Southeast Asian countries are notable for very different religious traditions and roles vis-a-vis state, society, and economy. Religious institutions and practices today are characterized by their dynamism, shaped by the region's rapidly changing demography—notably urbanization and migration—and politics. Several societies are marked in surveys by high religiosity. Religious movements and leaders have played varying roles in shaping the region's history and contemporary trajectories. Examples include Burma (Myanmar), where the Saffron Revolution and humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis highlighted Buddhism's practical hold and influence; Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, where two extraordinary Muslim movements, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, are vital service providers for education and health; Cambodia, where Buddhism is officially and practically a defining national institution; the Philippines, where the Catholic Church remains one of the most influential institutions (playing positive and less positive roles); and Vietnam, where religious institutions endure despite an often hostile environment. There has been little regional focus on matters related to religion, and few active interfaith groups operate today. Areas where faith and development coincide most purposefully are the environment, humanitarian response, peacebuilding, and HIV and AIDS.

Religious identity is linked to several persisting conflicts in the region, notably in the shape of Muslim extremism but also in tense relationships among Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims in several countries. Especially in the Philippines, religious actors (Catholic Church institutions and transnational Muslim networks notably) play active and creative roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

The region's very different histories and resource endowments result in uneven development progress, with very different country economic and social situations, evident in their un-
even progress toward reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Of the ASEAN-member countries, only three (Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) are fully on track to meet MDG 2015 deadlines. Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar all rank in the bottom third of 187 countries (138-139, and 147 respectively) on health, with education lagging not far behind. Religious institutions and leaders have not for the most part played prominent roles in highlighting uneven progress or inequalities and inequities. In many respects, contemporary religious roles in development represent unexplored territory.

**SOUTHEAST ASIA’S DEVELOPMENT THINKING AND APPROACH: FAITH DIMENSIONS**

Southeast Asia’s major faith communities have a long history of engagement in social welfare and their roles are deeply embedded in community life still in many parts of the region. Especially in the most remote and inaccessible locations, vibrant religious centers often function as social or economic hubs. There has been and remains considerable focus on faith/religious influence on values, whether it is to emphasize family and community or resignation in the face of harsh life realities or catastrophes. Commitment to a common culture and to honoring one’s responsibilities tends to receive more emphasis than individual human rights. Important but rarely addressed explicitly and practically are faith impacts on values such as work ethic and gender relations.

Very different religious traditions and contemporary profiles mark the region, explaining why religious factors play significant roles in several countries but are not a binding or unifying theme at the regional level, and have yet to take on prominence in ASEAN regional policy.

Islam (predominantly Sunni Islam) is the most widely practiced religion in Southeast Asia, with an estimated 37 percent of the population. Significant geopolitically is the fact that 65 percent of the world’s Muslims live in Southeast Asia. The largest Muslim populations are in Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao (Philippines), and southern Thailand. Traditionally, Southeast Asian Islam coexisted harmoniously with other large religions and indigenous belief systems. Current tensions, including uprisings and terrorist groups, are largely linked to strains of Islam from the Middle East through funding of mosques and madrasas and educational exchange. Malaysia is a world leader on Islamic finance. Muslim women in the region exercise global leadership in redefining women’s religious roles, including in peacebuilding. Muslim-inspired organizations are particularly active in education, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. The largest and best-known transnational Muslim organizations are Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid (region-wide), Muhamadiyah, and Nahdlatul Ulama (Indonesia, with some transnational work).

Buddhism shapes traditional society and social life in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma (Myanmar). Monks provide education, care for vulnerable children and orphans, and support public health initiatives, inter alia. A significant minority of socially active Buddhist monks and, to a lesser degree, nuns form an activist Engaged Buddhist movement that speaks truth to power on development issues like corruption and environmental destruction and is at times actively involved in shaping development thinking and action.

Apart from the Philippines (Catholic) and significant minorities in Burma (Myanmar) and Indonesia, Christians are a small minority in Southeast Asia. Christian-inspired organizations are, however, among the most engaged development actors. They include international NGOs (such as World Vision and Catholic Relief Services) and looser networks of evangelical groups. An example of transnational Christian activism is work to combat trafficking in persons.

The region’s Hindus today are concentrated in Bali, Indonesia, but Hinduism’s historical legacies shape social activities and customs across much of the region. Among reported development implications are relics of caste systems.

Indigenous beliefs are significant especially in mountainous areas of the Mekong region and Philippines. In relation to development strategies, tensions around land tenure and concessions involving these communities (especially in Cambodia) are a source of concern for communities and advocates. Some see indigenous traditions as offering possible inspiration for environmental protection.

**FAITH-INSPIRED DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTIONS**

As in other world regions, Southeast Asia’s faith-inspired institutions take diverse forms. Their varied institutional roles are defined both by national regulatory frameworks that affect religious activity and broader (and changing) approaches to civil society and specifically NGO roles.
Thus faith-inspired organizations play vital development roles in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia, but enjoy less support and room to maneuver in Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, and Laos. Organizations fall roughly into the following categories: national NGOs and community organizations; religious communities and congregations/leaders; international NGOs; national/transnational spiritual movements; and diaspora faith communities. The work of organizations linked to religious traditions and communities is known only in a patchy fashion.

**ISSUES ARISING THAT INVOLVE FAITH AND DEVELOPMENT**

The review and consultation identified seven focal topics involving faith-inspired organizations and development actors (including governments and transnational organizations) that raise concerns or that represent distinctive experience. All point to potential action looking forward.

**Coordination:** Poor coordination of structured development work, especially involving nongovernmental organizations, is a generic problem for several countries. The dispersed nature and often independent-minded character of faith-inspired organizations can exacerbate dysfunctions and poor resource use. Several countries have relatively robust development coordination mechanisms but these often ignore most faith-linked efforts and groups. This is true where there are state-faith tensions but apply more broadly given lack of focus on faith-inspired efforts and institutions. The most acute problems arise in healthcare (SARS, HIV and AIDS, maternal health) but as environmental protection and climate change responses assume increasing prominence the missed opportunities that poor coordination represents demand attention. Poor coordination of peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts detract from their effectiveness, though the Philippines is emerging as a global witness to what concerted integrated peacebuilding work can achieve. UNICEF has well established programs engaging religious communities on HIV and AIDS programs but these stand out because they are unusual.

**Governance, Corruption, and Transparency:** Poor governance, with corruption as a prominent manifestation, has emerged as a central development obstacle in many countries (though Singapore stands as an international model of what can be achieved with strong leadership). In popular mobilization against poor governance, faith organizations have played mixed roles. The Catholic Church in the Philippines has been particularly vocal in shining light on government corruption, as have Muslim groups in Indonesia. Elsewhere faith leaders and institutions appear ambivalent. One explanation is that faith institutions themselves are not known as beacons of transparency, explaining in part why religious leaders may be reluctant to open their practices to outside scrutiny. In the presence of endemic corruption in many societies, faith-inspired organizations handle practical calls for payoffs and nepotism in varying ways. Given the values dimensions involved in the full spectrum of governance issues, including links to democratic ethics and religious freedom, this topic deserves deeper analysis and dialogue.

**Faith, Conflict, and Fragile States:** Many Southeast Asian conflicts, including those in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Burma (Myanmar), have religious dimensions, though these are always complex, involving also ethnic identity, economic forces, and raw politics. Efforts to address faith dimensions of conflicts are active if patchy (there is no recognized focal point or centralized leadership). A range of faith-inspired organizations are actively involved in many dimensions of peacebuilding, including negotiation and mediation (San’Egidio), training (CRS), post conflict programs (Islamic Relief, NU, Muhammadiya), reconciliation (International Center for Conciliation), engaging women (Sisters in Islam), research on best practices (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies), and conflict prevention. Interfaith cooperation has shown some successes and experienced some disappointments, with the long-standing conflicts in Mindanao and Aceh as focal points.

**Climate Change and the Environment:** Climate change and environmental degradation already impact significant populations of Southeast Asia’s poorest and most vulnerable populations. This is an area of quite active faith-inspired mobilization. Different traditions and organizations draw on faith teaching on preservation and ordaining the natural environment, and have used creative modeling and communications distinctive to the region (ordaining trees, for example). Faith-based advocacy and action are areas that deserve greater attention and action, at the national and international levels.

**Orphan and Vulnerable Children Care:** Lively debates about appropriate policies and practical approaches...
to care for orphans and vulnerable children involve religious communities and institutions in several Southeast Asian countries. This is both because religious teachings give priority to care of children at risk, especially orphans, and because many operating orphan care programs, especially orphanages, have faith links. These include both some of the best and some of the worst such institutions. The emerging professional consensus (and official international stance) is that community or family care is far preferable to orphanages, which, besides discouraging integration of children in communities, are subject to wide-ranging abuses. These include so-called “orphan tourism” as well as links to human trafficking and perceptions of forced religious conversion. Nonetheless various communities persist in viewing orphanages as necessary and merciful. Largely, though not exclusively, Christian faith-inspired organizations (Foursquare among them) run networks of orphanages across the region. Significant numbers of faith-inspired organizations (largely Christian but also Muslim) continue to fund and operate orphanages as a way to directly link western donors with children on the ground. Dialogue, information about what is happening on the ground, and sensible regulations are called for. Given cross-cutting religious dimensions, this is a prime topic to engage different communities on a practical basis.

**Evaluation:** In national and international climates where results and accountability garner increasing focus, the generally weak program monitoring and evaluation that characterize most faith-inspired organizations are problematic. The wide variation in such practices also makes harmonization and learning from experience especially difficult. Reasons for reluctance to evaluate vary, ranging from resource and knowledge limitations to unease with standard evaluation methodologies and criteria. Best practice examples do exist, as does creative work (for example, World Vision Australia’s efforts to measure empirically how spirituality affects development outcomes). Nonetheless there is a broad consensus but relatively little implemented action to strengthen this important dimension of faith-inspired development work.

**Proselytizing:** Tensions resulting from proselytizing/evangelizing efforts by faith-linked groups that are associated with development work emerged as a concern. The issue is related to the broader topic of religious freedom and human rights, especially in countries where these issues are live, notably Vietnam. While most faith-inspired organizations are committed to strict separation of development and religious dimensions of their work, a minority views the two as inseparable. Issues turn on the reality of activities and perceptions (where proselytizing is commonly associated especially with Christian organizations). Definition of what constitutes proselytizing and how far it is appropriate vary between and within faiths. A negative example cited was Bible distribution alongside humanitarian aid by a Christian group responding to the 2004 tsunami in Sumatra; the reputation of all Christian groups working in the region was reportedly impaired. Government sensitivities to perceived proselytism account in large part for increasingly stringent registration requirements on religious groups. Complexities and sensitivities around proselytization point to a need for dialogue and clearly understood standards of conduct.

Full versions of the reports can be found at:


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**ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE**

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) works to build bridges between the worlds of faith and secular development. Established at the initiative of James D. Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, and Lord Carey of Clifton, then archbishop of Canterbury, WFDD responds to opportunities and concerns of many faith leaders who have seen untapped potential for partnerships.