

# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN POPULATION DYNAMICS

## Insights and Recommendations from the African Dialogues on Faith & Demography

While populations in many regions of the world are rapidly ageing, stagnating or even shrinking, the population in most African countries is still overwhelmingly young and rapidly growing. Today, the African continent is home to roughly 1.5 billion people. By 2050, Africa’s population is expected to reach 2.5 billion. With nearly 60 percent of its population younger than 25 years old, Africa will experience major demographic changes throughout this century that require targeted and adaptive policy responses in every one of the continent’s 54 countries.

In Africa – as elsewhere around the globe – both governmental and non-governmental actors and institutions are already implementing policies and programmes to manage and influence

demographic changes, some with the explicit goal of harnessing a demographic dividend. The task at hand is not one that governments can tackle alone. It requires the participation of civil society actors, development cooperation and multilateral institutions, as well as the engagement of faith actors and multi-religious organisations. The latter is particularly relevant in Africa, where 95 percent of people identify with a religion and where religious leaders are often respected figures who enjoy greater trust than the state. That governments rarely systematically engage faith actors or organisations in efforts to address demographic change is a missed opportunity.

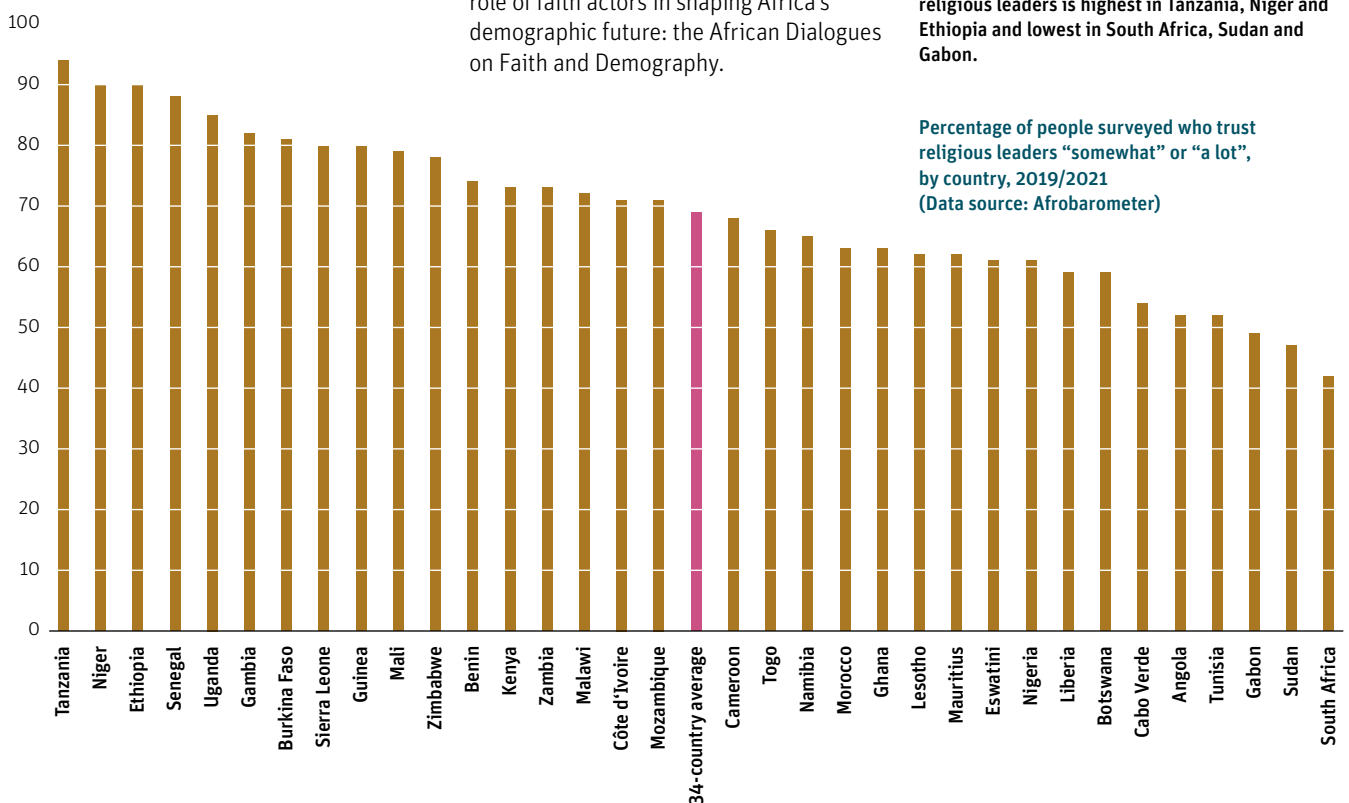
Against this backdrop, four institutions – Religions for Peace, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and the Berlin Institute for Population and Development – partnered to convene a series of virtual dialogue events on the role of faith actors in shaping Africa’s demographic future: the African Dialogues on Faith and Demography.

The organisers of this dialogue series recognised that many faith actors, including religious leaders, faith-based organisations and inter-religious councils, already work on and influence population issues. African faith actors are active in their communities in areas such as education, health, humanitarian assistance, and psycho-social well-being. Whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, faith actors contribute to creating the social foundations for demographic change. They deliver life-saving health care, help shift social norms and educate young people. This means that faith actors should be considered key partners in efforts to address demographic challenges.

### Religious Leaders Enjoy Significant Trust

Across 34 surveyed African countries people on average trust religious leaders more – and view them as less corrupt – than politicians. Trust in religious leaders is highest in Tanzania, Niger and Ethiopia and lowest in South Africa, Sudan and Gabon.

Percentage of people surveyed who trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot”, by country, 2019/2021 (Data source: Afrobarometer)



Between April 2022 and December 2023, the organisers of the African Dialogues on Faith and Demography convened six virtual dialogues that brought together African faith actors as well as stakeholders from governments, international organisations and civil society to explore the ways in which multi-religious engagement can contribute to demographic change and sustainable development. The first dialogue served as an introduction to the demographic issues at stake and the sixth highlighted faith actors' strategies for success. The other four dialogues focused on specific topics that were identified as key entry points for faith actors on demographic issues: gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, girls' education, and youth empowerment. Key insights from the dialogue series include:

### **Religious Leaders (Can) Advance Gender Equality**

Many religious leaders and organisations are already promoting gender equality in various ways, including by opposing harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), gender-based violence (GBV), and child marriage in their communities. Faith actors do this by working to shift social norms and perspectives, and delinking harmful cultural practices from religion. They can also bring men to the table and engage them in conversations about gender equality issues in their families and communities. This can take the shape of questioning traditional concepts of masculinity, developing positive alternatives, and transforming gender roles for both men and women.

### **Faith Actors (Can) Improve Sexual and Reproductive Health**

Many faith actors are using religious teachings to correct misconceptions about family planning and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). For example, religious leaders are providing and

disseminating a faith-based rationale for family planning and birth spacing that is grounded in close readings and interpretations of religious texts such as the Bible or Qur'an. They may also argue that maternal and child health must be the top priority for parents, and that further pregnancies should not jeopardise mothers' or their children's health. In addition, as social service and health care providers, faith-based organisations can provide SRH education and services in humanitarian settings and instruct women and girls about menstrual hygiene.

### **Faith-based Organisations (Can) Promote Girls' Education**

Religious organisations are often engaged as service providers in areas critical to advancing the demographic transition, including education. Thus, they have a natural role to play in these settings to promote girls' education by adopting gender-sensitive measures to ensure girls can safely participate and succeed in primary and secondary school. For example, faith actors operating schools can ensure students have access to clean water, adequate sanitation facilities and menstrual products, so girls don't have to miss class when they have their period. Religious leaders can also play a key role by using their influence to advocate for girls' education as a moral good to achieve gender equality – and a necessity to create healthy and resilient families and communities.

### **Religious Organisations (Can) Empower Young People**

Youth wings of churches and mosques are important spaces to work with and empower youth to be the driving force in Africa's socio-economic transformation. Faith leaders can also amplify the voices and needs of young people by inviting them to assume leadership positions in religious organisations. To make a material difference in young people's lives, religious institutions that generate employment opportunities – such as schools or hospitals – can also make a commitment to train and hire youth, including young people with disabilities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Secular Organisations, Governments and Development Cooperation Agencies Should...**

- Identify and support religious organisations and actors that are already advocating for family planning, gender equality, and girls' education.
- Recognise the potential of religious organisations as partners in developing and implementing health and education strategies and programmes.
- Adapt or identify appropriate language for respectfully engaging with faith actors on a long-term basis.
- Seek partnerships with faith-based organisations in diverse settings, including in humanitarian emergencies.
- Avoid making assumptions about religious actors' views on issues such as SRH, FGM or GBV, and engage them in dialogue instead.
- Resource and inform grassroots communities of faith on key socio-demographic issues.
- Connect faith actors with resources developed by other faith-based organisations, such as existing Islamic sexuality education curricula or church declarations in support of family planning.

## Faith Actors, Organisations and Leaders Should...

- Develop and promote interpretations of holy scriptures that support gender equality, family planning, and girls' education.
- Educate themselves about key SRH issues affecting their community members.
- Raise awareness within their faith spaces – for example, their institutions or among other religious leaders – about the importance of gender equality, girls' education, and youth empowerment.
- Sensitise parents in their communities about the long-term impacts of decisions they make for their girl children's futures.
- Create child protection policies for their institutions.
- Teach life skills in Sunday school and other religious education settings, emphasising that a person's physical, mental, and spiritual health are interconnected.
- Keep up with the modernisation of society, including in terms of technology, by recruiting and empowering youth leaders to advise their planning and decision-making.
- Promote and actively support youth leadership within their institutions and amplify young people's voices and concerns.
- Create inclusive spaces and practices for young people with disabilities, and advocate for their right to education, training and employment.
- Use their position of influence with policymakers to support human rights-based policies at various levels – sub-national, national, regional, global – and to better meet their communities' needs.
- Reach out to boys and men to challenge traditional gender roles that harm them as well.

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