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For Discussion

PARTICIPATION OF CHURCHES IN DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY

Introduction

In its meeting of 27 February-2 March 2007, the WCC executive committee recommended that

“there be, at its next meeting, a detailed discussion regarding the relationship between the WCC and the ACT Development, and on the role of the WCC vis à vis the participation of the churches in development and its own work on advocacy.”

A few weeks before the executive committee met, the first ACT Development Assembly was held in Nairobi (4-7 February 2007). ACT Development, the new global alliance for development, was officially formed after two years of consultations and planning. Its formation was proposed at a consultation in February 2005 titled “Enhancing Cooperation in Diakonia and Development”, to establish a global alliance of ecumenical development agencies to address the following specific needs:

- The need for a *global ecumenical platform* where we can come together as churches and agencies to discuss development issues, share policies and resources, look strategically together at our combined work and plan joint initiatives;
- The need for *coordination* of activities including of our actual development programmes, of the standards we set and mechanisms we use such as reporting procedures, greater coordination in the transition from relief to development and also of the work we do in advocacy;
- The need for *visibility* for the development work of the ecumenical family which it was hoped could result in increased income and greater leverage to influence international policy makers;
- And then there was the need to be able *to access all appropriate sources of funds*, noting that funding opportunities were being missed as some European and global bodies are giving preference to funding coalitions rather than individual organisations.¹

The wish to work more closely together in development came as no surprise as there was already a strong cooperation between churches and agencies with regard to emergencies through ACT International and advocacy mainly through the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance. The consultation in February 2005 stated therefore that:

“Long-term, the ideal model is to bring together ecumenical work with emergencies, advocacy and development under a common brand name, preferably Action by Churches Together.”

¹ Report by Dr William Temu, Convener of the Steering Group, Appendix 3 of the Record of ACT Development Assembly, 4-7 February 2007, Nairobi, Kenya.

This intention of bringing together the ecumenical work concerning emergencies, advocacy and development has been taken seriously and was affirmed at the first ACT Development Assembly. The final statement says: “It was agreed by the Assembly that ACT Development should continue discussions with ACT international... to explore possibilities of a structural relationship between the two alliances. A close working relationship will also be maintained with the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance.” Meanwhile the structural cooperation between ACT Development and ACT International is growing as there is a Joint Working Group and a joint meeting of the executive committees of the two ACT’s, taking place in September 2007.

The WCC plays a specific role in ACT Development. The WCC is hosting, even institutionally, the secretariat of ACT Development for the first 2-5 years and is moderating the steering committee. The Associate General Secretary, William Temu, has taken this responsibility showing that the WCC is committed to ACT Development at the top leadership level.

The formation of ACT Development, and the intention to bring the work of churches and ecumenical organisations with regard to development, emergencies and advocacy under the umbrella of preferably one global ecumenical alliance raises a number of questions which will be reviewed in this paper.

The relationship between the WCC and ACT Development

The relationship between the WCC and ACT Development needs to be understood against the background of the changes that have taken place in the arena of development organisations. At least a few major trends can be discerned:

- The total amount of development aid has increased drastically in the last few years.²
- Churches, at least in Western Europe, which initially played a major role in development, are losing their strong position which has implications for their financial capacity to participate in development activities too.
- The competition between different development organisations, as most of them get their funds from governments, has become more intensive than ever before leading to a concentration on a high media profile and advanced skills of campaigning.
- Several development organisations open offices in the so-called development countries to strengthen working relations and to increase accountability.
- There is an increasing tendency by national governments, in particular in Western Europe, to fund coalitions instead of individual development organisations.
- At the same time, there is a growing scepticism in public and political circles in these countries about the effectiveness of development cooperation as the efforts of the past decades did not fulfil the promises of poverty reduction.
- Responding to this growing scepticism, governments of many donor countries and donor organisations stress accountability by advanced methods of planning, reporting and monitoring.

These tendencies result in a search for a “reconfiguration” of the movement of development organisations. New coalitions are formed to strengthen the position in the struggle for funding and working methods are being professionalized. The need for a global ecumenical platform, coordination of activities, more visibility in order to have better access to appropriate sources of funds, as mentioned above, have to be understood against this background. ACT Development has to be seen as an answer to these needs.

The need for more cooperation, visibility and professionalism in development raises questions with regard to the role of churches. Churches have been major actors in development for centuries. They

² The net Official Development Assistance (ODA) of DAC Members increased in the last 15 years from around 65 billion USD to more than 100 billion USD.

still are, not so much because of their skills in planning, reporting and monitoring, visibility and accountability – the tools of modern, professional development organisations – but because of their mission, nature and structure.

The main challenges of today's world – the growing gap between rich and poor; the impact of climate change; the competition for resources and markets; the horrors of violent conflict and war, and the tension between people of different convictions³ – are so impressive that they affect the life of so many people throughout the world. In many situations, life itself is at stake.

Addressing these issues by advocacy and development is therefore part of the *mission* of the church. It is part of our witness to God's care for life and our faith in God's Son who was sent into this world so that "creation itself will be set free from its bondage of decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Care for human persons and care for creation is at the heart of diaconal work. This work forms an integral part of the expression of Christian faith in the world today and therewith also an integral part of the nature of the church.

The very *nature* of the church is that, in spite of the variety in traditions and theological articulations between different churches, finally it has to be understood as one global body. The search for visible unity has always been part of the ecumenical movement and finds expression in mutual care and accountability. In I Cor. 12 it is said that where one member suffers the other members suffer too. The unifying work of the ecumenical movement, in terms of taking care of each others needs, has become more urgent than ever before in a world where economic globalisation divides people and enhances conflicts.

This specific nature of the church is reflected in its *structure*. In spite of the differences in organisational models and their under girding theological traditions, churches are active on local, national, regional and global levels. There are few organisations or movements in this world which have this unique *structure*, interlinking the global and the local so strongly. Precisely churches can therefore play a significant role in building bridges and healing relations in this world, which is an essential condition for development.

Many churches have long traditions in diaconal work and development. Working with people in local situations, supporting their struggle to survive and improve conditions for life, helped them to develop an expertise few other movements or organisations have. This expertise ranges from involving people in raising awareness, education, community building, technical training, to economic development and political empowerment. Apart from this broad range of activities, churches are, more than other actors, sensitive to the social and religious dimensions involved in development being more than just economic development. From their long-standing involvement in development they have a deep awareness of the need for an holistic understanding of development.

However, precisely this deep and long involvement in development has many churches learned to see the significance of the professional skills of development organisations or specialized ministries as they are called in the ecumenical family. These professional skills are very much needed in the quickly changing world of development organisations as was pointed out above. Most of the specialized ministries have grown out of the involvement of churches in development and are staffed by committed Christians. Therefore, one could say that these specialized ministries are fully part of the life of churches and of the ecumenical movement.⁴ The challenge is to design a fruitful

³ See the presentation of the General Secretary of the WCC at the first Assembly of ACT Development, Record of the ACT Development Assembly, p.30.

⁴ Whether specialized ministries see themselves as part of the church and of the ecumenical movement depends very much on their self-understanding. This is a point of debate within several of these organizations as well as between them. From the historical perspective, it can be shown that many of these organizations have grown out of mission work

cooperation between churches and specialized ministries in such a way that the spirituality, nature, structure and the experience and expertise of churches on the one hand and the professional skills of the specialised ministries in fundraising, implementing development projects and advocating change on the other, can enrich one another. Churches and specialized ministries need each other in order to give hope to the people in their struggle for life spiritually as well as practically.

The role of the WCC vis à vis the participation of the churches in development

It is precisely in interrelating churches and specialized ministries that the WCC can play a crucial role. The WCC can play this role and serve the participation of churches in development under a few conditions:

- *A clear self-understanding:* the first condition is that the WCC has a clear understanding of its own nature and mission. The WCC is not in itself a global development agency. Its strength is not to plan, implement and monitor development projects or to raise funds for such projects. The WCC is a fellowship of churches as has been confirmed in its policy document *Common Understanding and Vision* (CUV).⁵ In this fellowship rich and poor do not meet as donors and recipients, but as full members on the basis of equality. This equality is a fundamental part of the quality of the fellowship.
- *Capacity building:* in some areas, in particular in extremely poor situations, the gap between specialized ministries and the needs of people and churches is growing. Churches and small organisations are unable to respond to the high standards of planning and reporting which specialized ministries are increasingly asking for. The WCC can provide and has provided capacity building for local and regional churches and church-related organisations to bridge this growing gap.
- *Giving support to churches:* those churches which are fully involved in (professional) development activities should have the opportunity to participate in national, regional or global networks for development, like ACT Development and with regard to emergencies ACT International. The WCC can encourage and support those churches, or their development departments, in their participation.
- *Giving voice to concerns:* the WCC gives voice to the concerns of churches with regard to the struggle of people and their search for hope. Networking, carefully listening to the member churches, analysing the signals coming from different corners of the world, gives the WCC essential information in the dialogue with specialized ministries about their policies and priorities. This is part of the prophetic role of the council.
- *Space for critical discussions:* a clear division between the role of the WCC and the task of specialized ministries helps to create space for critical dialogue. Such a dialogue is needed for instance on the paradigms of development as a one-sided focus on economic development still dominates and because the religious and cultural dimensions in development are neglected too often. The WCC should enhance a critical dialogue on the structural causes for enduring poverty and the need to interconnect issues that are too often addressed separately in the world of NGOs, (e.g. climate change and poverty reduction) as is being done in the AGAPE process. These examples show the specific role of the WCC in the critical dialogue with NGOs and governments about development and advocacy.
- *Space for pioneering:* history shows that time and again new issues and concerns emerge. The WCC, sensitively listening, has to articulate what churches see as emerging concerns and find ways to develop adequate responses. This needs space for pioneering. The WCC has done that successfully in the past, for instance by creating ECLOF or Oikocredit, by initiating EHAIA, and so on. These new initiatives can grow towards becoming independent organisations or can be implanted into organisations that provide a nurturing and supportive environment. In this

(and to some extent also as result of the emphasis of the ecumenical movement on the significance of laity in the work and life of the church).

⁵ See chapter 3 of the CUV document and Purpose and Vision of the WCC at the WCC-website: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/index-e.html>

way the WCC functions as a midwife for new initiatives responding to newly emerging concerns.

- *Strengthening the ecumenical family:* there are moments that the community of ecumenical specialized ministries experience internal tensions. As these ministries are valuable partners in the ecumenical family, the WCC, being the most comprehensive conciliar global organisation, can play a leading role in strengthening the relations.
- *Providing a stable policy environment:* many of the issues in the areas of development and advocacy have a complex nature with conflicting interests. This is becoming clear for instance in the debates on the effects of economic globalization where churches from rich parts of the world and churches from poor regions have different opinions reflecting different economic positions. The WCC has a tradition of working through these complexities and contradictions and providing a stable policy environment. Churches and specialized ministries can benefit from this environment. Going through these difficult processes, trying to reach as much consensus as possible, also gives the WCC legitimacy to speak in the global arena.

The work of the WCC on advocacy

The existence of specialized global platforms or organisations, can never replace the WCC's own work on advocacy. The reason is that the church, again by its very mission, nature and structure, has a specific role in the advocacy work. In the WCC Round Table Meeting of 2007 with specialized ministries, the general secretary, Samuel Kobia, rightly pointed at the theological meaning of advocacy: "*Advocacy has a very important theological meaning: standing before God and the world with and on behalf of suffering people and suffering creation.*" The WCC's unique contribution on advocacy lies in its constituency. The WCC, being a fellowship of churches, is an instrument of the churches to give voice to the concerns of the suffering people, who are quite often their own members. In most cases, the people affected are the best advocates of their cause. The ecumenical structure can help them voice their concerns. As Kobia concluded: "Understood in this way, advocacy cannot be delegated to one specific organization or institutional set of actors because it is such a basic characteristic of our common witness to the world."

However, to a large extent advocacy also requires professional skills, in particular in the complexity of international political arenas. The WCC, through its structure strong in relating itself to people in various difficult situations, benefits from an intensive cooperation with organisations which are specialized in advocacy. They can effectively help the WCC to translate the concerns of the people into adequate advocacy strategies. At the same time the WCC, being a global actor with a large and important constituency, can represent the ecumenical family in public statements and in encounters with other global organisations, like the UN (e.g. through the annual UN Advocacy Week), World Bank, IMF or WTO. Specialized ministries also expect this role from the WCC as was clear again during the meeting of the WCC Round Table of May 2007.⁶ In this meeting the unique role of the WCC was confirmed. The report of the meeting says:

It was affirmed that the WCC is uniquely positioned:

1. *To have an overview of issues raised globally in the advocacy scene,*
2. *To coordinate and convene, strengthening existing networks or creating new ones,*
3. *Relate to a uniquely wide constituency,*
4. *To support capacity building initiatives linking local actors globally,*

⁶ The report of this meeting says: "It was proposed that the Round Table Core Group follows up, together with the WCC, on the following areas of concern: theological grounding of advocacy; well-resourced, targeted global level advocacy in the UN family, emphasizing human rights and security issues; the role of the WCC and its constituency in addressing International Financial Institutions; the role of the WCC and its constituency in addressing the Private Sector, particularly Trans-National Corporations; enhanced ownership and involvement of the member churches and ecumenical partners, through capacity building and critical dialogue; capturing the different advocacy agendas in the ecumenical family, either through creative mapping, division of labor or existing forums."

5. To link local and grass-roots level advocacy to the UN and other global institutions, and
6. To develop a shared theological and spiritual grounding for advocacy.

Recognizing this unique role, the WCC already had installed an Ecumenical Staff Working Group on Global Advocacy in which also staff members of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, ACT Development and ACT International participate. The goal of this group is to enable the WCC to ensure coherence and complementarity and to promote cooperation in the advocacy work of the four organizations.

In search of a supportive structure

Starting from the general observation that the valuable work of specialized ministries and their global ecumenical alliances is very much needed to compliment the mission of churches and the WCC, but can never replace this mission, the main question is: how to structure the cooperation without mixing up the specific roles? Answers have to be found from a double perspective:

- The first is that the main actors need to have a *clear self-understanding*. Speaking from the perspective of the WCC, do we as WCC and our member churches have a clear vision what our specific contribution in the cooperation with the other economical global alliances has to be? The characteristics mentioned earlier may help to sharpen this self-understanding with regard to the role of the WCC vis à vis the participation of the churches in development and its own work on advocacy. A fruitful cooperation requires not only from the WCC a clear self-understanding, but also from the other actors, c.q., ACT Development, ACT International and specialized ministries. Do these organisations regard themselves as part of the ecumenical family? Do these organisations accept an ecumenical discipline which is characteristic for the relation between the churches and the WCC? How do specialized ministries, stemming from churches but mainly funded by secular governments, see themselves? These questions of self-understanding need to be clarified in order to create sustainable forms of cooperation.
- Secondly, there is need to develop *supportive structures* between the main global actors, which in the future are likely to be the WCC and Action by Churches Together.

In the search for such supportive structures, at least two aspects need further reflection. The first is the participation of churches in ACT Development and ACT International as they work towards a single alliance. One of the complicating factors is the enormous variety in church structures. Some churches have specialized departments for emergencies, development and advocacy whereas others do not have and yet are fully involved in these activities. What is the position of smaller churches which are unable to participate actively in ACT Development? Is their fear justified that they will have less access to funds than churches which actively participate? What role do regional and national councils of churches have with regard to development and advocacy if ACT creates sort of parallel structures? This differences in church structures should be taken into account if the question of participation and/or membership is addressed in the process of the merging of the ACT Alliances.

The second aspect in the search for a supportive structure is related to the specific role of the WCC. In the past the WCC initiated kinds of work that evolved into independent organizations, like Oikocredit. As the efforts concerning development, emergencies and advocacy are so close to the heart of the mission of churches and the WCC, a strong link between the WCC and Action by Churches Together is natural. The way in which such a strong link needs to be structured, needs carefully designing. If ACT Development, ACT International and the specialized ministries understand themselves as part of the ecumenical family, the WCC can be given a leading role in the governing bodies of the two ACTs. At the level of staff, it is necessary to form structures for coordination, mutual enrichment and accountability.