.

Other respondents chose to advise on the modalities of cooperation. Besides the need for respect, the most important condition, 8 interviewees stressed that funds should go directly to the applicant (and not via the government), while 7 emphasized the need for transparency again. Moreover, similar to the above-cited church leader underlining the need for the church to be registered, several interviewees noted that churches, for example their registration and leadership, should be thoroughly checked in advance of an engagement in cooperation. All these specific points go together with the more general advice to acquaint oneself with the local context – including its history. When asked for an advice that he would like to give, one church leader explicitly referred to the (South) African history to express his view on possible development cooperation:

> *"Only one message I will send. You see, we have a history that is so bad. And the people who came offering help, took something from us. We don't want to find ourselves going back again, it would be a sad thing if someone would stretch forth their right hand to help you and stab you with his left. Our land was taken through these kinds of systems. We were oppressed through the same type of system, where it came in the name of helping. But they were helping themselves." (Interview 2016/IX)*

It is in this light that the above-mentioned condition of mutual respect has to be seen. It might sound obvious, but this condition is particularly important in post-colonial contexts. In historical perspective, it was often not fulfilled. Particularly in South Africa during the time of Apartheid, nearly all church leaders and members experienced discrimination and oppression. Some of these still prevail due to persistent structures and mind sets. One church leader mentioned this ongoing problematic in his advice: "We would like to see black and white in this country belonging together [...] the systems have changed, but the practice is not like it" (Interview 2016/XI).

Moreover, in more recent times, many church leaders had deceiving encounters with governmental and/or international actors. Nearly all churches interviewed are registered as Non-Profit Organization (NPO) in order to run institutions like crèches, schools, hospitals and other activities. Nevertheless, many reported disappointment over the lack of government support. The necessity to send any potential funding directly to the applicant emphasized both in the conditions and advice, indicates that trust in governmental authorities is low. One church leader explained his advice as follows: If "the government becomes involved as a political structure, things don't go right [...] you must not depend on the government to facilitate our issues" (Interview 2016/XI). Three other interviewees requested that no empty promises should be made (Focus groups 2016/I, 2016/III and 2016/IV). In any kind of cooperation for development, the basic parameters such as objectives, time frame and limitations have to be clear to both sides. Decisions have to be taken together with the people responsible in the church – not for them (cf. Focus group 2017/I).

If development organizations want to partner with religious communities like AICs, they have to recognize these communities as independent actors who are already active on their own. As one interviewee highlighted, the main development cooperation needed is "capacity building" to support

the churches in thematic areas they are already working in (Interview 2017/Ib). Areas such as education, skills training or health-related issues could serve as entry points of cooperation.

Conclusions

Development interventions need to affirm the agency of individuals and communities and to take their social and cultural embeddedness into account in order to produce lasting change (Gräb 2014). Because AICs take the spiritual dimension of life seriously (which is an essential part of life in many African countries), they reach the people and their activities are relevant. They are culturally embedded and their work is locally grounded. Thus, "they have the high potential to foster long-lasting change of mind-sets and behavior" (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). AICs in South Africa know people's needs and respond to them wherever they can. They bear high potential for development cooperation and many of them would be very interested in such cooperation. As turns out from their priorities and advice, they already identified a variety of areas where cooperation would be fruitful. AICs can provide an institutional structure for development projects in many communities. Cooperating with them ensures local ownership and sustainability – and hence avoids the production of 'white elephants'.

At the same time, their interest and openness for possible partnership is not unconditional. Most importantly, AICs want to be seen as equal partners. Engagement with them should be direct and not via government channels. Any collaboration needs to be based on transparency, accountability and mutual respect. Respect, in this context, is predominantly seen as respect for their religious identity. The spiritual dimension is an integral part of their world view, self-understanding and activities. It needs to be taken into account if the collaboration is to have added value.

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