

# The Expansion of Muslim NGOs in Ghana

HOLGER WEISS

In comparison with Western/non-faith and Christian NGOs, the engagement of Muslim NGOs was for a long time left unnoticed by most observers, and if discussed, their input was generally belittled. However, especially after the traumatic experiences in the West of radical militant Islamic organizations, the activities of Muslim NGOs have come under close scrutiny, both in the West and elsewhere in the world. Some Muslim NGOs were believed to be potential supporters of Al-Qaida, others of posing a potential challenge, if not threat, to the Western secular state model.

The situation in Ghana as regards to Muslim NGOs and their relationship to the secular state and their participation in civil society provide an interesting test-case to examine the claim that the expansion and activities of Muslim NGOs pose a potential threat to the stability of Ghanaian society. As I will argue, this is not necessarily the case. Although the Muslim population is a substantial minority—about 18 to 20 percent of the total population of ca. 18 million—it does not consist of a monolithic block but comprises many ethnic and doctrinal groups that have little in common. Some Muslim NGOs are linked to individual groups, such as the Tijaniyya, the Ahlu 's-Sunna [Ahl al-Sunna wa 'l-Jamaa], or the Shia, while many others are not. While there was during the 1990s, and before 9/11, a rising fear among some observers in Northern Ghana that some local Muslim NGOs were branches of militant

**One notable result of the societal crisis in sub-Saharan Africa has been the expansion of NGOs during the last few decades, including, especially since the 1990s, Muslim ones. Most regional Muslim NGOs often supported by transnational NGOs, and, as one also has to stress, by foreign Muslim governments, particularly the Gulf States and Libya. Tracing such links, the author argues that while these connections are essential to their activities, the dependency on external actors simultaneously limits their effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>**

organizations, these suspicions turned out to be invalid. Instead, Muslim NGOs have done their utmost to become accepted partners in both the Ghanaian NGO scene and civil society.

## Visions and activities

One of the reasons for the upsurge of Muslim NGOs in Ghana is the distrust on the part of Muslim authorities, both among those connected to the Ahlu 's-Sunna and those connected to the Tijaniyya, of the activities of Western

international donor agencies and Western NGOs. As an outcome, some Muslim leaders have started to emphasize the importance of self-reliance and the need to create a new discourse on the necessity of mobilizing Muslim human resources. However, it is important to emphasize the shift in government social welfare policies. Due to the various economic recovery and privatization programmes, the role of the state as the main provider of basic social welfare has increasingly been eroded. Equally important is the active proliferation of international Muslim organizations in promoting economic and social development in sub-Saharan Africa as part of a counter-reaction against established Western and Christian activities in the field. Thus, it could be argued that the mushrooming of Muslim NGOs in Ghana is as much a philanthropic enterprise as it is also part of a new attempt to "capture souls" and present an Islamic alternative.<sup>2</sup>

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As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, some Ghanaian Muslim NGOs are either branches of international Muslim NGOs or have close links to such organizations.<sup>3</sup> Several local Ghanaian Muslim NGOs were established by returning Muslims, who had studied in the Middle East and had made contacts with and were inspired by local philanthropists. Some international Muslim NGOs were invited to start activities in Ghana as part of former president Jerry Rawlings' attempts to establish economic cooperation with the Gulf and other Arab states, as was the case of Libyan and Iranian NGOs.<sup>4</sup> However, many local Muslim NGOs do not have links to international Muslim NGOs nor do they receive any assistance from Muslim countries. As a result, these local NGOs have an erratic range of activities and are working only in a particular locality. The main bulk of them are found in the south, in the Greater Accra Region as well as in Kumasi; a few of them are also active in the north, mainly in Tamale and other centres with Muslim populations. Although they try their best to attract the attention of foreign donors, few of them are in the end successful. Consequently, many of these small NGOs exist but on paper.

Since the 1990s, many Muslim NGOs have commissioned projects for the improvement of the spiritual and socio-economic conditions of Muslims throughout the country. Such projects have first and foremost been the construction of mosques and, to a lesser extent, decent and modern educational infrastructure, community centres and orphanages as well as basic social amenities such as libraries and hygienic sources of potable water, and the sinking of wells in Muslim communities. Charitable activities of various other local Muslim NGOs have been of equal importance, for example, providing gifts to inmates in prisons, assistance to hospitals, orphanages, and handicapped institutions or the distribution of second-hand clothing to the poor and needy. Some Muslim NGOs, such as the Iranian ARD, are engaged in the provision of agricultural extension services in the north, including tractor services and the distribution of fertilizers, sewing centres for training Muslim girls, and financial assistance to women's cooperatives and groups to start small-scale businesses.

There are some highly influential local Muslim NGOs in Ghana, such as the Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services (ICODEHS, established in 1991), Muslim Family Council Services (MFCS, established in 1990), and the Muslim Relief Association of Ghana (MURAG, established in 1986). They have gained a good reputation both within and outside Ghana and have close links not only to international Muslim donor organizations but also Western ones. Like the MURAG, the MFCS has mainly been cooperating with Western donor organizations, such as the UNFPA and the UNICEF, in family planning, fertility management, prevention of female genital mutilation, child-care, and HIV projects. Similar to the MURAG, the strength of the MFCS lies in its community-oriented approach. Further, MURAG is included in a list on "NGO's in good standing" on the homepage of the Ministry of Manpower, Youth, and Employment.<sup>5</sup> The ICODEHS, on the other hand, is the only Ghanaian Muslim NGO that is a member of the Civil Society Coordinating Council (CivisoC) of SAPRIN-Ghana.<sup>6</sup> The ICODEHS is also a member of the Coalition of Domestic Observers (CODEO).<sup>7</sup>

## Societal impact

Despite all their efforts, the activities of Muslim NGOs have received a mixed response from the local people. Whereas educational, social, and infrastructural development projects in general are regarded as having a positive impact, other projects, such as the building of mosques, have at times been criticized by local Muslim intellectuals for not responding to the needs of the local population. A common argument by Muslim authorities I spoke with both in Tamale and Accra was that foreign Muslim donor agencies are very open-handed in providing resources for the building of mosque complexes whereas it is much more difficult for local Ghanaian Muslim NGOs to get funding from international/foreign Muslim donor organizations for social welfare or infrastructural projects, not to mention the provision of resources for staff salaries. It seems as if international Muslim aid is usually received as a kind of package: a Ghanaian Muslim NGO is able to get funding for an educa-

tional or social welfare project if it is tied to a mosque complex. Or, as one Ghanaian activist explained to me: a project application will secure funding if it is tied to the building of a mosque. Especially foreign Muslim donor agencies that channel funds through Ghanaian Muslim NGOs are criticized for being inflexible and only allowing the funds to be earmarked for stylish or even mere propagandistic projects. In fact, in comparison to various social welfare projects and programmes, huge sums are spent on mosque building projects by foreign donors and their Ghanaian initiators.

Perhaps the biggest problem connected with the activities and projects of Muslim NGOs is their restricted societal impact—although this certainly does not apply to all Muslim NGOs. Projects are usually designed to target a particular group or to accomplish a designed task, say an orphanage or a school. Although the particular project aims to remedy a certain problem, it is usually not linked to or integrated into a wider societal context. Not surprisingly,

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therefore, some Ghanaian observers have become rather critical about the concepts behind the promotion of development assistance. The activities of the NGOs, be they Muslim or other, can do little to address structural problems. It could be argued that the very nature of the NGOs is part of the problem: although most of the Muslim NGOs are run by Ghanaians, few, if any, are capable of financing their activities by generating funds from the Ghanaian Muslim community. Instead, most of them are financed by or are receiving funds from international Muslim NGOs or wealthy foreign Muslim states and philanthropists. Thus, there exists the danger of becoming dependent on outside money—a problem not too unfamiliar to many African NGOs.

The dependence on outside investments puts a Ghanaian Muslim NGO in a problematic situation: it is always the foreign donor who decides what to finance and what not. Thus, for the empowerment of the local poor, other approaches have to be sought, in particular initiatives that are designed by the recipients, targeted towards a structural change in the local community, and financed by funds which the implementing organization is fully capable of controlling. Such an approach will need the mobilization of the Ghanaian Muslim population to take collective responsibility not only for the improvement of their livelihood but also to engage in a fruitful debate about "Muslim" solutions for poverty alleviation. Interestingly, such a debate has already started among Muslim intellectuals and leaders in Ghana. This debate is itself part of an international debate among Muslim scholars, namely on the ability and possibility of Muslim societies and communities to make use of one of the most central concept of Islam, namely that of zakat or obligatory almsgiving.

## Notes

1. This article is based on my forthcoming book: Holger Weiss, *Begging and Almsgiving in Ghana: Muslim Positions towards Poverty and Distress* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, forthcoming).
2. See also H. Weiss, *Between Accommodation and Revivalism: Muslims, the State and Society in Ghana from the Precolonial to the Postcolonial Era* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, forthcoming).
3. International Muslim NGOs with branches in Ghana are, amongst others, the Kuwaiti African Muslim Association (renamed Direct Aid in Ghana), the Saudi/Kuwaiti Al-Hudah Islamic Society, the UK-based Muntada Islamic Trust and the Muslim Aid, the US-based Zakat Foundation of America, and the Pakistani Ghana Tablighi Jamaat.
4. For example, the Imam Hasayn Foundation and the Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) from Iran and the Libyan World Islamic Call Service.
5. See [http://www.mmde.gov.gh/gov\\_corp.cfm?GovCorpID=11](http://www.mmde.gov.gh/gov_corp.cfm?GovCorpID=11), accessed on 11 April 2006.
6. SAPRIN or Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network is a network encompassing virtually all major NGOs, churches, and trade unions in Ghana. Internationally, SAPRIN is a joint project of the World Bank, governments, and a global network of NGOs and civil society organizations. See Lindsay Whitfield, *Civil Society as Idea and Civil Society as Process: The Case of Ghana*, Working Paper 92, Queen Elizabeth House (Oxford University, 2002).
7. CODEO was first formed in 2000 to monitor the general elections. It consist of 34 civil society organizations, two of them Muslim, namely the Federation of Muslim Councils in Ghana and ICODEHS.

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