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Religio-Cultural Values, Sustainable Development, and Climate Change

Editorial

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Abstract

This editorial introduces *Religion & Development* Vol. 4, Issue 1. It starts out with a brief reflection on the field of religion and development and the journal's contribution to it before highlighting the contents of this issue. Central themes of the articles include the role of religious actors and religio-cultural values in response to climate change, secular-religious tensions in religious social services, the interaction of domestic and international social service and development work, and the role of religious leaders in the fight against gender-based violence. Geographically, the issue spotlights Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Northwestern Europe. Finally, the editorial includes a few editors' notes on the journal itself.

Keywords

strategic religious engagement – religious values – Ethiopia – Madagascar – Mozambique – climate change – gender-based violence

1 Introducing Religion & Development Vol. 4, Issue 1

We are opening the first 2025 issue of *Religion & Development* with this editorial. After the finalisation of last year's volume with two exciting thematic issues on *Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity*, edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen (Daou and Driessen 2024), and *Religion in the Digital Realm*, edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost (Swart and Frost 2024), the first issue of the new volume is a regular issue whose articles approach the field from a variety of angles.

Now into its fourth volume, *Religion & Development* demonstrates the interdisciplinary breadth and depth of interest in this area. From theological reflection to direct reports on interventions, the journal is a space for more abstract contemplation *and* practical knowledge sharing. The field of religion and development crosses such boundaries, as much of the research is highly applied and used for building and refining development interventions around the world. The Policy and Practice Notes in the journal also create a space for policymakers and practitioners to express insights gained from their experience at the forefront of working on religion and development. Yet as we have learned from decades of conversation on religion and development, we must also consider the nuances of the field, which means providing space for contentious issues to arise and be debated on a more conceptual and intangible level.

An overarching observation of the articles published so far underlines what has elsewhere been put forward as one tenet of what some call Strategic Religious Engagement (Marshall et al. 2021). That is to say, the undeniable importance of contextual appropriateness in religion and development research and practice emerges repeatedly from articles published in the journal as a critical principle for good practice. This is a call also aligned with localisation and decolonisation debates happening across the humanitarian and development fields. Across the articles in this volume (e.g. Tarusarira et al. 2025; Istratii et al. 2025; Hiilamo et al. 2025), as well as those going back to our very first volume (e.g. Golo and Novieto 2022), authors have repeatedly stated that the local religious dynamics are a vital consideration in religion and development research and practice. Research demonstrates how local "religio-cultural values", as Tarusarira et al. put it in this issue, will affect communities' views and perceptions of the development issue or intervention. Once stated, it feels self-evident that local religious dynamics and contextual appropriateness will be crucial for effective religion and development work. Yet this has frequently not been the case with the pervasive influence of Western, secular, international influence and agendas in development (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Wilkinson 2020), including the changing nature of religious engagement on

the world stage (as pointed out across the articles in Vol. 3, Issue 2 on *Religious Engagement in Global Affairs*). With faith-based organisations acting as part of the international discourse, they, too, are distanced from local realities at times. Yet the research repeatedly underlines that breaking free from Western modes of thought, indeed decolonising thinking, and paying sufficient attention to local nuance is what will make religion and development interventions more contextually appropriate and consequently more effective and impactful. In this way, over the years, the journal is creating a picture of what current scholarship deems to be the best way to conduct religion and development research and practice, with "local" and "contextual" being some of the most prominent key concepts and principles.

2 The Contents of this Issue

The first research article in this issue is on "Discursive Constructions of Domestic Corps-Based and International Social Outreach in The Salvation Army. Parallel Universes or an 'Integrated Mission'?" by Petra Kjellen Brooke and Emma Tomalin (Brooke and Tomalin 2025). The concept of "integrated mission" is used as a frame for the exploration of several fields of tension in the work of The Salvation Army. This includes the relationship between religious and secular aims, between proactive and reactive approaches, and between international and domestic work. Brooke (who is herself a senior staff member at The Salvation Army) and Tomalin begin by providing a brief look into the origins and development of the organisation and a discussion of the role of the idea of "integrated mission", i.e. the integration of social service and religious aims and activities, for the identity of the organisation. Subsequently, they use empirical data from key informant interviews conducted in Norway and the United Kingdom to analyse the dynamics at play in The Salvation Army along the three fields of tensions mentioned above, showing that these dichotomies continue to exert substantial influence. The article contributes not only to the ongoing debate about secular and religious approaches in the religious social service and development sector, but also draws attention to a dichotomy that has thus far received little attention in the literature: the dichotomy between (reactive) domestic social service work and (proactive) international development work. Brooke and Tomalin's article highlights the relationship of these two pillars as an important field not only for further academic research, but also for reflection on the part of religious organisations themselves.

In this issue's second research article, Joram Tarusarira, Gracsious Maviza, and Giulia Caroli zoom in on "Religio-Cultural Determinants of Reactions to

Climate Change and Related Security Risks in Traditional Religious Communities in Northern Mozambique" (Tarusarira et al. 2025). The article is based on the central premise that techno-scientific responses to climate change are insufficient and that religio-cultural values exert a strong influence on how people act in the face of climate change, its effects, and how they relate to adaptation and risk mitigation and efforts. The focus of their study is Northern Mozambique, an area disproportionately affected by climate change, which exacerbates poverty and vulnerability. At the same time, the region is marked by religious diversity (Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous Religion). In a participatory research approach and an extensive empirical field study, the authors worked with local community members to assess their lived experiences, interpretations and reactions to climate change. It materialises that experiences of climate change and extreme weather phenomena are largely interpreted through religious and cultural lenses by the community members – a finding that resonates with similar research in the field on other Southern African countries. The authors convincingly argue that these views have to be taken seriously. Policy responses to mitigate the effects of climate change and to reduce vulnerability have to be grounded in the religio-cultural values that influence local communities' views.

Climate change and the response to its effects are also key topics with which the third research article in this issue engages. In "Building Resilience in the Face of Climate Change: The Case of the Lutheran Church in Southern Madagascar", Heikki Hiilamo, Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison, and Stephanie Dietrich investigate the response of the Lutheran Church in Madagascar to Climate Change (Hiilamo et al. 2025). As in the article by Tarusarira et al., the study is undergirded by the core assumption that religious and cultural values and knowledge are fundamental in local responses to climate change. The asset-based community development approach employed by congregations of the church is an example of an approach that seeks to take these into account. Madagascar is also another hotspot of the negative effects of climate change in the Southern African region. Based on a comprehensive empirical study consisting of interviews and focus group workshops, the authors document three main sets of activities: afforestation, climate-resilient crop and livestock production, and water management. The findings show that these projects emerge from local initiative and constitute a highly contextual response to climate change, constituting an example of local religious agency and expertise. The study highlights the significant role of local religious actors in climate change adaptation.

Fourth, Romina Istratii, Benjamin Kalkum, and Henok Hailu's policy and practice note, "Findings from a Theology-Informed Training for Ethiopian

Orthodox Clergy" (Istratii et al. 2025), offers much-needed evidence from the evaluation of a training course for religious leaders on gender-based violence (GBV). While there are known examples of training for religious leaders on GBV, it is rarer to see the results of evaluations peer-reviewed and published in journals, which means we have something of a gap in the evidence base about the lessons learned and effectiveness of such interventions. The first notable feature of this training is that it is based on formative research that Istratii and her team have undertaken over several years, so that the contextually-specific creation of the training is based on deep ethnographic knowledge of the needs and nuances in the communities. The participants in this training reported "extensive" issues surrounding domestic abuse and marital problems. This underscores the need for such training. To make the training effective, however, is a different matter. This article provides evidence for good practice in religious leader training on GBV, including conducting refresher training at an interval after the initial training to provide necessary redirects when parts of the initial training have been misunderstood/incorrectly implemented, the importance of combining different types of knowledge in the training (theological interpretation, anthropological and sociological explanation, and legal and practical advice) rather than focusing on one type of knowledge alone, and the effect of having trainers from the same religious and cultural background. This policy and practice note provides significant further insights into how to best implement religion and development programming.

Finally, the issue includes a book review of Philipp Öhlmann and Juliane Stork's edited collection *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond* (Öhlmann and Stork 2024) written by Mookgo Solomon Kgatle (Kgatle 2025).

3   From the Editorial Desk of Religion & Development

On a more general note, we are pleased to see that the journal has made important strides in establishing itself as a leading periodical for research and reflections from policy and practice in the field. *Religion & Development* is swiftly gaining recognition and impact. While the journal has been listed in the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals[1] since 2022, we are delighted that earlier this year it was also included in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).[2] *Religion & Development* is becoming a key resource for research,

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1   https://kanalregister.hkdir.no/en/tidsskrift?id=503661.
2   https://doaj.org/toc/2750-7955.

policy, and practice. For instance, the recent report by the World Economic Forum "Faith in Action: Religion and Spirituality in the Polycrisis" (WEF 2024) references articles in the journal.

Furthermore, we are delighted that the following distinguished colleagues have recently accepted our invitation to join *Religion & Development*'s editorial board: Mohammed Abu-Nimer (American University, USA), Jayeel Cornelio (Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines), Eduardo Dullo (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), Nalika Gajaweera (University of Western California, USA), Nora Khalaf-Elledge (University of London, United Kingdom), Themrise Khan (Independent, Pakistan), Bob Kikuyu (Christian Aid, Kenya), Katherine Marshall (Georgetown University, USA), and Gopal Patel (Bhumi Global, USA). We would like to formally welcome them and appreciate their readiness to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the journal.

On a more technical note, the consolidation and further development of *Religion & Development* is an ongoing process. With this year's volume, we are transferring the editorial and peer review processes to the Editorial Manager system. This will increase quality due to enhanced capabilities such as plagiarism and duplicate submission checks by default and increase efficiency by reducing the processing times of submissions in the editorial office. In future, we encourage all authors to submit their manuscripts via the Religion & Development Editorial Manager system.[3] We will still be offering email submission for the transition period, but eventually all submissions should go through the Editorial Manager system.

Another small, but significant change in the journal's policies that is happening this year is an update in *Religion & Development*'s referencing system. Starting from the next issue, we will be shifting from the 17th to the 18th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Author-Date). The 18th edition brings with it a number of simplifications, such as the omission of the place of publication in reference lists, simplifying the manuscript preparation for authors and streamlining the copyediting processes.

Finally, we have recently renewed our social media presence and activity, curated by our editorial assistant, Esther Mazengera. With a view to increasing the reach of the journal and each author's article, we publish news about new articles and issues on Facebook and LinkedIn – you are cordially invited to follow us:
https://www.facebook.com/religionanddevelopment
https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/religion-development/

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3   www.editorialmanager.com/rnd.

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Research Articles

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Discursive Constructions of Domestic Corps-Based and International Social Outreach in The Salvation Army

Parallel Universes or an "Integrated Mission"?

Research Article

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Abstract

This article identifies a number of intersecting binaries that shape The Salvation Army's (TSA) social outreach environment and examines efforts to unite these as part of an "integrated mission". Two of these have been highlighted since the earliest days of TSA (i.e. social versus religious goals and reactive versus proactive approaches), while a third is more recent (i.e. domestic versus international outreach). Drawing on interviews with staff from two TSA territories – UK and Ireland, and Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands – we explore how a different language is used to describe domestic corps-based (church-based) social outreach compared to international social outreach and whether this goes beyond semantics and instead points to a variety in activities and outcomes or "parallel universes". Our research demonstrates how some areas of TSA are questioning the binary between domestic and international social outreach

not only because it leads to a lack of cross-fertilisation between different domains of activity that could lead to better outcomes, but also for its colonial underpinnings. Our findings suggest that as TSA develops its approach to "integrated mission", the binary between domestic and international social outreach is more widely and critically examined, in addition to other binaries that have been debated for longer.

Keywords

The Salvation Army – social work – service delivery – international development – reactive – proactive

1 Introduction

The Salvation Army (TSA), founded in Britain in 1865 by former Methodist preacher William Booth and his wife Catherine, is today a global Evangelical Church, supporting those experiencing poverty and inequality through its social outreach in 132 countries. Integral to the Booths' mission was connecting with and including those on the margins of society, whom other churches often rejected. In addition, the aim was to directly cater for the immediate needs of the disadvantaged as part of the core activities of the newly established churches, or "corps" as they are called in TSA language. Not only was such military lingo popular at the time TSA was formed, but as Taylor indicates, its use spelt "out both the urgency of the task, and the discipline needed to be effective in undertaking such a critical endeavour" (2014, ix). From the earliest days of TSA, "salvation meant being saved from both the misery of damnation in the next world, and of salvation from the miseries of the present world" (Taylor 2014, 53). Support included soup kitchens as well as hostels for "fallen" women, a term often used in the Victorian era to describe sex workers that is today viewed as pejorative and outdated. For the founders of TSA, such activity was to go beyond charity or a "reactive" response and instead to involve a "proactive" response that can lead to community development and the transformation of the social conditions that lead to poverty in the first place (Hill 2017, 313; Banks 1999). However, given the limitations on resources and the availability of professionally trained staff, pursuing a proactive approach has often been challenging, and corps today are more likely to focus on catering to people's basic needs. Moreover, while religious and material salvation were intended to go hand-in-hand, it was not long after the founding of TSA, as it began to scale up and professionalise its social service activities, that these began to diverge

into parallel tracks with the setting up of the "Social Reform Wing" in 1890 alongside the "Field Wing". The former was to concentrate on service provision and the latter on TSA mission and its religious activities through its corps (Humphreys 2015, 123; Hill 2017, 31). Many have been critical of this bifurcation along two vectors – between social and religious activities but also proactive and reactive approaches to social outreach – calling for the return to an "integrated mission".

Developing from these early roots in the poverty-stricken slums of London, the contemporary TSA social outreach environment is complex and multilayered. It continues to carry out a range of informal corps-based activities across its different "territories",[1] supporting those in need, whether members of the Church or not. Work at this level is more likely to reflect the religious mission of TSA compared to the professionalised and secularised work that it is contracted to do by governments, national and local, to provide formal domestic social services to address challenges such as homelessness and addiction. A further evolution in TSA's social outreach work has been its journey to becoming a major participant in the international development sector, which grew out of its role as a missionary church. As with contracted domestic social services, this work involves trained professionals who may not share TSA's faith identity, and if they do have a faith identity, they are expected to separate this from their client-facing work.

The motivation for writing this paper was to address questions that emerged from fieldwork carried out by one of the authors during the early stages of her PhD project examining corps-based social work practices in Norway (Brooke 2023a). For this, we jointly undertook additional research in Norway and the UK to increase the validity of the findings beyond a single context. In the original research, which involved interviews, focus groups and participant observation with officers and volunteers at four corps in Norway, several participants emphasised the existence of different "work cultures", where corps-based social work predominantly took a reactive approach, while TSA's international development work was much more likely to be designed as proactive and geared towards longer-term transformation. Moreover, it was observed that each "work culture" had its technical language to describe either

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1   This is another example of the use of military lingo, which continues to this day. 'Territory' is the word used to describe the international locations where TSA has a presence and often consist of two or more countries. These are further divided into 'divisions' which represent the state or county level and are more directly engaged in the day-to-day operations of the local churches or corps. Personnel within TSA are also referred to with military titles: soldiers and officers, including the ranks of lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel, commissioner and general.

domestic social service outreach in churches or international social outreach, where in Norway the former was referred to as "corps-based social work" and the latter as "community development", suggesting that they were viewed as different kinds of activities. Some of those who raised this topic in interviews and focus groups carried out for the PhD project did so because they were critical of the bifurcation between these different approaches, where they perceived that their work at the corps level was not given the support and direction necessary to bring about more lasting change. They questioned whether tools and approaches from TSA's international development work could be employed at the corps level, with some beginning to put this into practice (e.g. we heard about this concerning "faith-based facilitation", as discussed later) (The Salvation Army n.d.a).

While to this day TSA's "mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ *and* to meet human needs in his name without discrimination" (emphasis added) (The Salvation Army UK n.d.a), there have been calls for reform, at least since the late twentieth century, to address operational divisions that have emerged as the Church has grown and diversified. Efforts to (re)unite these divisions are frequently referred to as "integrated mission", which is a term most often used to refer to (re)uniting the religious and social missions of TSA. However, our research suggests that another important vector relevant to achieving an integrated mission relates to proactive and reactive dimensions of TSA's work, where "integrated mission" refers not only to bringing together "the 'church' community and the 'client' community" (Hill 2017, 306) but also developing opportunities for learning across and between different elements of TSA's social outreach environment.

We begin with a discussion of the concept of "integrated mission" and what this means in TSA. This is followed by overviews of the emergence of social service delivery as a core activity within TSA and the expansion of this to international development activities in the decades following the Second World War. Finally, we analyse our research findings to address two research questions. First, does the discursive construction of a particular problem and intervention as community development rather than service delivery/social work, and vice versa, point towards different practices and outcomes? Second, how is this question being addressed by TSA and with what effect for the task of integrating its different domains of activity?

2   Integrated Mission

First and foremost, by "integrated mission" TSA is referring to what other Evangelicals more commonly call "integral mission" or "holistic mission" (Padilla

2002, 2010; Kirkpatrick 2016; The Salvation Army International Headquarters 2006). This is a term that originally emerged in Latin America in the 1970s and was then popularised by the Lausanne Movement (Hunt 2011) to press for a return to what was considered to be the Christianity of Jesus Christ, where evangelism was not separated from social action (Sherwood 2002). During the lifetime of the Booths, their ambitious expansion of TSA's social service delivery began to give rise to a separation of its social outreach activities from the corps with the setting up of the "Social Reform Wing" in 1890 alongside the "Field Wing" (Hill 2017). While the corps (or the "Field Wing") have never ceased engaging in social outreach, as TSA's social service delivery became increasingly formal, institutional and professional, according to Hill, this has "led to almost separate Armies or parallel universes; field and social departments in every territory worked almost independently ... [becoming] ... ever more remote from the lives and experience of the rank-and-file soldiers and officers engaged in corps work" (2017, 306–307). Part of the motivation since the late twentieth century to restructure TSA operations through integrating the field and social wings in "most territories" (Hill 2017, 306) also reflects recognition that much of the formal social services provided by TSA, outside of the corps, are barely distinguishable from those of secular organisations, and that this compromises their mission to preach the gospel.

Attempts to define integrated mission within TSA (e.g. The Salvation Army International Headquarters 2006) suggest that it extends beyond the aim to bring together the social and the religious (Brooke 2023b). Instead, it incorporates addressing other divides evident in TSA practice that can lead to "parallel universes" and that are recognised not only as in need of reform but also as intersecting. For instance, as Hill writes, "the task of truly integrating the 'church' community and the 'client' community is ... an on-going challenge" not only because of resistance to overt faith expression in secular client-focussed spaces, but also because "professional expertise is required in serving the latter group" (2017, 306). Thus, the divide between a secular approach and the inclusion of faith in activities intersects with a divide between professionals and officers/lay volunteers. In turn, these intersect with the divide between proactive and reactive approaches and, as we will see, between international and corps-based social outreach activities, which results from "the categorisation of territories into those that financially give and those that receive" (Marseille 2012, 1). In this paper, our focus is on the bifurcation between domestic corps-based and international social outreach within TSA, which is considered to lead to missed opportunities for learning across the different elements of TSA´s social outreach environment (Brooke 2023a). While it would have been interesting to also compare these two areas with the formal contracted domestic services that TSA provides for governments, examining

"integrated mission" from the perspective of this domain of work as well, this will instead be taken up in the future.

Several studies have challenged the legitimacy and efficacy of such a division between domestic social work and international development for leading to "parallel worlds of research" (Lewis 2014, 1), "with limited interaction and cross-fertilization historically" (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, and Tomaney 2014, 22), and where research runs "the risk of becoming constrained by a narrow outlook that neglects wider learning opportunities within an increasingly global frame of experiences" (Lewis 2014, 3). In this era of globalised capitalism, the North–South/developed–developing binaries would seem to be redundant given that inequality and poverty exist in all nations and are underpinned by common socioeconomic dynamics that require a unified response, as suggested for instance by the universality of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Horner 2020; Mawdsley 2017). Moreover, since the 1980s, "post-development" thinkers have widely criticised the discursive construction of social problems and interventions carried out in the Global South by individuals and organisations in the Global North as "development" for employing a soft and aspirational term that masks the endurance of colonial structures and interests (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Kothari et al. 2019).

Having outlined some aspects of how integrated mission is understood in TSA and the wider literature, before we examine our findings from the research undertaken for this paper we outline the emergence of social service delivery as a core activity within TSA and the expansion of this to international development activities in the decades following the Second World War.

3   The Emergence of "Social Service Delivery" as a Core Activity

William Booth had worked for many years as a Methodist preacher but by 1862 had become frustrated with the Methodist Church. The Booths parted company with it to become "independent itinerant evangelists" (Taylor 2014, 11). In 1865 TSA was set up as The Christian Mission, not adopting the name Salvation Army until 1878 (Taylor 2014, 55), with the "widespread adoption of the military symbolism" that reflected rapid changes in the organisation (Humphreys 2015, 52). As Humphreys writes:

> Within TSA there is a richness of symbols like the flag, the crest, the use of uniforms and other accruements, and metaphoric language like war cry, promoted to glory, firing the cartridge, a battle and war are drawn from both Christian teaching and Victorian England phenomena of idealisation of the military. (2015, 59–60)

According to Taylor, military lingo was "chosen pragmatically within the context of holiness revivalism as an aggressive means of Christian mission" becoming "established as a kind of spiritual emergency service" (2014, xvi). The Booths were dedicated to evangelising amongst those living in poverty outside the confines of traditional Church structures and institutions, believing that the individual was able to directly connect with God without the need for intermediaries. TSA broke with tradition in several ways, with women being given a prominent preaching and leadership role compared to other Christian traditions at the time (Walker 2001). As a further departure from orthodoxy, in 1883 they abandoned the sacraments of baptism and communion as not being essential for salvation (Eason 2009, 51). In addition to theological justifications, they felt that the sacraments were getting in the way of the responsive, inclusive and localised approach to evangelism that they were enacting amongst the poor of East London where, as Eason writes, "the poor would not go to the churches, and the churches did not want the poor" (2009, 53–54). Also, to connect with those living in poverty, "Booth's Christian Mission started 'Food for the Millions,' a chain of London soup kitchens serving inexpensive meals" (Winston 1999, 23). The provision of food remains one of the key operations of TSA corps to this day. This reflects Booth's view that "You cannot warm the hearts of people with God's love if they have an empty stomach and cold feet" (Hill 2017, 265). From the mid-1880s, as Bailey writes, "the Army gradually supplemented its soul-saving mission" (1984, 136) with more formalised approaches to social relief work including night shelters, homes for "fallen women" and the Slum Sisters Brigade, an initiative of the Booths' daughter Emma in 1884 (Rappoport 2011, 108). This period also saw TSA beginning to establish itself internationally and by the 1890s TSA had a presence in more than twenty countries including the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, several European countries, including Norway in 1888,[2] as well as colonial settings such as India, Ceylon and Jamaica (Hill 2017, 17).

The publication of William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) reflected an emphasis where "[i]t was not just that social work was a means to a spiritual end (though it was), but that it was a spiritual end in itself, even if not the whole end" (Hill 2017, 275; Bailey 1984, 136). Moreover, for Booth this was not just a programme of charity or a "reactive" response, but instead needed to be "proactive" and to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. This publication not only marked the expansion of TSA's social work but also the bifurcation of its work into informal corps-based social outreach and

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[2] Known as Frelsesarmeen in Norway, Hanna Ouchterlony, who had pioneered TSA in Sweden, established the first corps there in 1888, with the number of corps reaching 27 by the end of 1889 (Lydholm 2017, 29–34).

more professionalised services. This involved the setting up of the "Social Reform Wing" of the Salvation Army in 1890 and the establishment of a new social trust deed (The Salvation Army UK n.d.b) or the Darkest England Trust Deed in 1891 (Humphreys 2015, 123; Hill 2017, 31). Sitting alongside the 1878 Foundation Deed, instigated by Booth when he set up TSA, this new social trust deed served to draw a distinction between funding used for its religious activities and that secured for social work as he "needed to ensure that those from whom he sought finance would be able to see how their money was being expended" (Humphreys 2015, 124). As Hill writes, "[i]nstead of social work being a minor operation on the side, it became equal in scope to the field work" (2017, 304). While not Booth's intention, a consequence of this structure was that it led to what Hill has referred to as "almost separate Armies" (2017, 305), where the increasingly professional nature of formal social work became more and more distant from the more informal forms of social outreach in the corps. Indeed, as Lydholm (2017, 50) writes, this became even more marked with the creation of the welfare state in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, when social work was increasingly professionalised. Writing about Norway specifically, where in the past social institutions had been run by officers who had learnt their social work skills on the job, rather than through formal training, there was mounting pressure on TSA to employ trained staff in its social services institutions and "the connection between corps and social institutions became looser" (ibid. 2017, 51).

This bifurcation between evangelism and social services has not been without its critics, and this criticism was expressed long before the emergence of the language around "integrated" or "integral" mission. Hill cites Lt. Colonel Alida Bosshardt, who ran the Amsterdam Goodwill Centre between 1948 and 1978: "'If we don't preach the gospel anymore,' she said, "we might as well hand over the lot to an undenominational organization'" (2017, 307). For Bosshardt there would be "no social work without the involvement of Soldier Volunteers for … they were the bearers of the Army's identity as they embodied both sides of its mission" (2017, 307). Over the years there have been attempts to reintegrate these two domains of TSA work ("integrated mission"), and while in Norway the structure remains split between the "programme wing" and the "social wing", the 2015 "Fit for Mission" process in the UK and Ireland Territory sought to bring them back together as a single "mission service". This comprises several mission units where social service areas are differentiated from each other according to their domain of work rather than whether they take place at the corps level or the formal social work level. By contrast, in some settings, as Hill (2017, 312) reports, such as France and the Netherlands, the different wings

of TSA have entirely different management structures to ensure that no public funds are used for evangelical purposes.

4 The Emergence of "International Development" as a Core Activity

The emergence of TSA's international development work has been much less researched than its domestic social work but has its origins in the spread of TSA abroad in its capacity as a missionary church from the late nineteenth century. From this time, it began to set up churches/corps in Asia, Africa and Latin America, seeking to spread the Christian message as well as to provide social outreach, including health and education. In 1911 TSA held its first international social work conference in London and then a second in 1921 with representatives from 26 countries (Hill 2017, 300). Documents about the conferences reveal that they dealt with a range of social issues across all territories and not just those that today would be classed as "developing" (Hill 2017, 300–301). This included setting up hospitals and schools where, as Hill writes, these "contributed significantly to the expansion of its membership in Africa and Asia" (2017, 302). Christian missionaries became significant social welfare providers in Africa, Asia and Latin America during the nineteenth century. Alongside evangelism, missionaries particularly focussed on health and education, with Manji and O'Coill (2002, 568; Haustein and Tomalin 2018) arguing that missionaries are "precursors" to the development NGO (non-governmental organisation). At that time the language and concept of "development" had not yet emerged, materialising later after the end of World War Two. While attracting criticism today for masking neocolonial interests, Harry S. Truman, US President, in his 1947 Inaugural Address is often attributed with inventing the concept of development as a term that replaced colonial ambitions (Rist 2014, 69–79). Thus, the shift from "international social work" to "international development" was not made until after this period. This included the emergence of the NGO, a term first used in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter in 1945. NGOs emerged either as new bodies or reformed existing organisations to become key actors in this new international development environment. They were increasingly funded for their work by donors, including individual states such as the USA, as well as multilateral agencies in the UN or the World Bank. Alongside this, some missionary organisations began to *NGO-ise* their approaches and activities to participate in the aid business, viewing "faith-based aid work as a developmental issue, rather than a matter of charity and missionary activity" (Bruchhausen 2016, 117). A key feature of this NGO-isation has been

the gradual diminishment of explicit faith expression in this work to meet the secular framing of the international aid system (Tomalin 2018). This led to new Christian development/humanitarian organisations being set up, separate from traditional institutional faith structures, such as the Catholic Misereor and the Protestant Bread for the World in Germany in the late 1950s, becoming recipients of formal donor funding for their work alongside funds raised from within the Churches (Bruchhausen 2016, 121). Other Christian faith-based organisations (FBOS) that were set up in response to this new aid architecture include World Vision, founded by evangelical American Baptist minister and relief worker Bob Pierce in 1950 in the USA (King 2019), CAFOD, set up in 1960 by British Catholics (Caritas n.d.), and Tearfund, set up in 1968 in the UK by British Evangelicals (Freeman 2019). Although bifurcation between professionalised outreach/development activities and religious activities exists internally within TSA, it stands out from these other organisations in that it combines them within one organisation: it is a church *and* a charity.

With the formalisation, professionalisation and growth of the international development sector in the decades following World War Two, accompanied by many missionary organisations moving away from overt proselytisation, the embeddedness of TSA in so-called "developing" countries alongside its long history of social outreach meant that it was ideally placed to become a key player in international development activities. Therefore, in addition to its corps-based social outreach in the Global South through local churches, TSA employs a large global network of professional development actors to manage its international development work. TSA had been involved in the emerging UN environment from the start, gaining special consultative status in 1947. Today its engagement with the UN is led by its International Social Justice Commission, founded in 2007, which also takes the lead on its international anti-human trafficking work and engagement with the SDGS (The Salvation Army n.d.b). The first country-level international development office – Salvation Army World Service Office (SAWSO) – was set up in 1977 in the USA (The Salvation Army World Service Office (SAWSO) n.d.) and today equivalents exist in Australia, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK (The Salvation Army International Headquarters n.d.), formally marking its transition towards an international development framing for much of its work in the Global South. These are not separate organisations such as the FBOS mentioned above but separate initiatives or operations within the overall TSA system. These country offices, which are all coordinated centrally from the international headquarters in London, enabled the formalisation and professionalisation of TSA's international development offering,

in an aid environment that following the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s dispersed ever greater portions of its budget via NGOs rather than directly to governments.

Having sketched out the emergence of domestic social outreach and international development within TSA, we now turn to a discussion based on our fieldwork where TSA is examined as a case study to explore the following research questions. First, does the discursive construction of a particular problem and intervention as community development rather than service delivery/social work, and vice versa, point towards different practices and outcomes? Second, how is this question being addressed by TSA and with what effect for the task of integrating its different domains of activity? After we outline our research methodology, the subsequent discussion is organised into four sections. We begin by addressing the use of different languages by TSA for its international and domestic social outreach. This is followed by an examination of reactive and proactive approaches to social outreach in TSA and the extent to which these indicate clashing cultures of practice or commentary paths. Next, we explore the place of faith in the social outreach of TSA and finish with a discussion of the implications of this for TSA's "integrated mission".

5   Empirical Research

5.1   *Methodology*

To supplement the fieldwork with TSA corps in Norway, undertaken for the PhD thesis of one of the authors, and to enable us to address the specific research questions underpinning this paper, both authors took part in two additional semi-structured group interviews with key informants in June 2022 using Teams. In addition to carrying out the research in Norway, we also spoke to people in the UK, to increase the validity of our findings. These locations were selected due to the existing connections of the two authors. We use pseudonyms to refer to the participants to protect their identity. One interview involved two TSA staff members, a female employee (Inger) from the Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands Territory and a male employee (Michael) from the UK and Ireland Territory. Both of these individuals had responsibility for providing advice to the corps about social outreach. The other interview was with two TSA employees who work in international development in each territory (Jakob and Laura). We selected these four individuals as they were in positions within TSA to answer the questions that we had. The data that was collected for the wider PhD project, which consisted of interviews, focus

groups and participant observation with officers and volunteers at four corps in Norway, is only lightly referred to in this paper and has been discussed in other publications (Brooke and Haugen 2022; Brooke 2023a; 2023b). The data that we present here draws on the two key informant group interviews with the four individuals outlined above.

5.2   *Findings*

5.2.1   The Use of Different Languages for TSA's International and
             Domestic Social Outreach: Parallel Universes or Integrated
             Mission?

In each setting, domestic corps-based social outreach and international development were carried out by different teams with little cross-fertilisation, alongside the use of different languages to describe them: they are largely discrete "work cultures". This suggests a divide between these aspects of TSA work, rather than an integrated mission. As in Norway, corps-based social outreach in the UK is also described differently from international social outreach. In the UK it is called "community services" and, since the "Fit for Mission" consultation in 2015, has been located within the newly created "mission services" area. While the international projects team in the UK and Ireland Territory, which was set up in 1997, also sits in "mission services", there is very little interaction between domestic corps-based community services and international development work. Similarly in Norway, there is little to no interaction between the corps and the international development office, beyond fundraising within the corps for international projects. This is even though the international development office, which was established in 1999, sits in the "programme department", where the corps are located. However, our interviewees indicated that this proximity in the organisational structure was circumstantial rather than strategic.

In the Norwegian Territory, corps-based social outreach has been called "corps-based social work" since 2016, in a bid to differentiate it from secular "social work" and Lutheran *Diakonia* (Dietrich et al. 2019; Lutheran World Federation 2009; World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance 2022), where the term *diakonia* is commonly used in Norway to describe church-based social work broadly. This was also part of a process dating back to 2015 when the Territorial Commander recognised that the corps lacked the support they needed to deal with the complex cases they were facing. As a response, there was an effort to recognise corps-level outreach as social work and to introduce formal processes and guidance to support outreach at the corps level, which was typically responsive, informal and mostly carried out by individuals without professional social work qualifications. This resulted in a document called

the "Platform for Corps-Based Social Work" (Frelsesarmeen 2016) and the appointment of a person from the "social work department" to have responsibility for supporting the corps in the "programme department". This support for the corps drew upon the more formal processes and professional experience of those working in contracted TSA domestic social services in Norway and was located in the social work department. One of our interviewees, Inger, took on this role in 2018 and a similar role exists in the UK, currently occupied by our interviewee Michael.

Both Inger and Michael (each working to support domestic corps-based social outreach) clearly expressed that the term "development" was never used to refer to the work that they supported domestically in the corps. Laura (located in the international development department, UK) also explained that concerning her work in development "sometimes we ask the same question … Would we call it community development, or would we call it social work?" She responded that while domestic work in the UK is called community services, international outreach is described as community development. This different use of language was felt to be problematic for reasons that pointed beyond language and towards the existence of different processes and outcomes. On the one hand, the conception of international outreach work as development was viewed by our interviewees as potentially masking neocolonial ambitions and TSA, like some other FBOs, was seeking to decolonise its activities. As already discussed, such a bifurcation between domestic social work and international development work has been criticised by scholars more widely for being neocolonial where development can be viewed as a process that is imposed on communities in the Global South to civilise and westernise them to control them (Lewis 2014; Horner 2020; Mawdsley 2017). On the other hand, our interviewees perceived international development work to be more professional and proactive with access to methods and frameworks that could facilitate social change. By contrast, corps-based social work was perceived as informal and carried out by officers, lay staff and volunteers, of whom few have any formal social work qualifications, leading to primarily reactive outcomes that did not challenge the social structures leading to poverty and inequality. These two reasons may appear inconsistent, where the first rejects development for its coloniality, and the other laments the missed opportunity for the corps to learn and implement development methods and frameworks. However, as we demonstrate below, they are different sides of the same coin, where our interviewees saw the breaking down of the binary between "developed" and "developing" settings as a crucial step to undermining development as a neocolonial enterprise, whether the term "development" itself is rejected or retained.

We deal with concerns about the neocolonial underpinnings of the term "development" first. Michael, for instance, felt that it was a "soft" term that was deliberately employed to draw attention away from the colonial roots of the development ambitions of the Global North, where it would be unpopular to state what these ambitions consisted of (e.g. "land grabbing"). Abandoning the term altogether was not discussed by our interviewees, although they were critical of how it was used to refer only to international outreach. Laura, who works on TSA's modern slavery and human trafficking international response, part of international development within TSA, problematised other terms used both by TSA and the broader development sector that perpetuate unhelpful binaries that reinforce development's colonial underpinnings. She drew attention to how in "development, we very clearly talk about 'supporting territories' and 'implementing territories', where the UK, for instance, is viewed as 'supporting' development work mostly carried out in Global South settings, which is viewed as 'implementing'." She continued that supporting territories "raise funding from their own countries and help support The Salvation Army's work on the ground internationally with technical knowledge." Just as the Christian missionary endeavour in the nineteenth century divided the world into countries that "sent" missionaries and those that "received" them, TSA divides its countries into those where projects are "implemented" and those that are "supporting", where the latter includes Australia, Canada, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA.

Our international development respondent in Norway, Jakob, similarly drew attention to attempts to rethink the binary between implementing and supporting territories, suggesting that recent crises such as COVID-19 and the Ukraine war were making such distinctions redundant:

> First COVID-19 … we all received funding from an American company to support our local initiatives, right? So suddenly we were on the other end … being the implementing territory. Similarly, now with Ukraine … we are the supporting territory, supporting the work going on in Ukraine and the countries around. But we're also an implementing territory doing our own response and channelling funding to that. So, there is a little shift going on.

This dualistic language gives rise to a perception that the world's problems and their causes are located somewhere other than the Global North and that the role of the Global North is to help other countries catch up through "development". As Horner writes, "rather than being viewed as a relational problem in accordance with incorporation into global economic and social relations …

the causes of underdevelopment are then considered as located in a ghettoized Third World or Global South" (2020: 419). This overlooks the interlocking nature of global social problems, where poverty and inequality are not confined to the Global South, as well as the role that Global North economic and political systems play in perpetuating structural injustice. During the interview, Laura also pointed out that while in the "modern slavery and human trafficking sector we are trying to move the language" to recognise that we are "all implementing territories", linguistic conventions were hard to shift. Other examples given were about the language used to describe aspects of work in different settings, where the term "field visit" is used by employees involved in international development when they are working abroad, replicating the colonial language of discovery, settlement and exploitation, compared to "going to work with our outreach team" for social service in the UK.

However, alongside this critique that the use of the term to refer to a particular "work culture" within TSA was neocolonial, our interviewees also drew attention to the way that TSA's international development work employed methods and frameworks that were proactive and professionalised, whereas in the corps the response was more informal, reactive and did not challenge the systems and structures that were responsible for social inequality. Officers and volunteers were beginning to explore ways of borrowing methods and approaches from international development, as examined below, as a way of enhancing corps-level work, although this kind of capacity building had not yet been formalised as it had been with Inger and Michael's roles, where support is provided from the "social work department" to the corps in the "programme department". We turn to this in the following section.

5.2.2   Reactive and Proactive Approaches to Social Outreach in TSA: Clashing Cultures of Practice or Complementary Paths?

In this section, we probe more deeply how the use of different languages to talk about international development and domestic corps-based social outreach goes beyond words and points to different practices and outcomes. We explore how this is linked to the requirements of differing "work cultures" as well as funding regimes. Jakob (international development Norway) was conflicted, reporting that

> it's just that the international development community has its own lingo and its own context … that's just the way we're used to talking about our things and sometimes that might reflect the genuinely different way of approaching a problem, sometimes it may just be a matter of we're just used to calling it this, but really it's the same as that.

However, others argued strongly that the bifurcation between international development and domestic corps-based social outreach goes beyond words and instead reflects different processes and outcomes. While the formal and professionalised international development response has adopted frameworks and approaches that can be termed "proactive", the social work response at the corps level is predominantly "reactive" and is largely carried out by TSA officers, lay staff and volunteers. Jakob confirmed this observation, explaining that:

> Local social services here might be more like handouts, helping, you know, short-term stuff … Whereas … a community development project is more like "OK, we're working with the community to map out what are your issues, what are your resources, what you want to do to move your community forward and deal with your issues."

He also felt that this difference in approach was a reflection of norms within the international development space where a "work culture" has emerged that emphasises the importance of people shaping their futures rather than receiving handouts from NGOs, where the latter creates dependency and does not change the systems and structures that lead to poverty in the first place. Therefore, a programme that emphasises help or charity to a community is unacceptable in a sector where longer-term social transformation is emphasised:

> The community development space is … very sensitive about how you talk about things … so you don't want to be saying that, "We're helping these people with this or that" … it's very politically correct … we need to always reflect on how we're talking about things.

This need to inhabit the norms of the international development sphere has led to the adoption of a universally accepted technical language of "development" within this "work culture". This is not only to signal adherence to values around transformation rather than dependency but is also necessary to be successful in securing donor funding. As Jacob explained:

> In the international development space … you have two years, three years, five years maybe of funding from a project … If we get the Norwegian Development Agency for example to give us funding for a project … we have to be extremely specific about what are we gonna achieve in those five years. What's the impact we're gonna have, what lasting change are we gonna have in this community over the course of those five years.

While our international development interviewees stressed the benefits of a "proactive" response, which is largely absent at the corps level, and the ways that this could improve outcomes for people in the longer term, they also recognised that "reactive" responses had an important role to play. Laura talked about how the "reactive" needs-based social work services at the corps level were virtually impossible to sustain in her international development work because of donor interest in only funding projects with clear transformation agendas. By contrast, at the corps level, a stream of locally raised unrestricted funds made it possible to offer ongoing support to individuals without having to demonstrate any transformation or "development" to external donors. The interviews with Inger and Michael similarly recognised the importance and value of the informal work culture at the corps level, with Inger emphasising the significant role that social outreach at the corps played as a first point of contact where there was time to talk and to find out more about the challenges facing people in a holistic sense. She argued that:

> If you only give them food bags and you don't talk to them, they won't share their stories, especially if they are scared … when you give out food bags … you also have a place for taking a coffee, sitting down, getting to know people. It's an easy thing to do, but it's extremely important because you wouldn't share that scary story over a food bag, but you could do it over a coffee.

Thus, differing "work cultures" and funding regimes encourage different kinds of responses: at the corps level, there was time and space for a personalised, holistic and slow-build approach that responded to people's immediate needs, while at the international level responses tended to be time-bound, results-dependent and focused on longer-term change. While our respondents did not see these as clashing cultures of practice in themselves, viewing them instead as complementary paths, the lack of integration between these different domains within TSA, through the perpetuation of the binary between "implementing" and "supporting" territories, results in missed opportunities for mutual support and learning.

5.2.3 The Place of Faith Identity in the Domestic and International Social Outreach of TSA: Expressive or Passive?

Debates about the place of faith identity are not a new concern for TSA and other faith actors but have become more acute following neoliberal welfare reforms since the 1980s and the "rolling back of the state" that has seen an increased role for the third sector globally, including that which is faith-based

(Furness and Gilligan 2012; Zehavi 2013). While this has been accompanied by a rapid upskilling of many previously informal voluntary third-sector initiatives or organisations to become professional service delivery bodies, for faith actors this also meant a requirement to separate religious activities from service delivery, particularly evangelism, and to bracket, hide or downplay their faith identity. Thus, whereas at the start TSA was "expressive" in terms of its religious identity alongside other activities, the role of faith has become much more "passive" with the growth of professional and contracted services and the separation of these from the corps. This is necessary to accommodate the requirements of secular funders to serve all communities regardless of religious affiliation and not to proselytise.

As discussed earlier, in addition to the concerns of the founders of TSA, Catherine and William Booth, that social service should be proactive as well as reactive, they also viewed social work and spirituality as fundamentally connected: social work was not just a means to achieve a spiritual end but constituted a spiritual end in itself (Hill 2017, 275). The gradual distancing of formal and professional social work from the corps as TSA developed also led to the former becoming steadily emptied of religious content, leading to calls for an "integrated mission". Mirroring the concern voiced by Lt. Colonel Alida Bosshardt, who ran the Amsterdam Goodwill Centre between 1948 and 1978, that the Booths' integrated vision of the social and the faith dimensions of TSA's work was being compromised by the increasing professionalisation of its social work offering, Laura told us that today "we are always having conversations … asking *is it missional enough* for us?"

We discussed the impact of the separation of religion from service delivery in contracted services with Inger and Michael (who support corps-based social outreach) compared to work at the corps level and found that there were differences that arguably reflect a stronger commitment to secularism within the Norwegian public sphere than in the UK. In each setting, social outreach at the corps level is in closer proximity to the religious activities of the churches, and funding for these activities is raised locally and internally. TSA officers play a prominent role in social outreach at the corps level, with the flexibility to combine faith and social welfare in a way that is less acceptable for activities that receive funding from the state or other external bodies. However, we found that restrictions on the visibility of faith activities in contracted services are stricter in Norway than in the UK, with clauses in contracts that prohibit direct evangelisation for externally funded social services. Inger indicated the careful negotiation that she undertakes with funders from the government or foundations to be allowed to keep a faith dimension as an option within

externally funded services, particularly when these services have a link to the corps. Although contracted services attract external funding, they may be provided by TSA officers or professional social workers in a corps setting. She explained that:

> Where we get funding from the government and we like serve a table [for a shared meal] and one of the things on the table would be something Christian [e.g. an offer of prayer, pastoral care, devotions and bible study] and you can take what you want. So that means you can come or you can choose not to come on that part.

This matters, she told us, more to some corps officers involved in contracted services than others, where some "feel that they are losing … their DNA when they are not allowed to do these things". She continued, "of course, we would like to have full freedom, but I think it's better than not taking the funding because I want us rather to do much … and make an impact rather than just opening our door."

By contrast, in the UK, Michael indicated that such an explicit requirement for religious identity to be "passive" and to keep religion separate from contracted social service activities, for instance in the wording of contracts, "doesn't really happen". Nonetheless, these services tend to be more secular than those at the corps level, reflecting an implicit expectation that evangelism and service delivery should be kept separate, where the professionals employed to provide these services do not necessarily share the mission of TSA.

We also discussed this divide between "expressive" and "passive" religious identity in international social outreach with Laura and Jakob. Both explained how they had experienced a shift in the wider international development domain, where there had been a "turn to religion" in development policy and practice over the past decade or so. Scholarship on this topic also acknowledges that there has been a marked shift, from a situation where religion was virtually ignored to one where it is now seen as something important to consider, including engaging with faith actors to achieve development goals (Tomalin 2013; 2015).

Reflecting this, despite challenges domestically in Norway with respect to including religion in contracted social services, Jakob had experienced a more positive attitude from NORAD (the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), a directorate under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to funding projects that had a faith dimension in contrast to "the social work sector here in Norway, which is kind of allergic to all of that stuff":

> Our faith-based approach I think as community development actors ...
> we use as a selling point ... because that gives us a different entry point to
> working with communities in a lot of parts of the world where faith plays
> a much more apparent role in the lives of individuals and communities
> than it does here in Norway. ... We have churches all over and they have a
> permanent presence there, they have a trust in the community. The faith
> leaders if they wanna deal with issues like disability where there's stigma,
> you know, the voice of faith leaders is even better than the voice of some
> sort of disabilities expert coming [in].

Laura similarly noted that in her work at the international level, "conversations
in the past few years have encouraged us to work through our faith networks
as long as we're non-discriminatory, [and] we don't evangelize." However, she
explained that in her international outreach, she can "draw on a faith response
a lot more" when she works with corps in the Global South than when she
is part of a donor-funded community development project. As with corps in
Europe, those in the Global South "work within their own territorial budget,
more than requiring external funding" and therefore "we've just got much
more freedom in our faith in that space."

6   Discussion: Challenges and Opportunities to Achieving "Integrated Mission"

In this section, we briefly discuss three examples that our interviewees talked
about where they were attempting to achieve a more integrated mission and
the challenges and opportunities they faced. The above presentation of data
from our interviews demonstrated how the call for "integrated mission" should
not only be viewed as a reaction to the bifurcation between social and religious
activities but also to different domains of TSA social outreach. In this paper, we
have illustrated this by examining how international outreach is more likely
to be "proactive" and corps-based social outreach more likely to be "reactive".
This dual meaning of "integrated mission" is also strongly hinted at in a 2006
statement from General John Larsson, TSA's 17th international leader, in the
introduction to a document called "Mission in Community", issued by TSA
International Headquarters in London:

> The hallmark of The Salvation Army is integrated mission. Salvationists
> are called to minister to the whole person. ... There is no doubt that when
> everything we do as an Army is added together The Salvation Army is

the very embodiment of integrated mission. But it is when we view each Salvation Army corps or centre or programme on its own that we need to pause and think. Ideally, every unit, every programme, however special-ised, should reflect to some degree the breadth of vision that integrated mission represents – salvation as physical, mental, social and spiritual health for every person. But in our concentration on the task at hand we sometimes forget the larger picture. (The Salvation Army International Headquarters 2006)

To take an example from domestic corps-based social outreach first, Inger and Michael both discussed how their roles had been created to inject more structure and formalism into corps-based social outreach. It is frequently too informal and ad hoc to meet the Booths' ambition that social work should be proactive as well as reactive. For instance, they both sought to implement better client management systems to capture who was being helped and the progress that was being made, so that future responses can be more effectively tailored to effect change. As Michael explained, there was a need

> to collect that pool of people that we've been journeying with probably for three or four years and we have never asked any questions at all, because, "Here comes Aunt Flo again, here's Mavis on a Tuesday morn-ing." It's all the same … but nobody's saying, "So what are we doing with these people?" Because they are lovely people and the volunteers are great. But what are we actually trying to do?

However, both discussed how they often faced resistance from time-pressured officers and volunteers, who considered that their role was to respond to the immediate needs in front of them. This included reluctance to take on board learning and guidance from the central level, preferring instead to just get on with the job. Although they both sometimes felt that a top-down approach was needed to make things more efficient and effective, they were also aware that this was in tension with the need to respect a tradition of autonomy and self-determination at the corps level. This was the very ingredient that enabled locally focused community work, much of which relied on volunteers, to flour-ish. For instance, Inger emphasised that although she has an advisory role at the corps level,

> the corps themselves decide what they want to do, and then we support it. That's … the way it's done in Norway. So, it's not like us saying "now everyone's doing this programme" and then we teach everyone. It might

be our dream to have it that way. It would be easier to follow up. But ... the
initiative comes from the local level.

Michael similarly indicated that he could not dictate to the corps what they
should do in terms of social outreach, although he agreed with Inger that
"it might actually be from our agenda easier to manage if we could be more
top-down ... [but] it doesn't work like that. The word to use here is organic. The
Salvation Army is absolutely organic." He explained how the corps come up
with ideas that they want to pursue and his role is to "put some structures in to
make it safe". So, there is a strong awareness of the need to nurture and value
the informal and holistic work at the corps level while at the same time putting
some formal structures around it so that it can be more effective at addressing
longer-term outcomes.

   Our second example of an initiative to achieve a more integrated mission
was discussed by Jakob and Inger from Norway, in their respective interviews.
They each drew attention to a method that TSA has developed over the past
decade called "Faith-Based Facilitation" (FBF), which "is a way of helping peo-
ple think, talk, explore and respond to their issues in the light of faith" (The
Salvation Army n.d.a). It is a process that leads a group of people in a com-
munity facing a particular issue through a series of five steps: event or issue;
describe and analyse; reflect and evaluate; plan and decide; and act (The
Salvation Army n.d.b). It is based on what has been called the "pastoral cycle"
(Cameron et al. 2012) and "does not end with Step 5 but, like all cycles, contin-
ues round again and again" (The Salvation Army n.d.b). In contrast to similar
facilitation processes in secular settings, FBF deliberately brings people's faith
into the discussion and reflection, helping "people connect their faith with
their actions" where "people who have a faith in God want to include God in
every part of their lives" (The Salvation Army n.d.c). As Jacob explained, it

> grew ... out of the community development space and ... it's not "help" ...
> [Instead] we're here to facilitate a community to deal with the situation
> or the issues that they have and move forward, and in that whole facilita-
> tion process faith is also an important factor that we bring to the table.

Inger voiced her interest in promoting more interaction between international
development and corps-based social outreach in Norway where in her attempts
to strengthen the corps-based response she had actively borrowed from TSA's
"international development resources" including "faith-based facilitation" as
well as "asset-based approaches" and implemented these at the local level. She
explained that these community development approaches enable corps

to actually go beyond and see behind the problems and not just give out the food bags but ... instead of looking at the 200 in the line you decide which ones of these can we actually follow up better for maybe six months and see a difference in their lives.

A third and final example was given by Laura, who works on TSA's international modern slavery and human trafficking response. She referred to "integrated mission" in relation to a mentoring programme she has been involved in setting up at the corps level. The aim of this programme was that

volunteers ... can support victims and survivors of trafficking as they come to the corps ... [where] ... we in the international team would meet once a month with the mentoring team ... transferring information we've heard internationally to help them make sense of some of the support needs of ... the people that are presenting at their corps ... [and] ... to have awareness of modern slavery and human trafficking.

In addition to the work with the mentoring team, she is also involved in running

an education and community awareness programme throughout our corps through different campaigns ... [to] ... raise both the profile of the work that happens overseas and [overseas] corps' requests for financial support, but then also requesting people here to see their role as a global citizen and how that if they change their behaviour that we can impact the trade.

While these examples illustrate that there are already initiatives to share learning between corps-based social outreach and international social outreach, in the examples given the balance seems to be towards how the corps can benefit from international development approaches rather than the other way round, suggesting that the learning is perhaps one way. As we heard in the interviews there are also shortcomings to the way that international development is enacted in TSA, where compared to corps-based work it is less likely to take a holistic approach where there is time and funding to cater to the interconnected immediate needs of a person, including the spiritual. However, it is clear that there are not only pros and cons to how social outreach is enacted at both levels but also that the persistence of the binary between international development and domestic social work inhibits greater cross-fertilisation between different social outreach environments. Our research suggests that thinking about how proactive development approaches can be brought into

the corps is an important first step in the process to transcending unhelpful colonial binaries, such as the one between international development and domestic social work.

7   Conclusion

The contemporary TSA social outreach environment offers a range of "service delivery"/"social work" and "development" activities, both "reactive" and "proactive", across different regions globally, from those coordinated locally at the corps level to those coordinated centrally at the international, territorial and divisional levels. While its international development work and centrally organised contracted services involve trained professionals operating in formalised sectors who may not share TSA's faith identity, social work at the corps level is more informal and responsive, involving TSA officers and volunteers, most of whom do not have professional social work qualifications, and many of whom wish to include a faith dimension as a central part of their outreach activities. We have identified several intersecting binaries that shape TSA's social outreach environment in which there have been efforts to unite as part of "integrated mission". Two of these have been debated since the early days of TSA (i.e. social versus religious goals and reactive versus proactive approaches). Another is more recent (i.e. domestic versus international outreach) and emerged as an important point of debate as TSA became part of the international aid system.

In this paper we have focused on the binary between domestic and international social outreach since this is increasingly viewed as a relevant topic in the academic literature as well as in TSA, which has recently begun to consider how to decolonise its approach to social outreach. We addressed two main research questions. First, does the discursive construction of a particular problem and intervention as community development rather than service delivery/social work, and vice versa, point towards different practices and outcomes? Second, how is this question being addressed by TSA and with what effect for the task of integrating its different domains of activity? Our empirical data has illustrated that community development and service delivery/social work are not just different terms for the same thing but that they point to different practices and outcomes. Moreover, while domestic social outreach tends to be more reactive in nature, particularly at the corps level, TSA's international social outreach has adopted methods and frameworks that are proactive and attempt to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. As our respondents indicated, the

downside of the focus on structural change at the international level is that funding for core services that address immediate needs is likely to be tied to the timeline of a donor-funded programme or not funded at all. Thus, while there are factors internal to TSA that influence this bifurcation, external influences in terms of funding also play a role in how problems are constructed. One resolution to this in terms of international engagement, however, is a closer pairing of social outreach at the corps level in the territories where TSA engages in "community development" work, where the latter can potentially fill the gap in service delivery with its donor-funded work. Conversely, an emphasis on root causes in donor-funded work can play a role in undermining the need for such services in the first place. This does already happen in TSA and it would be interesting to examine it more closely in future research.

In terms of domestic social outreach, the reactive nature of the corps-level activities resembles an emergency response approach that within an international aid framing would be viewed as "humanitarian relief". While this term is not used to describe it, such a labelling could arguably serve to underscore the significance of reactive work at the corps level, despite its lack of focus on long-term structural change, where it plays an important role as a first point of contact for vulnerable individuals. Our research also demonstrates that the expression of faith identity alongside social outreach is strong at the corps level. This can place the organisation at the heart of communities, and not fulfilling their role in terms of "community development" (i.e. addressing the causes of inequality and poverty) is a missed opportunity. More research is needed to explore the role that the strong faith identity at the corps level plays in social outreach and how this can be effectively channelled to support proactive responses as well as the barriers to faith expression within contracted services and how this is navigated. Our research in Norway suggests that if corps were involved in longer-term proactive projects, rather than treated only as a reactive emergency solution, it would be more likely that a negotiation around the visibility of a faith identity would have to be part of the process.

While many of the issues discussed in this paper are not new within TSA (i.e. social versus religious goals and reactive versus proactive approaches), we draw attention to the emergence of more recent debates around the binary between domestic versus international outreach. Our research contributes to understanding how some areas of TSA are questioning the binary between its domestic and international social outreach as the Global South/North bifurcation becomes ever more redundant and unhelpful. Our findings suggest that as TSA develops its approach to "integrated mission", the binary between domestic and international social outreach is ever more critically examined.

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Research Ethics

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BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

Religio-Cultural Determinants of Reactions to Climate Change and Related Security Risks in Traditional Religious Communities in Northern Mozambique

Research Article

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Abstract

This article examines how religio-cultural values influence the vulnerability and adaptive capacity of local communities in the face of climate-change-induced security risks through a case study of vulnerable communities in northern Mozambique. These risks encompass various forms of suffering, displacement, and violence related to climatic stressors. While traditional approaches to climate change impacts often prioritize economic and technological solutions, this study argues for the inclusion of religio-cultural values in climate security discourse. Using a values-based analytical framework and ethnographic and participatory research methods, the article investigates how religio-cultural values shape community responses to climate change and

related security risks in two communities in Nampula District. The research highlights that techno-scientific interventions, when not aligned with local values, can exacerbate conflicts and undermine the effectiveness of climate adaptation strategies. It further demonstrates the potential for peace and stability that can be achieved by integrating local religio-cultural values into climate policies and practices.

1   Introduction

This study critically examines how religious and cultural values shape responses to the impacts of climate change and related security risks in northern Mozambique. Religio-cultural values influence people's vulnerability and adaptive capacity to cope with climate change and related security risks, that is, systemic risks arising from the interactions of the ecological, social, political, and economic dimensions. Climate impacts and related security risks are challenges driven directly or indirectly by climatic stressors (Detges et al. 2020, 5) and include the "diverse forms of suffering, pain, vulnerability, marginalization, displacement, dispossession, denial of basic needs and violence and/or risks to this effect, that individuals and collectivities experience" (Selby, Daoust, and Hoffmann 2022, 25). The idea that the values and decision-making frameworks of those affected by climate change should be included when addressing climate crises has become a fundamental assumption in climate research, policy, and practice (Adams et al. 2015). However, there is still a need for more case studies to capture more scenarios and patterns, strengthen the evidence, and update and nuance our understanding of the role of religion, culture, and tradition in climate action. Hitherto understudied climate-related security risks, such as human security and violent conflicts, from diverse contexts should be included, and the discourse translated from theory into practice. Based on a study in Mukupasa and Kwiline-Naburi villages in Nampula District, Mozambique, in 2023, this article argues that religio-cultural values are significant determinants that have been understudied with regard to climate change and related security risk reduction policies and interventions in northern Mozambique. While not immediately conspicuous, giving the impression that they are insignificant, religio-cultural values are fundamental

determinants of the actions and decisions the affected people take. Hence, the article highlights the importance of intentionally uncovering and integrating these values when assessing local vulnerability and capacity to respond to the impacts of climate change and related security risks.

Conversations on the impacts of climate change mainly address the issues of the biosphere, the environment, and vulnerability, which are often implemented according to top-down economic and technological interventions. Examples of such interventions include the introduction of new drought-resistant crops requiring improved agricultural technologies, markets, information systems, and infrastructure (Ford et al. 2020; Caretta and Cheptum 2021; Salite and Poskitt 2019). They prioritize physical and material factors that are addressed by the natural sciences, such as climatology, physics, and engineering (Brückmann et al. 2023; Foulds et al. 2022). Consequently, they overlook a variety of ways, including intangible and nonmaterial factors such as religion, culture, and tradition, which people use to value the environment and interpret and respond to the impacts of climate change (Jones et al. 2016). However, techno-scientific interventions can harm or create resistance among the vulnerable, exacerbating existing conflicts or initiating new ones, especially when the vulnerable are not consulted, when false evidence is used as a basis for adaptation plans, or when interventions conflict with the religio-cultural values of those who are affected (Nalau et al. 2021; Little 2019).

The article argues that prioritizing techno-scientific explanations and solutions over non-techno-scientific ones, such as those that integrate religio-cultural values, can maintain an imbalance of power, undermining local acceptance and buy-in. The dominance of technological innovations is criticized not because we think the science behind it is wrong or unnecessary, but because there is more to climate change than technoscience shows. It is also about aligning social values with science and technology in a quest for responsible research innovation (Boenink and Kudina 2020). Moreover, climate change requires more creative solutions than technology alone can provide, and religion and culture can contribute much to this (Haberman 2021; Hulme 2014). Research has also shown that, despite the importance of the availability of appropriate policies, technologies, or funding, social perceptions and values are an important determinant of the success or failure of climate crisis interventions (Artur and Hilhorst 2012).

The article assumes the following structure. In the next section, we introduce a values-based approach as an analytical framework to discuss how religio-cultural values shape the impacts of climate change and related security risks. This is followed by articulating research methodology and presenting

findings on how religio-cultural values intersect with climate change and related security risks in the two communities. We then discuss and analyze the empirical findings. After that, we turn to an exposition and conclusion, calling for climate security policy and practice that integrates religio-cultural values.

2   Analytical Framework: Religio-Cultural Values

Religio-cultural values represent what is desirable based on religion and culture, how things ought to be, and how one ought to interact with the world (Bengston 1994). Thus, there can be ways of relating to or perceiving the environment, e.g., with respect, which cannot be compromised. We understand religio-cultural systems as the interconnected aspects of religion and culture that shape social systems, beliefs, practices, and worldviews. Our understanding builds on Clifford Geertz's description of religion as a "cultural system" composed of myths, rituals, symbols, and beliefs created by humans to give meaning to individual and collective lives (Geertz 2013). They provide the basis for making value judgments (Jones et al. 2016) and assessing the right or wrong way of relating to the environment. For example, respect for God's omnipotence can lead to climate change being attributed to external natural forces or a higher supernatural power or God rather than to human activities, thus leaving everything to God. Leaving everything to God is based on the understanding that God allows extreme weather conditions to happen and has the power to stop them in his own time. Mitigating the impact of climate change is thus not dependent on human capacity but on God's decision and control. Religions and cultures can attach certain values to certain places (Seymour et al. 2012), species, other features of the natural world, and certain objects or activities (Lockwood 1999). They express the "relative importance or worth of an object to an individual or group in a given context" (Brown 1984, 236). African religions, for instance, assign a sacred value to land and the provenance of extreme weather conditions, thereby shaping reactions to appropriating or grabbing ancestral land.

Religio-cultural values, sometimes hidden and unconscious, determine communities' motivations to take action. They shape societies' relationships with their physical and social environment and supernatural forces and represent a society's identity, the common way of thinking, communicating, giving meaning to symbols, and behaving. They influence how people perceive, understand, identify, experience, and prioritize risk, their motivation to act, response choices, and means of implementation, as well as the resulting

consequences. When the affected people respond to or implement interventions, they try to shape the process to fit their perspectives on the problem and goals (Artur and Hilhorst 2012). Religio-cultural values are thus an important driver of perceptions and behavior in both constructive and harmful ways (Cannon 2014).

Understanding how the religio-cultural values and decision-making frameworks of those who are affected shape their communities' interpretations and responses to climate change and its impacts has numerous advantages. Firstly, it helps providers better understand users' needs, values, and decision-making contexts so that climate services can be better tailored to them (Parker and Lusk 2019). Secondly, it helps policymakers and implementers recognize that communities are not passive recipients of climate information but active actors who can and should play a role in climate action (e.g., Olawuyi 2021; Ruostetsaari 2020). Thirdly, it shows that the outcomes of climate-related security risks are also a function of how the values of those affected influence how they perceive and interpret that hazard, as well as being a function of the extent to which a society is economically, politically, and technologically prepared to cope with the damaging consequences of a particular hazard (Tarusarira et al. 2023).

Thus, a values-based approach brings to the attention of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners that when climate impacts and related insecurities involve religion and culture, they become values-based. At stake in values-based impacts and insecurities are people's most deeply held norms, beliefs, principles, and identities, which can lead to a refusal to make any concession that would appear to compromise their values or categorically refuse to negotiate because their self-identities are threatened, thereby producing higher levels of distancing, intolerance, and egocentrism, which will lead to more competitive than cooperative attitudes. When insecurities degenerate into conflicts, they can lead to zero-sum outcomes, and the usual conflict solutions, such as trade-offs and compromises, deployed in disputes concerning material possessions, can be unacceptable and even be perceived as an insult. To be clear, value and material impacts and insecurities tend to be mixed (Illes, Ellemers, and Harinck 2014). For example, conflicts over resources, such as land, can include values-related beliefs about the right way of distributing the land. Foregrounding religio-cultural values does not imply the rejection of biophysical explanations but rather demonstrates the multidimensional perspectives on climate change impacts, the non-neutrality of techno-scientific approaches, and why it is necessary to integrate the different lenses (Forsyth 2003). It is also about asking whose values count in addressing climate crises (Leichenko and O'Brien 2019, 48).

3   Methodology

3.1   *Context of the Study*

The two communities under study emerged from Mozambique's history of resettlement due to civil war (Coelho 1993; Taju 1992; Vines 1996; UNHCR 1996; Newitt 1988; Filipe 2003). Since 1980, mean annual temperatures have increased by between 0.15 and 0.3°C per decade, affecting temperature-sensitive crops, livestock, fish, and human health. Sixty percent of the population lives in low-lying coastal zones and is exposed to increasing storm surges and coastal erosion. The start of the rainy season is now some 20 to 45 days late, compared with what it was in the 1960s, and more of the rainy season's precipitation is falling in intense, extreme events. The country's three biggest climate hazards – tropical cyclones, flooding, and drought – will be exacerbated by climate change. Climate change projections from multiple climate models (CMIP6 – which informed the IPCC 6th Assessment) indicate that, over the period from 2021 to 2040, temperatures are likely to be between 0.6 and 1.3 °C warmer, and the number of hot days with temperatures above 35 °C per year is likely to be 15 to 35 days higher, depending on the part of the country. Seasonal precipitation totals for the main rainy and cyclone season (October through April) are not likely to change much, but the amount of rain that falls during heavy rainfall events could increase by 19 to 25%. Moreover, rises in sea levels will continue, leading to worse storm surges in coastal areas. Warmer sea temperatures are also impacting coastal fisheries (INGC 2009; National Directorate of Climate Change 2023; Ndapassoa 2020, 2023; IOM 2023).

In recent history, Mozambique has suffered from natural disasters such as droughts, floods, cyclones, and related disasters, shaping the country's poverty and vulnerability (Artur and Hilhorst 2012). The hardest-hit provinces are Nampula, Zambézia, and Sofala. The country's location on Africa's southeast coast and downstream of several major rivers makes the country highly susceptible to recurring natural disasters, namely floods, tropical storms, droughts, and earthquakes. These hazards have shaped the country's poverty and vulnerability. Numerous recorded floods occurred in Mozambique in the 21st century, the first in 2000/2001, the second in Central Mozambique in 2007/2008, and the most recent in 2013. The most recent cyclones were Desmond, Idai, Kenneth, and Belna in 2019, Diane and Chalane in 2020, Eloise, Guambe, Iman, and Jobo in 2021, Ana, Gombe, and Jasmine in 2022, Cheneso and Freddy in 2023, and Alvaro in 2024 (Worlddata.info 2024).

Mozambique is a deeply religious nation, with Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous faiths being the predominant traditions (Morier-Genoud 2023; Premawardhana 2021). It is a constitutionally secular state that upholds the

right of its citizens to freely practice or abstain from practicing any religion. The country's constitution emphasizes that no individual can be deprived of their rights based on their religious beliefs or practices, provided they comply with the laws of the state (Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique 1990). Data from the National Statistics Institute as of 2020 reveals the diverse religious landscape of Mozambique: 27% of the population identifies as Catholic, 19% as Muslim, 17% as Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians, 16% as Zionist Christians, and 2% as Anglican. Other religions, including Judaism, Hinduism, and the Baha'i faith, collectively constitute less than 5%. Meanwhile, 14% of Mozambicans report no religious affiliation. A notable portion of the population practices Indigenous religions, blending African traditional beliefs with elements of Christianity or Islam, although these are not officially recorded in census data (US State Department 2021).

3.2   *Methods*

We analyzed the communities' lived experiences of climate change and the role of local religions and cultures in shaping the experiences, interpretations, perceptions, and responses to the impact of climate change. We used several participatory tools and rapid assessments designed to familiarize ourselves with the local socio-ecological context, understand communities' interactions with climatic changes through time and space, and link religio-cultural values to entry points for future programming, policy, or investments to strengthen climate resilience. We conducted the research in English, with translations into Portuguese – a language understood by the participants – to facilitate the exercises.

To be concrete, we conducted transect walks led by community members to systematically map the physical and social landscape to ground our understanding of local contextual realities. Transect walks (Jaison, Reid, and Simatele 2023; Bagagnan, Ouedraogo, and William 2019; Bagbohouna et al. 2023; Haque 2021) allowed us to see where natural and nonnatural resources are located and how they are distributed. Next, we constructed historical timelines that traced the collective experiences of communities through various climatic and social transformations. The historical timeline helped us discuss and analyze vulnerabilities and coping and adaptation strategies to improve our understanding of events, trends, and changes across time and space (Turnbull and Turvill 2012, Warrick 2009, Bartels et al. 2013). Research of this nature should be based on a historical analysis of how people and societies have interacted with nature (Artur and Hilhorst 2012; Dovers 2009). We utilized problem tree analysis to uncover the underlying drivers and cascading effects of climate-related insecurities, which provided us with critical insights

into community vulnerabilities. Building upon this analytical foundation, we used the solutions tree tool to explore existing coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies. We complemented the participatory methodologies with observations, interviews, and secondary literature.

Our methodological approach allowed us to conduct a comprehensive study to examine the religio-cultural interpretations and responses to socio-ecological systems in the light of climate change, the social tensions around the preservation of religio-cultural values, and how women are differently affected by the impact of climate change against the backdrop of religio-cultural values. We were intentional in finding out how women are impacted because of our assumption that how one is affected by climate change depends on who and where one is. Women provide an immediate and concrete example of how climate-related security risks are experienced because they are most affected due to their social roles. We separated men and women for the focus group discussions so women could speak freely in what are patriarchal communities.

The participatory methodologies involved 48 community members from the villages of Mukupasa and Kwiline-Naburi in Nampula District, Mozambique, in 2023. The research participants included individuals aged 15 and above engaged in different livelihoods and economic activities, ensuring diversity in representation across various age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as gender. The focus group discussions involved an equal number of men and women – twelve of each – in each of the two communities. The research took place over five days, from 10 am to 4 pm. We considered our research sample suitable for this study because it consisted of local Indigenous people who have experienced the direct impacts of climatic disasters, making them vital in understanding the lived reality of climate disaster response and interpretation. We conducted four key informant interviews with traditional religious, cultural, and community leaders and six informal interviews with diverse community members. The use of various approaches to the qualitative approach allowed for triangulation, ensuring that detailed contextual narratives did not contradict one other.

4   Findings

4.1   *Religio-Cultural Interpretations of Socio-Ecological Systems and Responses to Climate Risks*

The research showed that the communities' livelihoods are intertwined with religio-cultural values. One respondent explained that when livelihoods – especially agriculture, the mainstay of the community – are at risk or threatened

by drought, storms, or cyclones, the *pwiyamwene*, a traditional religious leader known as the queen, performs traditional religious rituals to ask the ancestors for rain (see also Artur and Hilhorst 2012) or to protect the community from calamities. This is one way through which their community has traditionally dealt with rainfall shortages: It has performed rituals focused on increasing the likelihood that the right amount of rain falls at the most appropriate times (see Shaffer 2017). During our research, we met a *pwiyamwene*. When we arrived in the Kwiline-Naburi community, we were taken to her house before the research started. Before entering the community, she told us that we had to visit the altar where rituals are performed and ancestors are venerated. She insisted that the ancestors must be appeased through appropriate rituals before any activities, such as development interventions, take place. Proceeding without following this procedure would lead to tensions and conflict between the researchers and the community, and possibly intra-community strife over whether to participate in the program (see Artur and Hilhorst 2012).

Speaking during a focus group discussion, a research participant stated: "When the rains are violent or accompanied by a severe storm, a religious ceremony known as *ovetha moro* is performed to 'close the borders' of the community." This metaphorical expression, "closing the borders," references protecting the community from possible harm, damage, or destruction. Another participant explained that during this ritual, the community collectively invokes its ancestors for protection from cyclones, storms, violent winds, and related tensions in the community. The religious leader, or *mukhulukana*, prepares a community fire during a community ceremony. This fire, symbolizing protection, is then distributed to all those present, who in turn share it with others in the community. The belief is that this fire, which should be spread throughout the community, serves as a protective shield that has been blessed by the ancestors to protect the community. Such beliefs resonate with the argument that the forces of nature are at the service of divine command and that the disasters caused by natural hazards are the expression of a vengeful deity (Bankoff 2004). Appealing to deities is, therefore, to invite their command to control nature – in this case, to control the severe storms.

We found that initiation ceremonies are common and central to the lives of communities. Initiation rites refer to the rites of passage through which boys become men and girls become women. The young people go through initiation, the second ritual out of the four rituals, after birth, followed by marriage and death rituals, to be considered and accepted as adults. These rituals focus on three main aspects of the individual in society: sexual and reproductive health, the role of women and men in society, and global knowledge to be

accepted as an adult in society. After this ritual, the young people can marry and actively participate in community life. A person who does not participate in these rituals is never considered an adult, even if he or she is elderly (Rodrigues da Silva 2016; Kotanyie and Krings-Ney 2009). During the transect walk, we met women walking with flour poured on their heads, indicating that they were participating in initiation ceremonies. We were also taken to a place where initiation ceremonies for men were held. Since the ceremonies were also taking place during the period of our research, some participants excused themselves from the focus group discussions to bring food to the candidates at the initiation ceremonies. When we asked the young participants why initiation ceremonies were a priority for them, one of them responded:

> These initiation ceremonies play a key role in the development of individuals and communities. They strengthen social bonds and a sense of belonging. Individuals who have not undergone this rite of passage are excluded from certain activities and may be blamed for community misfortunes. I don't want to miss out on the experience or be blamed for community misfortunes.

Participating in initiation rituals instils a feeling of a more profound connection with their community. This promotes unity and cooperation, which are essential for effective community development. Initiation ceremonies are vehicles for transmitting traditional ecological knowledge and understanding local ecosystems and strategies for resilience in the face of environmental change. The communities reject some Western development organizations' characterizations of initiation rites as harmful practices (Le Roux and Bartelink 2017). They consider them a fundamental tool for their collective identities and principles (Jacquinet, Nhaueleque, and Bussotti 2022). They transfer important religio-cultural values, beliefs, and traditional knowledge, including moral lessons, social norms, and practical skills, all contributing to the holistic development of individuals and the community. In addition, they teach conflict resolution, respect for others, and the importance of social harmony, which contributes to more peaceful and cooperative communities.

The finding resonates with Bourdieu's (2020) concept of "habitus" – the embodied dispositions that structure social practice and perception. These rituals determine what is considered culturally legitimate or possible within a community. In addition, ritual ceremonies reproduce and potentially transform gender ideologies. They serve as mechanisms for transmitting not just cultural knowledge but specifically gendered expectations regarding sexuality

and reproduction (Moore 1994). The fear of blame for misfortunes by the initiation ceremonies aligns with the analysis that cultural practices often serve to maintain symbolic boundaries and social order. Uninitiated individuals threaten this order and thus become associated with danger or misfortune (Douglas 1966). The shared ritual experiences generate emotional energy, reinforcing social solidarity and collective identity (Durkheim 1912).

4.2   *Tensions over the Preservation of Religio-Cultural Values*

Traditional leaders expressed concern about the declining recognition and appreciation of local religion, culture, and knowledge systems by policymakers in relation to food security, which is now being compromised due to climate change. They lamented the undermining of traditional foods due to agricultural intensification focused on increasing yields using improved seed varieties, chemical and organic fertilizers, soil and water conservation technologies, and pesticides, among other technological interventions (Howard et al. 2001, 1). One traditional leader stated:

> Traditional crops would fare well during these unpredictable climate-related droughts. People no longer consume traditional foods, and food preparation has since changed accordingly. In the past, people obtained their food from the fields, prepared it immediately, and consumed it. Most food is now processed, and the food chain has become much longer, destroying food quality and affecting people's health and vitality. Modernization is influencing the young to no longer respect prohibited sacred natural resources, leading to the destruction of the environment.

He further asserted that some young people are violating taboos, which are understood as laws protecting the environment from harm (see Mubai et al. 2023). To mitigate these problems, the traditional leader called for religious, cultural, and traditional values to be incorporated into policies. In a demonstration of an epistemological conflict between traditional leaders and the government on how Indigenous knowledge and culture should be understood, a traditional leader charged: "The government and politicians talk about Indigenous religion and culture as part of tradition and history, not as a lifestyle. They should be a lifestyle." The traditional leaders recommended that traditional leaders be put back in their place. Their call thus challenges the unnuanced modernists' argument that the traditional leaders and chiefs had been corrupted by the colonial system of despotic, indirect rule, and that what

counted as the "real" tradition has withered away (West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999; Kyed and Buur 2006).

Traditional leaders and community elders stated that, historically, traditional leaders and elders met with their communities before the farming season to entrust the community to the ancestors for protection for the whole year. They prayed for peaceful rainfall that would not destroy people or crops. According to them, in the past, people did not experience as many cyclones or extreme weather events and destruction of livelihoods as they do nowadays. What they experience nowadays is due to the broken communication with the ancestors. Prayers to the ancestors for the protection and productivity of the land are now irregular. A community leader stated:

> Government and development organizations override religious approaches to socio-ecological systems under the guise of modernization, resulting in conflicts between those for or against religio-cultural values and practices.

Extreme weather conditions and events, such as cyclones and storms, are therefore interpreted as expressions of the ancestors' anger at communities and government policies. According to one interviewee, the ancestors are also concerned about people indiscriminately cutting down trees and poisoning bodies of water and fish. Stressing the importance of trees, he said: "A rich man is not the one with a lot of money in the bank. It is the one with plants in his garden because he has something to eat all year round." His perspective is that Indigenous religion and culture possess resources that can be used to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change and associated risks to peace and security. He further showed the power of Indigenous religions by comparing them with a story in the Bible:

> As in the Bible, Joseph in Egypt could see what would happen in the future. In our culture, we have people who can see into the future of these cyclones and disasters. Telling our people that their religious leaders are superstitious has only led to a lack of cooperation from the local people and, in some situations, conflict between intervening organizations and the locals.

The reference to people who can see into the future of cyclones and disasters could be interpreted as an early warning system and, hence, be integrated into the systems. The local communities thus operate within a multiple cognitive

framework where scientific knowledge, local knowledge, and cultural and ritual practices are integrated to provide early warning systems (Durkheim 1912).

4.3   *Religio-Cultural Values and the Impacts of Climate Change on Women*

This study revealed a bleak situation for women in the context of the impacts of climate change. In the two communities where we conducted research, women have no access to or ownership of the means of production, that is, access to key farm resources and inputs such as farmland, information, fertilizers, seeds, and extension services. These gendered differences in accessing resources and exerting control over decision-making affect women's ability to adapt to the impacts of climate change. During the focus group discussions, some men believed that the man should have access to and ownership of the means of production because he marries the woman and hence should own the land to take care of her. One of the participants stated:

> If women were given power, they would stop respecting men. In cases where women own houses and land, they inherited them from their deceased fathers or husbands. We are afraid that if we marry such a woman, she will oversee everything and make the decisions.

Most male research participants were uncomfortable with the idea of consulting a woman to use the resources she possessed. If one marries a woman who already has cattle and needs to use them, they would have to consult her. Sometimes, the woman returns to her family, suggesting that women ultimately have no decision-making power.

On the other hand, it emerged that women have knowledge of climate change and are among the first responders when climate disasters strike. When strong winds or cyclones destroy houses, the women gather grass, and the men fetch the wood to build makeshift buildings. In times of climate-induced food insecurity, they utilize their knowledge, skills, and techniques to collect wild fruits, roots, and tubers from the forests. They run savings groups for soft loans, which they resort to when climate disasters strike, and men now mimic what women do. Some individual women process food and make foods like biscuits to sell.

These findings reveal significant gender disparities in climate change adaptation within the studied communities. Women lack access to and control over resources such as land and agricultural inputs. This situation is reinforced by patriarchal power structures where men have priority. However, women demonstrate substantial adaptive capacity and climate knowledge. This paradox

exemplifies "gendered adaptive capacity," where women's climate contributions remain constrained by structural inequalities in resource access and decision-making power (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Carr 2008). These findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive climate adaptation policies that address both material resource disparities and underlying power dynamics while building upon women's demonstrated adaptation knowledge and initiatives. It also shows the patriarchal nature of the land tenure systems. Three types of land tenure are established under Article 109 of the Constitution of Mozambique. Ownership of all land resides with the state, but use rights are granted to Mozambican citizens. The types are: occupation of land by a community governed under customary law; occupation of land for an uninterrupted period of 10 years, as if the occupier were the owner (so-called "good faith" occupation); allocation of a 50-year lease by the state to a private investor, after consultation with the affected local community (Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique 2007). While the tenure systems are not gendered, culture prioritizes men in terms of access and control of land, leading to women being disadvantaged. The impacts of climate change worsen the negative impact of the land tenure systems on women, as productive land becomes more scarce.

5 Discussion

This case study presents a rich context where religion, culture, and local knowledge influence interpretations and responses to climate change. Numerous insights emerge when analyzing this case through a values-based approach. The reliance on religious leaders like *pwiyamwene* and *mukhulukana* for religious rituals to protect the community from calamities and disasters such as climate-induced storms and cyclones shows that the community is strongly rooted in religio-cultural beliefs and values. Rather than dismissing these views as ill-informed, they must be made explicit and treated as legitimate (Leichenko and O'Brien 2019). For the local communities, these rituals and cultural beliefs are not abstract ideas but deep foundations for how the community deals with the climate and environment. They provide cognitive (how to think), emotional (how to feel), and moral (how to act) meanings in times of climate crises. Rain-making ceremonies can thus be seen as a community-level adaptation to reduce the uncertainties of rainfall variability and control rain (Hannaford and Nash 2016). There is a perceived disdain for cultural awareness and understanding from policymakers and practitioners, who are less open to local ontologies and cosmologies than scientific ones. They prefer to impose

the dogma of Western ecological science, citing convenience and a desire to maintain credibility with donors by relying on "pure" scientific discipline (Bourdier 2024). In some cases, the research participants were hesitant at the beginning to articulate how central their local cosmologies are to addressing climate change because they fear being labelled backward, thus losing support from NGOs and the government. However, policymakers and implementers cannot afford to ignore the entanglements of religion, culture, tradition, environment, and climate if they aim for acceptable and effective interventions. This is not to suggest that there is an outright exclusion of religio-cultural and traditional factors in development. International platforms such as the IPCC (2022) have begun to acknowledge the relevance of religion, culture, and Indigenous knowledge systems in addressing climate change. However, there is still a need for more case studies since the acknowledgment remains more in theory and blueprints than in practice.

The call by the traditional and religious leaders for the restoration of their authority underscores the pre-existing tensions between the traditional leaders and the government regarding climate action in Mozambique. It is crucial to locate the conflict in the context of Mozambique's political history. After independence, the ruling party removed traditional leaders from office and replaced them with party members. The party ignored the country's unity, ancestry, and traditional authority. Traditional leaders were seen as constituting a repressive "feudal" power structure of traditional society, which had collaborated with the Portuguese. This was when any reference to ancestral spirits was condemned and treated as superstition. However, religio-cultural rituals and ceremonies did not disappear. They were still performed, but in secret (Signe 2011, 235).

The formal recognition of traditional leaders as representatives of local community interests and assistants of local state organs came with Decree 15/2000. This was 25 years after the FRELIMO government abolished the formal power of traditional leaders. The decree provided for reinstating traditional leaders to perform state administrative tasks, such as the enforcement of justice, allocation of land, rural development, fostering a patriotic spirit, supporting the celebration of national days, promoting environmental sustainability, and renaming chiefs or *régulos* as "community authorities." They are to be consulted on behalf of the communities they represent when natural resources such as forest products or minerals are procured from their territory, when land is leased out for donor-aid projects such as water, health, or micro-financing, and when clinics, schools, and roads are built or agro-technical support is distributed (Kyed and Buur 2006).

Climate change, therefore, presents traditional leaders with a development situation in which they are expected to act. It thus indirectly resuscitates the pre-existing tensions and provides the traditional leaders with yet another opportunity to call for more recognition and involvement in the government's climate action policies. Despite the decree, they still feel they are not fully recognized but continue to be perceived as historical and traditional actors with no understanding of modern and better Western knowledge. Thus, the call can be perceived as a challenge and an effort to dismantle the hierarchical power structures that marginalize non-Western knowledge systems and advocate a more inclusive and respectful approach to policy formulation and programming. Many people in the Mukupasa and Kwiline-Naburi communities hold that traditional authority still exists and is legitimized through customs and belief practices from long ago (West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999, Kyed and Buur 2006). Poor handling of these relations in the efforts against climate crises can exacerbate these tensions.

The religio-cultural interpretation of climate-induced disasters highlights the moral dimensions of climate and environmental crises. This dovetails with research arguing that, for the response to climate disruption to be adequate in scale and speed, it has to be seen as a moral challenge related to ultimate concerns (Haberman 2021, 4). The moral perspective challenges the dominant belief in the technologically controlled biophysical, earth-science, and market-based approaches of positive science that marginalize, attenuate, and misunderstand religio-cultural values because they cannot be objectively observed, validated, and measured (Tarusarira 2021). Marginalization is extended to traditional foods, which traditional leaders lament. The lament critiques modernity and global capitalism, underscoring the need to rethink and learn from traditional lifestyles and consumption patterns, which traditional and religious leaders often say are more sustainable and in harmony with nature.

Chiziane and Pita argue that modernity and global capitalism in Mozambique have separated humanity from nature and contributed to "the transformation of the environment into an object to be used and abused, deforested and destroyed" (Chiziane and Pita 2013, 19, quoted in Premawardhana 2023). This gap between man and nature translates into a gap between man and spirits (ibid.). The Makuwa ontology considers all of nature sacred; trees have souls and feelings, rocks and metals have souls, and sand speaks. The natural world is active and has feelings (Chiziane and Pita 2013, 123; Cruikshank 2005). By treating nature like humankind, this ontology provides a basis for climate resilience, peace, and security, as people tend to take extraordinary measures

to protect and defend what they consider extremely valuable or sacred (see Haberman 2021).

The traditional leaders' interpretation of climatic and environmental hazards as a sign of disgruntled ancestors resonates with the beliefs of many other communities worldwide. Some Tibetan communities conceive of climate change and climate events as carrying spiritual and moral weight. They see droughts, hail, and blizzards as angry deities responding to the local neglect of religious duties or outsiders breaking local taboos (Byg and Salick 2009). Our research participants interpreted disasters as the will of the ancestors (Artur and Hilhorst 2012, MICOA 2006, 19). They believe in the wrath of the ancestors: If they are not properly respected or favored, they can express their displeasure in various ways, including causing or influencing disasters. Climate-related security risks in Mozambique (Mbugua 2023) include land conflicts. While the biophysical framework considers land a physical and material resource, the Mukupasa and Kwiline-Naburi communities treat it as ancestral land. This accounts for the texture of the conflicts between these communities as hosts to the Coranne camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the Maratane refugee camp. The host communities refer to the land as ancestral land, where their relatives lie buried. In times of conflict with IDPs or refugees over the land, the host communities defend their land in this spirit. Hence, conflict over land is not only about its distribution to the IDPs and refugees but also its meaning and value (see Anderl 2024). Unlike traditional Western Christianity, which places the sacred in the sky and the Church, African spiritual traditions bring religion and the sacred back to the land, to the earth. They take it outside the temple walls (Chiziane, in Premawardhana 2023). Ancestors are intertwined with people and land. The land is not just a material good but the basis of life and identity. It belongs to the ancestors (Signe 2011, 234; Martinez 1989, 62; Geffray 1991, 20; Medeiros 1995, 47), who demand attention from their descendants. If treated well, they become, among many other things, the source of the fertility of the land, providing rain for the fields and protecting the crops as they grow.

Undermining or ignoring ancestor appeasement is therefore considered abhorrent and an insult to the community and will lead to low participation, resistance, and conflict, especially when intervention programs conflict with this practice. Research on climate and security has considered the biophysical factors and socioeconomic and political variables and excluded sociocultural and traditional variables. However, conflicting understandings of land and other similar resources are relevant to climate adaptation and the related security discourse. On the one hand, values that contradict those of the local community and its beliefs and practices can exacerbate existing security risks or

create new ones. Conversely, traditional conflict transformation mechanisms, such as those learned during initiation ceremonies and other religio-cultural platforms, can be used to address climate-related conflicts. The communal nature of religio-cultural rituals makes them strategic for promoting stronger social network ties, as community members come together to reduce the perceived climate risks.

This perspective contrasts sharply with secular, biophysical, and scientific explanations of climate phenomena and shows that the discourse on climate change is not monolithic. There are different discourses for interpreting and responding to climate change. However, these discourses are not mutually exclusive. For example, while traditional leaders attribute climatic disasters to ancestors, they recognize that deforestation and the poisoning of water bodies contribute to climate hazards. Therefore, they call on people to plant trees, which is a scientific solution. This suggests that being religious should not be considered anti-science (see Wilber 2001). The emphasis on traditional and religious knowledge challenges the hegemony of the secular, biophysical, and Western scientific discourse on climate change. It brings to light other ways of knowing and understanding the world that are equally valid and crucial to fully understanding climate change and its associated security risks and mobilizing communities for climate action.

The potential contribution that religio-cultural values can make to addressing the impacts of climate change and the related security risks should not be taken to suggest that they cannot also hinder these processes. This research found that men acknowledged that women are resourceful and have agency because, when cyclones strike and destroy houses, they cut grass to rebuild houses, and in times of drought, they look for traditional foods. While they can lead, cope with disasters, and play an important role by drawing on local knowledge and Indigenous survival mechanisms (Sultana 2010, Enarson and Morrow 1998, Hossain and Sen 1992; Nasreen 2000), they remain more vulnerable to climate change. This vulnerability is due to religio-cultural factors, which have assigned them roles such as providing water, food, and family care. These roles become challenging to fulfill during floods and disasters, as they suffer from other climate-related insecurities, such as competition and fighting over limited water resources. Stories of forced marriages as an adaptation strategy to escape hunger and the abuse of women in disadvantaged situations due to climate impacts were also shared. As mentioned earlier, women have little to no ownership of productive resources and leadership positions, and men dominate in all aspects of society. When we asked men why that is the case, they replied that it is what their religion, culture, tradition, and history dictate. This perspective is consistent with Sultana's (2010, 46) observation that "social

processes interact with natural processes to produce the differential vulnerability and consequent suffering that have gender implications," noting also that some of the reinforcements of gender roles and challenges faced by both men and women are cultural and religious.

Chiziane challenges the perception of Indigenous religion, culture, and tradition as historically and inherently oppressive and the notion that they deny women agency. She attributes this vulnerability to the eradication of matricentric norms and matrilineal structures in northern Mozambique by Islam and the nation state (Chiziane, in Premawardhana 2023). She observes that women in northern Mozambique have enjoyed certain privileges from their chiefs, such as inheritance, property, and even leadership (Premawardhana 2023). Environmental metaphors are used to describe them, for example: "Women are land." This characterization is a sign of their value and dignity, especially in agrarian societies, where land is a source of livelihood and sanctity (Premawardhana 2023). The historian Signe (2011) noted that women occupy a central position in Makhuwa cosmology because communication with the ancestors consists of pouring finely ground sorghum flour, which is a female crop because its cultivation, weeding, and harvesting are done exclusively by women. Ceremonial pouring is a female affair. For ceremonies like the rain ceremony and male and female initiation ceremonies, the woman pouring the flour must be the *pwiyamwene*. Today, churches are involved in initiation ceremonies and in some cases adopt them, "mixing traditional teachings and precepts with lessons from the Bible; but Christianity or not, the *pwiyamwene* must be there to pour out the flour" (Signe 2011, 236). Be that as it may, there is a need for a deep understanding of the role religion, culture, and tradition play in addressing the plight of women in times of climate crises.

While this article acknowledges the positive role that religion, culture, and tradition play in addressing the impacts of climate change and the related security risks, it agrees with Salite and Poskitt (2019) that the belief that supernatural forces act for a reason holds humans responsible and accountable for the actions of supernatural forces, such as cyclones, and the related security risks to humans. People's responses might consist of correcting the perceived wrongdoing to gain forgiveness and prevent the environmental problem from occurring (IFRC 2014). As we have seen, religious leaders interpreted the extreme and destructive weather conditions as human transgressions against ancestors. In response to drought, communities performed prayers and rain-making ceremonies (Semenya 2013), which did not always yield positive results and increased people's vulnerability (see Shaffer 2017). This approach can reinforce the existing order and hide the role of social institutions, economic processes,

and political choices in contributing to people's vulnerability to natural disasters (Artur and Hilhorst 2012). We have also seen that some religio-cultural practices influence the uptake of related scientific information, which would be a relevant and effective response. Thus, these values and beliefs may undermine appropriate responses and institutional adaptation strategies that are considered logical and effective (Adger et al. 2013). However, their functional benefits should not be underestimated. They bind communities and help them explain the occurrence of drought and find comfort in overcoming its consequences, thus facilitating recovery (IFRC 2014). While they may not bring about a material change in the availability or nonavailability of water, they ultimately determine intentions and actions.

6   Conclusion

Emphasizing religio-cultural values marks a shift from a centralized, one-size-fits-all approach to more localized, immersive approaches that enable a better understanding of how collective action can be mobilized (Turcu, Rydin, and Pilkey 2014). Moreover, it challenges one-way knowledge transfer in favor of multidirectional knowledge exchange, where all stakeholders have an active voice and role (Foulds et al. 2022). In the broader context of the politics of knowledge, it is also a way to center and visualize the experiences and voices of the grassroots and the role local actors can play in global conversations on climate change. The findings highlight the essential role played by local religious, cultural, and traditional actors in times of climate-induced disasters. They perform rituals for good rains and productive agricultural seasons and seek the protection and blessings of their ancestors during extreme weather events. They also encourage their communities to respect the environment by not cutting down trees but planting more of them, a recommendation that biophysical scientists would also make. Thus, traditional and religious approaches do not necessarily contradict technical-scientific knowledge. The recognition of scientific knowledge emphasizes a harmonious relationship between faith and science. It also challenges the assumption that believing in the divine cause of dangers always leads to fatalism and leaving everything to the divine (Gaillard and Texier 2010).

This study has also highlighted the complex links between climate change, cultural practices, and the role of religious and traditional institutions in responding to the impacts of climate change. It emphasizes the importance of a holistic and culturally sensitive approach that recognizes and integrates local

cultural and religious perspectives into climate policy for more effective interventions. This approach helps reverse the legacy of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and techno-scientific approaches. In conclusion, analyzing the situation in Mozambique through the lens of a values-based approach challenges dominant Western paradigms and highlights the importance of embracing a multitude of worldviews in understanding and addressing the complex challenges posed by climate change. This approach enriches our understanding and opens up new possibilities for more inclusive and effective responses to the impact of climate change.

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Research Ethics

The research process adhered to the principles of research ethics throughout, and all interviewees provided their informed consent to participate in the study.

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Building Resilience in the Face of Climate Change: The Case of the Lutheran Church in Southern Madagascar

Research Article

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Abstract

Religions play a crucial role in driving behavioral transformation towards harmony with nature. Consequently, faith-based organizations have increasingly taken an interest in addressing climate change and promoting environmental sustainability, with ecotheology and environmental initiatives gaining prominence over the past decade. Climate change poses unprecedented challenges to vulnerable communities, particularly those in rural Madagascar, which grapple with increasing climatic variability and extreme weather events. This study investigates faith-based and asset-based initiatives and projects for climate change adaptation in Southern Madagascar, which the UN

declared the world's first climate-induced famine area in 2021. The aim is to make visible the small-scale projects and activities for climate change mitigation in an area with frequent droughts and periods of famine and to give voice to local actors in the field. The study demonstrates that by leveraging local assets, knowledge, and capacities, some congregations of the Lutheran Church in Madagascar (FLM) seek to empower communities to proactively address climate-induced vulnerabilities. The findings of this study offer practical insights for policymakers, practitioners, faith-based organizations, and development agencies seeking to promote climate resilience in rural Madagascar and similar contexts through locally-led development activities.

1   Introduction

As climate change necessitates urgent action across all sectors, religious organizations have emerged as significant yet often underexamined actors in ecological sustainability (Jenkins, Tucker and Grim 2016). Research has documented the increasing role of faith-based organizations in global development, highlighting their expanding engagement in addressing both environmental and social challenges (Swart and Nell 2016). More recent studies indicate a growing commitment of religious communities to sustainability, with faith traditions increasingly incorporating environmental principles into their teachings and activities (Öhlmann and Swart 2022). As Abumoghli (2023) argues, religions are crucial in driving behavioral transformation towards harmony with nature, and when integrated with policies, scientific evidence, and technology, they can bring about changes at both individual and institutional levels through a united ethical front against climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. With ecotheology and environmental initiatives gaining prominence over the past decade (Digni 2024), an additional strand of faith-based engagement has foregrounded the concept of climate justice – emphasizing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations and linking ecological sustainability with social and economic equity (World Council of Churches 2013; Abumoghli 2023). While much of this engagement has been framed through ecotheology – positioning environmental stewardship as both a moral obligation and a divine mandate (Salter and Wilkinson 2023) – this study takes

a different approach. Rather than focusing on theological discourse, it examines the practical, on-the-ground and locally-led initiatives undertaken by a religious organization to facilitate climate adaptation and resilience-building at the local level. Specifically, this study aims to enhance understanding of the role of grassroots religious initiatives in climate change adaptation within vulnerable communities. The research investigates how local congregations and actors of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy – FLM) implement asset-based community development strategies in Southern Madagascar to respond to climate change and strengthen resilience.

The role of faith-based actors in environmental stewardship is particularly relevant for the world's lowest-income countries – many of which have strong religious networks – which are experiencing disproportionate increases in extreme heat (IFRC 2022). Climate change poses an imminent threat to these countries as they rely on subsistence farming as their main source of livelihood. Klöck and Nunn (2019) provide a systematic review of academic research on adaptation to climate change in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) which are already facing the effects of rising sea levels. In general, most documented adaptation strategies in SIDS appear autonomous and reactive, often focusing on changes in behavior and in infrastructure, and are targeted toward everyday climate-related challenges (climate variability) rather than long-term climate change. More importantly for the focus of this study, the published research highlights the importance of community engagement, underscoring the significance of involving local communities in adaptation efforts and empowering them to draw on indigenous knowledge and local resources. Low-income countries are characterized by weak state capacity (Klöck and Nunn 2019). In many rural areas affected by climate change, apart from temporary emergency relief, the communities may not have access to international or national resources for building up climate resilience. According to Klöck and Nunn (2019), engaging communities in decision-making processes and incorporating local knowledge and practices can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of adaptation measures. Currently, there is very little research knowledge on the practical application of community-based climate change adaptation measures in low-income countries.

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is an approach that focuses on identifying and leveraging the existing strengths, resources, and capacities within a community (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Instead of viewing communities solely through a deficit lens, ABCD emphasizes the inherent assets and capabilities that individuals and groups possess. The approach recognizes that communities have valuable resources, including local knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, natural resources, and social networks, which can

be harnessed for sustainable development. In a low-income country context, ABCD seeks to empower communities to take ownership of the development process.

Madagascar is a country rich in natural capital and biodiversity but with high levels of poverty, food insecurity, population growth, and exploitation of natural resources (World Bank 2022). Despite Madagascar's commitment to international environmental agreements such as the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Ramsar Convention, national-level policies have failed to curb deforestation, pollution, and climate change, slowing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Rakotoarimanana and Rakotoarimanana 2022). Governance challenges and weak public institutions further exacerbate the environmental crisis. Given the shortcomings, studying ABCD-inspired initiatives is crucial, as it may offer a practical, locally-driven alternative that empowers communities to leverage their own resources and knowledge for sustainable solutions, possibly providing effective grass-roots strategies to bypass governmental inefficiencies and foster long-term environmental resilience.

A study by Weiskopf et al. (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of documented and projected climate change impacts on specific sectors in Madagascar, focusing on managing these effects rather than emission reduction. It highlights deforestation, habitat fragmentation, high levels of poverty, food insecurity, and population growth as major challenges. The predominantly rural population relies heavily on agriculture, but faces food insecurity due to low productivity, recurring climate shocks, and socio-political instability. The scholars call for the integration of climate adaptation into development plans, recognizing the interconnected effects of climate change across various sectors. Due to smallholder farmers' inherent reliance on agriculture as a primary source of livelihood, coupled with their constrained resources and capacity to manage unforeseen events, any diminution in agricultural productivity can impart noteworthy consequences on their food security, nutritional status, income, and overall well-being (Harvey et al. 2014).

Protestant Christians constitute 25 percent of Madagascar's 25 million population. The Lutheran Church of Madagascar (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy – FLM) is one of the largest Protestant churches in the country (Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo 2019; 2021). Lutheran Christianity was introduced to Madagascar by the Norwegian Mission Society and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America after 1867. The FLM was officially formed in the 1950s, unifying 1800 Lutheran congregations that were initially shaped by Norwegian missionaries and funding. Presently, the FLM is an independent and self-governing church with over 4 million baptized members, 5000 congregations, and is the

third-largest church in Madagascar. It maintains strong ties to its Norwegian heritage while being one of the fastest-growing Lutheran churches globally, organized into 28 synods, including one in Europe. FLM follows a holistic approach to rural development, integrating evangelism and development work as equal and complementary efforts, ensuring that development initiatives serve all people without requiring Church membership (Skjornes 2020).

In 2004, the FLM instituted a development committee known as FANILO (Fampandrosoana Anivon'ny Loterana). This aimed to integrate development activities into the church's broader mission, promoting the sustainable growth of God's kingdom. In 2008, the FLM initiated an asset-based "Use Your Talents" (UYT) project, supported by development funding from the Norwegian state (NORAD), through the Norwegian Mission Society (Rakotoarison 2024). The project introduced a novel approach to development work, aligning with the FLM's vision of promoting the development of individuals and the entire community. Inspired by the concept of revival villages (Toby[1]) and biblical narratives emphasizing the use of God-given gifts for the collective benefit, UYT encourages asset-based community development. UYT aims to raise awareness among Church members and the community about their potential to contribute to the common well-being by utilizing their talents as a privilege and special mandate from God.

As an ABCD-inspired approach, UYT focuses on leveraging existing skills, knowledge, and coping strategies within the Church and the community. Recognizing the magnitude of this development structure's responsibilities, the FLM later launched the UYT project at the national level, involving the sensitization and training of church leaders to collaboratively establish committees. The implementation of the UYT approach greatly differs from one synod to another as well as from one congregation/parish to another congregation/parish (Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo 2019; 2021). In the following, we speak about Church actors referring to the local actors who are salaried employees of FLM congregations or synods, their members, volunteers, or representatives of associations that work inside the Church or in collaboration with it.

Drawing on interviews with local actors, the study analyzes the FLM congregations' and affiliated actors' climate change adaptation activities in Southern Madagascar, an area with frequent droughts and periods of famine. The article is structured as follows. The next section discusses the context of the study.

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1 A Toby refers to a spiritual revival center established as part of the indigenous Christian renewal movement known as Fifohazana (meaning "awakening"). Tobys serve as holistic communities dedicated to spiritual healing, physical care, and communal living, deeply rooted in both Christian teachings and Malagasy cultural practices.

The following section focuses on the ABCD approach. A section describing data and methods precedes the analysis section. The final section presents a discussion and conclusions.

2   The Land of Constant Droughts

In the South, as elsewhere in Madagascar, livelihood is mostly dependent on small-scale agriculture, cultivation of maize, sweet potato, and millet. The replenishment of groundwater reserves is intricately linked to precipitation patterns (Carrière et al. 2021). Southern Madagascar has a predominantly arid climate, leading to significant challenges in accessing water for both household and agricultural purposes (Rice 2020, 85–86). This area ranks among the most water-stressed regions in the country (Serele et al. 2019, Fig. 1). Water management is challenging due to a great variation in rainfall. Moreover, during dry spells, the availability of groundwater – the primary water source in southwestern Madagascar – becomes even scarcer, exacerbating issues related to sanitation and placing immense strain on operational water sources. Also, in extensive regions of the Southern areas, the excessively thick layer of impermeable sediment makes it impractical to drill wells (Rice 2020, 88). Increasing frequency of droughts has made it difficult for development programs to provide aid in a timely fashion (Weiskopf et al. 2021, 36).

In Southern Madagascar, a comprehensive set of climate change adaptation strategies has been recommended based on the region's specific conditions (Digni 2024; Harvey et al. 2014; Weiskopf et al. 2021). These include promoting afforestation, planting climate-resilient crop varieties, and advocating for the adoption of agroforestry techniques to bolster agriculture and food security. Additionally, strategies have been proposed to enhance water storage capacity, implement efficient irrigation methods, and establish community-based water management systems, which would ensure sustainable access to vital water resources. In the fisheries and aquaculture sector, measures involve strengthening management and conservation efforts, diversifying livelihoods, and supporting alternative income-generating activities to enhance resilience.

The specific livelihood conditions in Southern Madagascar historically relate to the pricky pear cactus, *raketa gasy*, which was introduced to Southern Madagascar by the French military during the settlement of Fort Dauphin in 1769. Since then, the economy and ecology in the area were based on the cactus, which offered food for cattle and for people during the droughts (Rice 2020). As an invasive species, *raketa* was widespread by the time missionaries arrived

in Madagascar in 1820. The abundant *raketa* fruit offered regular food for the pastoralists between August and October. Thorny *raketa* barriers also provided local people with protection against the French tax collectors and soldiers as well as against the colonialists' attempts to transform the cattle herding lifestyle of the local people into a large-scale farming based on paid (forced) work.

When other attempts proved unsuccessful, the French decided to eradicate the *raketa* cactus with a *cochineal* insect plague in 1924. They introduced canisters containing biologically manipulated cochineal beetles (*Dactylopius coccus*) into the thriving *raketa* thickets in the Tsongobory region (Ralaingita et al. 2022). The infestation spread rapidly; the area was full of swirling clouds of cochineal (Rice 2020, 114). In five years, the cactus was completely destroyed which led to a collapse of the South's pastoral economy and food security.

Rice (2020, 80) reports that the widespread famine in 1930–1931 killed as many as 30,000 people and 300,000 cattle, while Ralaingita et al. (2022) mention 500,000 human casualties as a conservative estimate. The French stopped eradicating the *raketa* cactus because its destruction led to severe unintended consequences, including the collapse of the pastoral economy and food security in the area. Since then, the area has been vulnerable to food insecurity, and reoccurring famines, called *kere* in local language, have troubled the region (Ralaingita et al. 2022). A study by Harvey et al. (2014), based on surveys of 600 households, revealed current risk-coping strategies among Malagasy small-scale farmers are insufficient due to resource limitations. There is an urgent need for technical, financial, and institutional support to enhance agricultural production, food security, and resilience. In 2020, 1.5 million individuals, constituting half of the population in Southern Madagascar, required humanitarian aid (WFP 2020).

The most recent famine in Southern Madagascar between 2021 and 2022 was the first to be discussed in the context of climate change (UN 2021). The term "world's first climate-change-induced famine" (e.g. Pilling and Bibby 2022) might be an exaggeration since droughts and cyclones are frequent events in the area (e.g. Pannett 2021). Also, a qualitative study by Ralaingita et al. (2022) based on focus group discussions challenged the prevailing notion that recurrent drought is the sole cause of recurring famine in Southern Madagascar.

While it is often assumed that droughts inevitably lead to famine, this is not necessarily the case. The relationship between climate-induced events, such as drought, and famine is multifaceted and cannot be understood in purely environmental terms. Political factors always play a crucial role in determining whether a drought escalates into a famine. Governance, resource distribution, social safety nets, and conflict are all political elements that significantly

influence a population's vulnerability to famine (de Waal 2018, 169–178). Ralaingita et al. (2022) highlight that famine is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by interconnected factors such as deforestation, drought, pests, diseases, food insecurity, extreme poverty, lawlessness, and political challenges. Since 1930, Southern Magadascar has experienced 16 famines over a span of 93 years (cf. Ralaingita et al. 2022), resulting in significant loss of life, both human and animal, leading survivors into a recurring cycle of collapse and recovery and ensnaring the population in persistent poverty.

3   The ABCD Approach

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) can be characterized as both a theory and an approach to development (Rakotoarison 2024). It was originally a method for community development in the urban context of deprived areas in high-income countries, like the US (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Later it was applied in locally-led development projects in the Global South (e.g. Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo 2019; 2021). The core idea of the approach is to work collaboratively with community members to identify, mobilize, and build upon their assets. One of the key strengths of ABCD in the context of climate change adaptation lies in its emphasis on sustainable land and resource management. This allows the use of ABCD as a framework for analyzing climate change adaptation efforts at the community level.

Community engagement in ABCD may involve conducting asset-mapping exercises, where the community collectively identifies its strengths and resources (Rakotoarison 2024). Communities using this approach can identify and implement practices such as agroforestry, soil conservation, and water harvesting techniques that enhance resilience to climate impacts. Additionally, ABCD underscores the importance of preserving and promoting local knowledge and skills. Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices that are adapted to local climate conditions can play a critical role in building climate resilience. This recognition and preservation of indigenous knowledge forms a cornerstone of effective climate adaptation strategies.

Furthermore, ABCD fosters social cohesion and collective action, which are vital components of successful climate adaptation (Rakotoarison 2024). Communities that work together in planning and implementing adaptation measures can pool their resources and efforts to achieve greater resilience. Additionally, ABCD encourages the establishment of inclusive governance structures that involve all community members in the decision-making process. ABCD places a strong emphasis on fostering community participation

and engagement, which are cornerstones of faith-based organization's (FBO) activities. The approach also encourages inclusive decision-making processes, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. By involving community members in setting priorities and designing interventions, ABCD aims to create solutions that are contextually relevant and sustainable.

However, ABCD has been criticized for ignoring the structural dimension of ecological, social, and economic problems (e.g. Macleod and Emejulu 2014). The critics argue that ABCD is therefore driving the neo-liberal agenda. However, by promoting partnerships between communities and external stakeholders, such as NGOs, governmental agencies, and research institutes, ABCD may ensure that issues are also tackled on the structural level and that communities have access to additional resources, technical expertise, and support for their climate adaptation initiatives.

In this study, we examine local climate change adaptation practices promoted by Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM) congregations and the church's affiliated development organization, FANILO. Although we use the term "asset-based community development" (ABCD) to describe the general approach observed, it is important to clarify that FLM and FANILO do not explicitly label their interventions as ABCD (Rakotoarison 2024). Rather, this etic categorization emerges from our analysis of practices that emphasize leveraging local assets, social networks, and community empowerment. This is in line with previous research (Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo 2019; 2021) which has established that FLM's development work predominantly relies on local resources with little external input, resulting in considerable variation in implementation at the local level.

4 Data and Method

The primary data for this study is based on 15 interviews with 21 individuals (6 females, 15 males) representing FLM actors including people from the Church's development organization FANILO, associations working with FANILO, synod representatives, pastors, local church volunteers (deacons, treasurer, group leaders, congregation vice president), international organizations, and local administration in the Ambovombe Androy area (Table 1 in Appendix). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation of diverse perspectives within the church hierarchy, selecting informants such as a bishop, pastors, deacons, and voluntary workers based on their distinct roles and insights into the research topic. The informants were selected to represent different types of congregations (one urban, one semiurban, and two

rural) as well as different actors in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of FLM in climate change adaptation in the area. Interviews were conducted both in Malagasy (with one of the authors acting as an interpreter) and in English during the two last weeks of November 2022. During the time of the interviews, rain had just started after three years of drought. Thirteen interviews were conducted in the Antandroy area between the Menarandra and Mandrare rivers, while one interview took place in Antananarivo.

In November 2023, a validation workshop was arranged at the Lutheran Graduate School of Theology in Madagascar (SALT) in Fianarantsoa with five pastors/theologians who had worked in the South. The researchers presented their preliminary findings to the participants who provided additional insights and details for the analysis of the interview data. A supplementary interview was conducted at Tombontsoa agricultural school in Antsirabe in November 2023. Notes from the validation workshop as well as from the additional interview were used as secondary data to guide the analysis, but no direct quotations were used in the analysis.

All the primary data was recorded and transcribed (78 pages). The data was analyzed with thematic content analysis. First, a list of acknowledged local climate change adaption activities was drawn up based on previous literature (Klöck and Nunn 2019). Given the small scale of the activities and their reliance on local assets, they are referred to as climate change adaptation activities and projects instead of strategies, which would entail a more systematic and centrally-led nature. Second, the list was used to code the interview data thematically.

5   Results

After the preliminary analysis three main types of activities and projects were identified from the coded data: afforestation (planting trees), promotion of climate-resilient crops and livestock, and water management.

5.1   *Planting Trees*
The informants working in the development field explained that Southern Madagascar can be divided into three geographical areas, namely sandy, stony, and mountain areas. All of these suffer from lack of trees to prevent erosion. The regions need more trees to protect the areas from strong winds and to keep the moisture in the ground. Unfortunately, trees are used excessively for cooking, income generation (charcoal), and construction. Planting trees, the main climate change adaption activity described by the informants, relates to the

use of techniques like cover cropping to prevent soil erosion, enhancing soil fertility, and preserving arable land.

According to all informants, Church actors are involved in small-scale tree planting operations using local resources across the region. Both salaried employees and volunteers work to establish nurseries for propagating endemic trees, which are crucial for local ecosystems. The seedlings are then distributed for free both to Church members and to others to encourage widespread planting. The decision not to give preference to Church members follow the principles in Lutheran diakonia (Skjortnes 2020).

> Synod has a tree nursery. This is how church works against destruction of environment. The church is also cultivating vegetables around the well. The church is also encouraging planting of a specific vegetable which is nutritious. (Synod representative)

Church activities also include low-key training and education on climate-smart agricultural practices and sustainable natural resource management. However, planting trees appeared as the most important activity which the informants interpreted as a vocation to all Christians including the children.

> Each person takes what s/he can, whatever s/he could plant in his/her own land. If a Christian has a big land, the Church gives him/her as much as s/he could plant in his/her field. If the person doesn't have land, the person will be given one, two or three seedlings to put in his/her garden. (Deacon)

Community leaders and pastors interviewed for the study were keen to demonstrate the success of their own tree planting efforts, with many planted trees growing in their compounds. The informants noted that these types of "teaching by example" initiatives were valued by community members as sources of inspiration for adopting similar practices.

> Before people used to cut down trees, but now I encourage them to plant trees. When we came in 2019 there were no trees in town. All the trees you see, we planted them. People thought that was a dream model to adopt to the new context. (Pastor)

The Church activities also relate to engaging local communities in the sustainable management of natural resources to ensure long-term ecological balance. A Church-based organization operating in Fort Dauphin, FaFaFi, started

planting trees already in 1992. According to a FaFaFi representative, the mode of operation is to sensitize local village volunteer leaders (MAFIS) about the need for tree planting and then train other local volunteers. A local leader involved in the FLM development organization FANILO through his own association was able to convince the mayor of his city to give him two hectares of land for forestation. The leader gathered 61 community leaders for a tree planting demonstration.

The integration of traditional knowledge into climate adaptation also came into play here. To protect the area from intruders who would cut down the trees, the local leader came up with the idea to kill an ox as a symbol in the plantation and leave the ox's leg hanging on the fence. Killing an ox is traditionally done during rituals for important events in Madagascar. An ox's leg is used as a symbol to indicate a prohibited/ taboo location or piece of land. If somebody cuts even one tree in that area, they must pay back the ox. This is an example of how incorporating indigenous cultural norms and traditional religious beliefs can prove effective in promoting climate resilient practices.

A Church development worker active in the northwest part of the area talked about practices of the Bara people who are mostly cattle herders and burn the grass to encourage new shoots of grass for the cattle to feed on. The practice is slowly destroying the environment.

> We sensitized people and trained them to plant trees. We encourage them to create seedlings first so that they can have seedlings to do reforestation.

A community leader described the mission of the tree planting as "to make people aware that when the environment is destroyed, there is an unknown future for our children." Informants agreed that Church efforts should be intensified to reverse environmental degradation.

> The number of trees cut is much greater than trees planted, especially in the Northern area. Trees are a means of subsistence for the people. They use them for food and for medications. They have cut down trees for a long time, but only planted trees for a short time. We have just started to encourage people to plant trees. (Deacon)

The landscape in the South is dominated by vegetation comprising thorny shrubs, and xerophyte and euphorbiaceous thickets interspersed by grassy savannahs (Ralaingita et al. 2022). The only green spaces surround ancestors' tombs.

Solutions for the overuse of trees involved teaching people about alternative modes for cooking (thermos) and providing other income-generating activities to replace selling charcoal. According to one informant, women were shown to be particularly eager and focused on tree planting, likely due to their strong connection to family well-being. Critical voices among the informants argued that more awareness raising and sensitization is needed for tree planting, since Church members lack motivation to plant and nurture trees as they see no immediate benefit from the activity. Tree planting is experienced simply as an obligation.

One development worker described the dilemma in the following way:

> If all the 120,000 Christians in the South, the Lutherans, plant 20 trees each, it will cover the land, and we will not have a problem with rain and food crisis. But when I ask my son, why do people burn the trees and produce the charcoal, he said, mom, how can we think about tomorrow if the kids went to bed with empty stomachs. (FLM representative)

5.2 Promotion of Climate-Resilient Crops and Livestock

The promotion of climate-resilient crops and livestock in a rural context of a low-income country is a vital climate change adaptation strategy aimed at enhancing the agricultural sector's ability to withstand and thrive in changing environmental conditions. The strategy involves identifying, developing, and disseminating varieties of crops and breeds of livestock that are better suited to the anticipated climate challenges. The strategy is deemed vitally important for Southern Madagascar, which is vulnerable to reoccurring droughts and famines. In Southern Madagascar, all land outside the cities is public land which local people can cultivate freely.

The informants emphasized the need for climate-resilient crops and livestock through the recent experience of drought and famine. Against the backdrop of the food crisis of 2021–22, an international aid worker claimed it was possible to predict a famine coming three months ahead in the area (cf. Ralaingita et al. 2022). A development worker described the unfolding of the food crisis as follows:

> The first sign is an increase in the price of water. It can go up to 5000 ariary (around USD 1.20) per 20-liter container. People have no money to buy water. Then the price of cattle goes down. Ox can cost only 15,000 ariary. The last sign is selling kitchen utensils. People sell everything, also pots. Red sand wind covers everything and kills the plants. Eventually

people have nothing to sell and nothing to eat. Children become skinny. Women are no longer able to breastfeed their children.

A Church development worker summarized the experience as follows:

The weather became very hot. There was no water. The animals died.

The specific feature of the drought in 2021–22 was the extremely strong wind which blew away the top layer of the soil together with all the crops. One pastor described the sheer strength of the wind to an outsider, saying that experiencing it even once would make you promise yourself never to return. Church actors acknowledged that famine has been a recurring calamity in the area and that the Church should train people to adapt to the cyclical nature of droughts.

The aim is to prevent people from migrating. It is not a solution to run away. The aim is to learn to live under new circumstances. Church should teach the people to face the situation and how to live with the situation. Church should prepare the people to face the worst. The Church is preparing the people to face climate change consequences. (Pastor)

Church actors emphasized the Church's role in promoting climate-smart agriculture to improve food security. In areas where traditional farming becomes less viable due to climate change, people are turning to charcoal production as an alternative source of income. This shift is, however, associated with concerns about its environmental impact, including deforestation.

Church actors encouraged small-scale farmers to grow, e.g., sorghum and millet instead of corn and rice and to prefer goats over zebu in animal husbandry since goats can eat almost anything while zebus need grass. However, in the South, climate and soil differ from district to district which means that the same crops, plants, livestock, or trees do not fit to the whole area. The informants emphasized that the Church actors should know the conditions in each area.

Because of climate change new survival strategies are needed. We need crops which can be cultivated under harsh conditions. (Church development worker)

The informants gave examples of a mix of income-generating activities for promotion of climate-resilient crops and livestock. In response to changing climate patterns, some communities are considering transitioning to fishing

as an alternative livelihood. In one rural village the Church was facilitating this shift by providing boats and fishing equipment. However, it is noted that coastal communities have a greater advantage in this regard. Inland farmers appeared reluctant to become fishermen.

Chicken farming was highlighted as a significant livelihood option, particularly for women. Unlike other livestock (e.g. sheep, goats, cows) where decision-making is often dominated by males and the community, chicken farming allows women more autonomy. They can sell chickens to meet various financial needs such as school supplies and healthcare. Additionally, chickens hold special cultural and religious significance, making them an asset.

> One example of adaption, when agriculture faded, was to switch from farming to chicken husbandry. It does not need water. Chicken husbandry can replace farming if done properly. It can provide a solution to a money problem. (Pastor)

Despite environmental challenges such as drought and water scarcity, chicken farming was viewed as a viable option. The Norwegian missionaries initiated a community development chicken husbandry project where the idea was to donate five chickens and a cock to a few families. Once they had five new chickens, they were expected to donate them to another family. The indigenous chicken breed was preferred due to its resilience to local climate conditions. This adaptation activity enables communities to sustain their livelihoods even in adverse environmental circumstances.

FANILO was also responsible for the implementation of the chicken project through coordinating the distribution of chickens and organizing training for chicken husbandry. Due to the challenging climate and diseases, many chickens died during transportation or immediately afterwards. Drought also affected the chickens, since there was not enough food for them. Some chickens were allowed to run wild and then people stole them or dogs ate them. Despite the difficulties, the project was considered a success at least at one location. A voluntary worker described how the project worked:

> The church taught us to plant trees and gave us chickens. We were told to share chickens when we had enough chicks. (Deacon)

> They [congregation members] saw that somebody got a chicken in the church. When the person got the chicken and got chicks, they will give chicks to another person in the area. The idea is to teach people to give. (Pastor)

A Church development worker argued that Christians are more open to agricultural innovations than non-Christians.

> It is difficult for non-Christians to accept modern ways of doing things because of the tradition. They keep on what the ancestors say. It is difficult. If someone dies, the Christians may kill one to two oxen to feed the people that are coming to the funeral. But non-Christians will kill all the cattle and burn the house of the deceased person. This is the tradition. The idea is that no one should gain anything from the deceased person. (Pastor)

The promotion of climate-resilient crops and livestock organized by the Church actors included sensitization for the farmers to diversify their crops by introducing and promoting climate-resilient varieties that are better adapted to changing temperature and precipitation patterns. The actors also tried to identify and promote livestock breeds that are well-adapted to the local climate, resistant to diseases exacerbated by climate change, and capable of thriving in challenging environmental conditions.

FANILO and associations working for the Church provided farmers with training and education on the selection, cultivation, and management of climate-resilient crops and livestock. However, there were very limited infrastructure and support services, which was highlighted by the problems facing the chicken project. In the absence of veterinary services, many chickens died. More importantly, Church activities such as an ABCD approach failed to deal with structural problems such as limited access to larger markets which would ensure that farmers benefit economically from adopting these adaptive measures.

One pastor summed up the development:

> People are changing their practices little by little. Because they are starting to acknowledge and be aware of the climate change impact.

Despite the experience of recent famine, Church actors highlighted the potential for developing the South.

> The south is potentially a rich area. It is an agropastoral area. You can have livestock – goats, sheep, chicken, turkey. And then there is the sea. (Church development worker)

5.3   *Water Management*

Lack of water is the most urgent issue for food security in the South. A Church development worker described the cause of the most recent drought and famine in the South as resulting from two factors: lack of rain and destruction of the cultivable land. Water management causes problems even when the rain comes, since local people, especially in the rural areas, lack capacity to store water.

> There are no trees which allows the strong wind to take away the upper layer of the soil and destroy the cultivable land. Everything is covered by dust. There is less soil to cultivate. (Synod representative)

Church activities for water management included implementing water-harvesting techniques, building small reservoirs, and utilizing efficient irrigation methods to ensure consistent water supply for agriculture.

> In the forest there were holes in the rock that preserved water. Because of climate change there is less and less rain. There are less and less water resources. I encourage people to dig water storage. This is the new practice. Old practice was to rely on the holes in the rock. (Pastor)

The actors emphasized that there is water in the area, both in rivers and in the groundwater, but the challenge is water management.

> There are a few places where you only reach groundwater at 50 meters below the surface. Usually, you can have water at 8 meters below surface. (Church development worker)

The synod, NGOs, and government collaborated in building a well on the synod's ground. The well is used by the people living in the neighborhood. However, in another area, the Church actors reported that nobody came to help them dig a well. Local government had promised to send a truck to construct a well, but the road was too poor for the vehicle and no well was built. In another village the Church constructed a water tank to capture rainwater. In a further village the Church invested in two water containers, one of which was used to sell water and earn income for the congregation.

> Building water tanks is one solution, tanks the size of a building. Some people are building tanks and selling the water from the tanks. (Synod representative)

Informants regarded congregational water management activities as only temporary. Building a pipeline from Fort Dauphin to Ambovombe was mentioned as a more permanent solution.

> If we construct the pipeline, we will have water. But the government does not do that. There is a lot of corruption. (Church development worker)

The distribution of responsibility emerged as another challenge in the interviews. The Church development workers complained that the pastors were not giving enough attention to water management and other climate change adaptation activities since they are mostly interested in evangelization. Meanwhile, pastors argued that Church development work is too passive and lacks local knowledge.

6   Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that a religious organization's engagement with climate change extends beyond rhetoric (Salter and Wilkinson 2023) to concrete, community-driven actions, even in the absence of centralized management. The results indicate that local faith-based climate change adaptation activities within FLM congregations in Southern Madagascar primarily consisted of small-scale, ad hoc initiatives. These included soil conservation through indigenous tree planting, promotion of alternative livelihoods, and water management efforts. These strategies are recognized as effective in the ecological literature. Ellison et al. (2017) emphasize that trees and forests are essential for climate adaptation as they regulate water cycles, enhance rainfall distribution, and provide cooling effects that mitigate extreme heat. Alternative crops and improved water management strategies, such as rainwater harvesting and sustainable irrigation, strengthen food security and reduce vulnerability to droughts and floods. The activities under study include a strong educational component. Both paid church workers and volunteers encouraged local inhabitants to adopt and spread climate change-resilient practices, such as tree planting, cultivating alternative crops, and improved water management, thereby enhancing local livelihoods and health (Scheelbeek et al. 2021).

The projects were asset-based, relying on local resources, knowledge, and Church volunteers or members. However, no systematic links were found

between these activities and larger initiatives, such as the "Use Your Talents" program or other national or regional FLM projects. Therefore, the findings align with previous results from the "Use Your Talents" poverty alleviation research projects (Rakotoarison 2024; Rakotoarison, Dietrich and Hiilamo 2019; 2021). The paid Church employees were more vocal in setting an example for congregation members, while voluntary workers mainly described the working modes of the project. However, they were more open to discussing structural challenges and problems in the projects. The paid Church workers more often attributed challenges and problems to local people's attitudes.

In the absence of structured planning and implementation, these activities may not be classified as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) strategies. For instance, we did not observe the use of asset mapping, a hallmark of ABCD. Instead, the activities appeared to be spontaneous responses to immediate climate-related challenges. Furthermore, these projects seemed to rely heavily on individual efforts by local pioneers, with substantial variation in the scope and intensity of the activities across different congregations. However, the projects reflected FLM's holistic way of thinking, embracing all the people in the area irrespective of their Church membership status (see Skjortnes 2020).

The data was collected from four different localities (urban, semiurban, and two rural context). The extent to which Church actors engaged in climate change adaptation appeared to depend more on their own initiative and interest than on the specific needs or context of the locality. What seems to matter is the local leadership. Local leaders committed to climate change adaptation in Madagascar were respected and accepted as role models for local action because their authority is deeply rooted in both religious and cultural traditions. In Madagascar, authority is understood as stemming from Jesus/God as well as the *raiamandreny*, a Malagasy concept meaning "father-and-mother" or "parent," which symbolizes a connection to ancestors (Rakotoarison 2024, 94). The most active localities were the two rural areas, while the least active was the semiurban congregation. Both male and female informants were interviewed, but gender did not seem to play a role in how the informants were engaged in climate change adaptation activities. However, it needs to be emphasized that this study did not specifically focus on the role of gender in climate change adaptation.

Despite the heterogeneity, the study demonstrates the potential of asset-based approaches in fostering climate resilience in rural communities in the Global South. The studied activities leveraged local knowledge and skills, thereby strengthening climate resilience. However, due to the limited scope and irregular adoption of these practices, it is uncertain whether they can

foster inclusive governance structures that involve all community members in decision-making processes.

Critics of ABCD argue that the approach is overly atomistic, failing to address the structural causes of unsustainability (Macleod and Emejulu 2014). In this study, participants mentioned the need for improved infrastructure, such as roads and centralized water management. These structural factors are crucial. Famine is rarely caused by environmental factors alone; political instability, economic inequality, and inadequate infrastructure also play significant roles (De Waal 2018). Effective governance and social policies can mitigate the impacts of climate-related shocks, preventing them from escalating into full-blown crises.

The small-scale adaptation activities observed in this study did not amount to a coordinated campaign or call to action directed at the government. Additionally, the asset-based approaches may be less effective in addressing more technical climate adaptation strategies, such as early warning systems for extreme weather or constructing climate-adaptive infrastructure, which often require substantial external resources. Similarly, the promotion of renewable energy sources, while briefly mentioned by some participants, was not a major focus of the Church's activities, likely due to limited resources and the low reliance on mechanized agriculture in Southern Madagascar. The study also highlights that Church activities did not include social security mechanisms like cash transfer programs or food assistance to support vulnerable populations during climate-related shocks. Instead, discussions centered around the protection of reforested areas, incorporating indigenous and local knowledge systems.

Existing literature identifies both drivers and barriers to adaptation, helping to explain when and how adaptive capacity translates into action. Asset-based projects focus on social change, which can be categorized into education, information dissemination, and behavior change (Klöck and Nunn 2019). FLM congregations, with their long tradition of educating and sensitizing their members, are well-positioned to foster behavioral change toward climate-resilient practices. Given the increasing severity of extreme weather due to global warming, development actors face a dilemma: whether to prioritize emergency relief or invest in long-term development projects. Local faith-based actors enjoy greater flexibility because they operate both during crises and in more peaceful periods. Even before climate change, these communities had weathered disasters and served as bastions of safety, volunteerism, and crisis management (Martinez et al. 2024). They also combine indigenous knowledge with innovative practices, as illustrated above by the use of taboos (*fady*) to prevent tree cutting.

This study did not specifically focus on ecotheology. Lutheran values – particularly the stewardship of creation and a commitment to social solidarity – could inform the Church's engagement with environmental challenges (see Skjortnes 2020). FLM's involvement in building climate resilience is in principle deeply intertwined with its theological commitments. At the national level, the FLM recognizes ecotheology as a Christian call to action. Over the past 20 years, the FLM has encouraged tree planting in Church lands together with other activities for environmental protection, particularly with the assistance of different developmental programs and projects at national level as well as through regional specialized training centers for agriculture and farming (FaFaFi). However, as our results demonstrate, ecotheology remains poorly implemented in the local level. As one informant noted, tree planting in the Ambovombe Androy region is often perceived more as an obligation than as an expression of care for creation in a broader sense. It appears that for the local population planting trees must offer tangible benefits, such as food, firewood, medicinal uses, income generation, or at least aesthetic value. People's motivation for tree planting is not driven by climate change adaptation, but rather by the practical and economic advantages the trees can provide. This aligns with Randrianjaka's (2025) observation that the FLM has largely remained silent on environmental degradation in Madagascar, failing to integrate environmental conservation into its core mission. The FLM and its associated programs are notably absent from the list of major national NGOs and environmental associations in Madagascar. For instance, the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund – a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the World Bank – does not mention the FLM or its programs among the key actors in the environmental sector in Madagascar, while another Protestant institution (SAF FJKM) is mentioned (Carret 2014).

The strength of this study lies in giving voice to grassroots actors in a vulnerable region. A limitation, however, is that we were unable to assess the long-term viability of the activities and projects studied. It remains unclear to what extent these findings can be generalized to other contexts. Nevertheless, the insights offer practical guidance for policymakers, practitioners, FBOs, and development agencies seeking to promote climate resilience in rural Madagascar and similar settings.

The findings on local-level climate change adaptation activities in this study may be generalized to other large or mid-size Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa that engage in community-based environmental initiatives and development work. However, these findings are not directly applicable

to value- or faith-based international organizations such as the Red Cross or World Vision, which operate within broader institutional frameworks, often with substantial external funding, centralized management, and standardized programmatic approaches that differ from the more decentralized, asset-based, and locally embedded strategies observed in this study.

Our study highlights the potential of local faith-based actors, such as the FLM, to play an active role in resilience strategies that support communities, particularly in remote areas where national and international assistance is limited or absent. Strengthening support for faith-based civil society actors on a local level in climate change-induced crises should therefore be recognized as a crucial means of enhancing local resilience and reaching "the furthest behind" (UN 2015).

7   Conclusion

This study sheds light on the nuanced and context-sensitive role of faith-based organizations, particularly FLM congregations, in grassroots climate change adaptation in Southern Madagascar. While these initiatives were modest, fragmented, and largely detached from formalized institutional structures or theological frameworks, they nevertheless illustrate the active use of local assets in faith-based community development. The reliance on local leadership, indigenous knowledge, and voluntary engagement underscores the potential of local faith-based actors in building resilience where state and international interventions remain limited. However, to fully harness this potential for sustainable development, more intentional integration of environmental stewardship into theological discourse, greater coordination with broader policy frameworks at the local and national level, and investment in human capacities are necessary.

Acknowledgements

Research Ethics

Permission to collect and process the data was given by Norwegian Center for Data Security (NSD, currently SIKT) (approval number 397456). The accepted application for NSD included details for interviewee's inclusion and ethical concerns. Before the interview, oral explanations were given to all informants about why the data was being collected and how it would be used, and their oral consent was recorded.

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Appendix

TABLE 1   Description of the interview data

Informant status	Date	Gender	Place	Duration
FLM representative (s)	11/20/2022	F	Antananarivo	42:11
Church development worker (s)	11/22/2022	M	Fort Dauphin	60:00
Development worker (v)	11/22/2022	M	Fort Dauphin	58:42
Synod representative	11/23/2022	M	Ambovombe	67:23
Deacon (v)	11/23/2022	M	Ambovombe	42:00
Treasurer (v)	11/23/2022	F		
Pastor (s)	11/23/2022	M	Ambovombe	53:21
Local official (s)	11/23/2022	M	Ambovombe	53:00
UNDP representative (s)	11/23/2022	M	Ambovombe	22:46
Secretary of congregation (v)	11/23/2022	F	Village outside Ambovombe	54:59
Leader of the youth group (v)	11/23/2022	M		
Leader of the women's group (v)	11/23/2022	F		
Pastor (s)	11/24/2022	M	Village outside Ambovombe	38:51
WFP representative (s)	11/25/2022	M	Ambovombe	56:35

TABLE 1   Description of the interview data (*cont.*)

Informant status	Date	Gender	Place	Duration
Church development worker (v)	11/26/2022	M	Rural village	68:34
Leader of women's group (v)	11/26/2022	F	Rural village	41:11
Deacon (v)	11/26/2022	F		
Congregation vice president (v)	11/26/2022	M	Rural village	43:54
Deacon (v)	11/26/2022	M		
Pastor (s)	11/27/2022	M	Rural village	59:06
Church development worker (s)	11/28/2022	M	Betroka	40:40

s = salaried position
v = volunteer

Policy and Practice Note

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Findings from a Theology-Informed Training for Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy

Policy and Practice Note

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Abstract

Domestic violence interventions that engage religious leaders and clergy have increased significantly in recent years, spanning social work, psychology, public health, and international development. The international evidence indicates the need for culturally appropriate and theologically informed interventions that may combine religious and secular knowledge and approaches. The current paper presents such an intervention that was implemented with Ethiopian Orthodox clergy employing ethnographic, theological, safeguarding, and legal training content. Qualitative evaluation of the pilot showed that the theological component gave the training credibility from the perspective of the participants and helped them to become more confident in teaching against domestic violence in their communities. The paper proposes the need for

developing robust evaluation strategies to better quantify the impact of theologically informed training materials and the influence of the trainers' approach and identity as a way of designing more appropriate and effective domestic violence interventions in diverse cultural and religious contexts.

Keywords

domestic violence – clergy training – culturally appropriate responses – Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – trainer identity

1   Introduction

In recent years, domestic violence interventions that engage religious leaders and clergy have proliferated, spanning disciplines such as religious psychology, public health, international development, and social work (Petersen 2009; UNDP 2014; Tomkins et al. 2015; Le Roux et al. 2020; Le Roux and Palm 2021; Le Roux and Pertek 2023; Kassas, Abdelnour, and Makhoul 2020; Istratii 2020; Istratii and Ali 2023). The increased engagement with clergy in addressing domestic violence seems to respond to two sets of evidence. On the one hand, there is an important association between religious beliefs and interpersonal relationships, including experiences of domestic violence (e.g., Cooper, May, and Fincham 2019; Aman et al. 2019; Roberts 2018; Fincham and May 2017; Stafford 2016; Hatch et al. 2016; Lambert et al. 2010). On the other hand, clergy often have an influential role in mediating marital conflict and domestic violence situations in faith communities, which can have both positive and negative implications (Istratii 2020; Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

A recent cross-sectoral literature review demonstrated a well-established practice of integrating clergy in culture-sensitive interventions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and, increasingly, in international diaspora communities (Istratii and Ali 2023). In many LMICs, the pervasive nature of religious idiom in social life has meant that religious experience has often been indistinguishable from cultural practice, thus contributing to rigid or unhelpful understandings and attitudes around gender relations and marriage that may underline experiences of domestic violence in complex ways (Magezi and Manzanga 2019; Shaikh 2007; Istratii 2020). On the other hand, the influence of the clergy in collective and individual life has meant that they have occupied an influential role in informing collective and individual attitudes in community life, and married life specifically (Hamid and Jayakar 2015; Nason-Clark 2018;

Istratii 2020). The international evidence that has been summarized by the first author and other collaborators in previous publications points to the need for culturally appropriate, theologically accurate training for clergy and better integration of religious and secular knowledge and approaches in domestic violence responses and services (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Moon and Shim 2010; Le Roux et al. 2016; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019; Istratii and Ali 2023; Istratii, Ali, and Feder 2024).

However, the influence of religio-cultural parameters and faith in gendered experiences of domestic violence and help-seeking attitudes continues to be simplistically conceptualized in mainstream gender-based violence (GBV) practice as implemented in LMICs. Historically, GBV interventions have relied heavily on ethnocentric theories and understandings of gender relations and domestic violence informed by Western cultural experiences, which were explicitly or implicitly assumed to have universal relevance, and these often portrayed religious and cultural traditions and norms as being mostly complicit in women's abuse (Volpp 2005; Istratii 2020). Although the sector has become more reflexive about this epistemological bias, ongoing structural inequalities between providers funded in the West and their LMIC collaborators often contribute to the perpetuation of such biases. For example, in a qualitative multi-stakeholder study that included faith-based organizations exploring how the "faith versus secular binary" had influenced the delivery of GBV interventions, Le Roux and Loots (2017) found a secularist bias hindering a productive engagement with faith and religious actors. A more effective approach would be one that carefully considers context-specific intersections between gender, faith, and domestic violence without assuming their relationship in a reductionist, or essentializing manner. Such an approach would need to be reflexive of the situatedness of Western theoretical frameworks and the practitioners' own epistemological and cultural bias. It would need to proceed in culturally appropriate ways that genuinely engage communities' religious beliefs and theological teachings (Olivier 2016; Ager and Ager 2016).

The current paper presents such an intervention that was implemented with Ethiopian Orthodox clergy in Ethiopia in 2021–2022.[1] Not unlike other countries, domestic violence is a prevalent problem in Ethiopia, with one out of three ever-married women aged 15–49 (34%) reporting having experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence from their husband or partner, and with 63% of Ethiopian women aged 15–49 agreeing that wife-beating can be

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1 Historically, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) was a dominant religious institution in the country with the Orthodox population constituting a majority, although religious demographics have steadily diversified in recent decades.

justified in at least in one of the specified five circumstances (Central Statistical Agency and ICF 2017). The first author's previous anthropological research in Ethiopian Orthodox rural and urban contexts found that Ethiopian Orthodox women who experienced domestic violence did not seek help for numerous reasons, including feeling shame and fearing the risk of divorce (Istratii 2019; 2020). In Orthodox communities, it is well known that everyone is expected to have a spiritual father, a priest who supports them spiritually throughout their life. The aforementioned study, which relied on interviews with priests and lay believers, found that priests were often called to mediate conflict in the marriage, and in this context, they sometimes even confronted perpetrators (Istratii 2019, 2020; Project dldl/ድልድል 2021). Clergy were often inadequately equipped to support victims and survivors safely as they lacked sufficient theological and safeguarding training on domestic violence (Project dldl/ድልድል 2021). This needs to be appraised with consideration of the fact that traditional clergy education historically focused on the memorization of liturgical prayers (Melaku 2010; Kalewold 1970) and does not appear to have incorporated family training, a gap that has started to be addressed in some of the urban, modern theological colleges (Istratii 2019, 2020; Project dldl/ድልድል 2021).

The first section of this paper provides a more detailed discussion of the international evidence on effective clergy-centered interventions on domestic violence. It also presents the research results from an anthropological study in Ethiopia that preceded and informed the design and delivery of the clergy training series. The next section presents the intervention, which comprised a two-day training and a one-day follow-up session about six months later with numerous batches of clergy participants. It also discusses the evaluation outcomes, key learnings, and assessment results. Limitations and future research directions for theology-informed clergy-centered interventions on domestic violence are discussed in the final sections of the paper.

2   Current Evidence on Clergy-Centered Interventions (International and Africa-Specific)

The evidence on clergy-centered interventions for domestic violence is international and cross-sectoral and can be found in research and social work in North America, in public health and international development interventions in LMICs, including many African countries, and in other community-based research within anthropological, sociological, GBV, and religious studies. According to a recent scoping review, intervention programs involving clergy present commonalities across geographies and cultural contexts, but also some

differential needs reflecting the context in which they operate (Istratii and Ali 2023). This evidence suggests that clergy in North America and other Western high-income societies with dominant secular cultures present an increased awareness of domestic violence, a lack of trauma-centered training, and the need for continuous training to respond to domestic violence in their communities (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Choi 2015; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019; Levitt and Ware 2006; Moon and Shim 2010; Shaw et al. 2022; Sisselman-Borgia and Bonanno 2017 as cited in Istratii and Ali 2023). On the other hand, studies from non-Western tradition-oriented societies and LMIC contexts, including African countries such as South Africa, DRC, and Ethiopia, stress the central role that clergy have in family life and the mediation of marital problems and strategies to leverage their influence positively in domestic violence responses (Petersen 2016; Le Roux and Bowers Du Toit 2017; Istratii 2020; Le Roux et al. 2020 as cited in Istratii and Ali 2023).

The cross-sectoral evidence suggests the need for more customized, theology-specific training for clergy and a better integration of religious and secular knowledge in domestic violence interventions through the facilitation of equitable collaborations across faith-based and secular providers (Le Roux et al. 2016; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019). Several studies found that clergy and religious personnel acknowledged their own needs for further training (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Petersen 2009; Moon and Shim 2010; Kassas, Abdelnour, and Makhoul 2020). Other studies found that clergy were receptive to the training content and planned to incorporate it into their work (Hancock, Ames, and Behnke 2014; De Roure and Capraro 2016). However, studies that evaluated specific clergy-centered programs found a tendency among participants to forget the training content, necessitating ongoing support and retraining (Drumm et al. 2018; Kim and Menzie 2015). Within international GBV responses, a synthesis of primary data from six African countries and Myanmar focusing on faith leadership also concluded that any support for clergy would need to be sustained over time to ensure personal and behavioral change (Le Roux et al. 2016).

Despite this general agreement that clergy need to be integrated into interventions, many of the studies cited spoke simultaneously about the concern of clergy complicity in perpetuating patriarchal norms and harmful interpretations of religious teachings hindering productive collaboration with secular organizations. Numerous studies based on research or interventions implemented in LMICs evidence the difficulty for faith leaders to separate religious teachings from culture-specific gender and behavior standards (Magezi and Manzanga 2019; Istratii 2019; Le Roux et al. 2016; Nason-Clark et al. 2018). In their paper focusing on Zimbabwe, Magezi and Manzanga (2019) problematized

the patriarchal cultural context in which the Church in Zimbabwe operated and found limited pastoral leadership in promoting women's emancipation in society, including responding to GBV. Le Roux and Bowers Du Toit (2017) drew on data collected during a scoping study on the role of faith communities and organizations in the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence. Their study found disbelief or lack of awareness among religious leaders of the extent of GBV in their communities, a double role of religious factors in serving both as a coping system for victims and making them vulnerable as a result of misplaced beliefs about how a "good" religious person should respond to abuse, and that faith leaders were conducive to the continuation of patriarchal traditions. The blurring between theological teaching and culture-specific norms and practices within the lived experience of a community can foster tendencies among religious personnel to interpret sacred texts in a rigid manner that can contribute to the problem and its continuation (Istratii 2019; Le Roux and Pertek 2023; Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

This points to a need for both theologically versed and ethnographically grounded approaches that understand the interplay between religious and cultural factors and how these impact domestic violence experiences. A study that demonstrates this well was published in South Africa by Petersen (2017). This juxtaposed feminist approaches to responding to violence against women that had not paid the necessary attention to faith with the more effective work of the South African Faith and Family Institute. The latter was described as a multi-faith nonprofit organization that employed theologically informed and culture-sensitive discourses to counter "patriarchal traditions" using scripture, encourage mutually supportive and fulfilling models of marriage, and hold perpetrators accountable. As Petersen writes, the program's respectful engagement with clergy brought many to reflect on their own practices and discourses and to open up about challenges in their own family lives (ibid.). Several other programs proved effective by being culturally sensitive and spiritually based (Davis et al. 2020; Stennis et al. 2015; Hancock, Ames, and Behnke 2014).

Overall, the available literature identifies several key gaps in clergy-centered interventions for addressing domestic violence in the context of LMIC faith communities. Their effectiveness seems to be primarily hampered by the clergy's difficulty in separating religious teachings from culturally ascribed norms and accepted knowledge, despite a general openness among most clergy to the problem of domestic violence. To these authors' awareness, the existing literature has yet to systematically examine the ability of religious teachers to engage theologically with the problem of domestic violence and to

reflect critically on their own role in maintaining rigid or harmful understandings, practices, or norms, despite this shortfall being stated recurrently.

The evidence review also reveals significant gaps in measuring the effectiveness of clergy-centered programs, and specifically whether such interventions are more effective when they *integrate theological teaching*s, as opposed to when they do not. Addressing this question could reveal the more specific mechanisms that make a theologically informed training approach effective and desirable with clergy, which could improve the design of future interventions. To date, the literature has also not shown sufficient interest in assessing the quality or the relevance of theological material in clergy-centered interventions of this sort. Usually, programs that are theologically informed employ materials that are considered relevant by the respective delivery teams, but the effectiveness of the specific choice of materials is not directly evaluated. Additionally, very little attention has been given to the identity of the trainer and delivery teams and their relationship to the clergy participants and their communities, although it is implied in some studies that trainers must be culturally sensitive and aware.

We designed and delivered the training series presented in this paper with these questions and gaps in mind, although we could not explore all of them in this pilot series. The aim of the current paper is to channel the program's key lessons into the current state-of-the-art evidence, especially around the effectiveness of theological content and trainer identity, and to propose directions for future research and interventions involving clergy.

3   Description of the Program

3.1   *An Evidence-Based and Theologically Informed Intervention Design*

In contrast to programs designed on the basis of a secular sociological GBV theory, the current intervention was informed by long-term anthropological research completed with Ethiopian Orthodox communities in the region of Tigray that had explored multi-dimensionally the overlap between religious beliefs and domestic violence (Istratii 2019; 2020).[2] The research revealed

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[2]   The research took place in Tigray regional state and sought to embed an analysis of conjugal abuse and attitudes toward it in the local religio-cultural and gender worldview and the participants' vernacular realities. A close study of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo theology working with official texts and relying on interviews with theologians and Church historians in Ethiopia was followed by approximately 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork.

nuanced and complex relationships between conjugal abuse, culture-specific gender norms, and religious beliefs, evidencing the need and prospect of leveraging theological teachings to counteract harmful understandings, attitudes, and norms contributing to the problem and its tolerance. The study found a community-wide implicit tolerance of domestic violence, which could be underpinned by religious connotations. These religious discourses, in which social norms were often embedded, did not appear to emanate from the official teachings of the indigenous Church, with the faithful having generally known their faith from often under-trained clergy and generation-to-generation learning, and having a skewed or limited understanding of theological teachings on marriage.

The research also documented the centrality of the clergy in teaching about gender relations and marriage and in mediating situations of conflict and domestic violence (Istratii 2019; 2020). Most rural priests opposed harmful culture-specific practices and usually mediated conjugal abuse situations favoring the victimized party, although many, often unwittingly, enforced sociocultural gendered norms that fostered situations which could turn abusive. While many clergy lacked the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims, survivors, and perpetrators considering safety-related risks for the victims, others used theological language resourcefully and in ways that seemed to respond directly to rigid and pernicious attitudes in the community.

This evidence resulted in the development of Project dldl/ድልድል, a four-year project funded by UK Research and Innovation hosted at SOAS University of London and led by Dr. Romina Istratii. Project activities included the design and implementation of a culturally appropriate and theologically informed intervention to build the preparedness of Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. The intervention centered on juxtaposing theological teachings upheld in the indigenous Church with community beliefs and understandings that often confounded the people's "religion" with their "culture" (a separation that members of the community themselves made in the original research). Extensive time and resources went into developing and translating relevant theological content by Dr. Romina Istratii with the expert support of theology graduates in Addis Ababa that directly responded to the research results, which were

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The study engaged 244 informants, who included domestic violence and GBV experts, scholars and theologians at traditional Church schools and in the modern theological colleges, monks and nuns at nearby monasteries, clergy, members of the Sunday School Department of the Church, and lay men and women in rural and urban settings, including numerous self-identified victims and survivors of conjugal abuse.

eventually used to develop the current intervention with further input from the main collaborating organization.

3.2   *Program Overview and Ethical Process*

The program was delivered in collaboration with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC),[3] the development wing of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The collaboration with EOTC DICAC was sought in order to avoid duplicating the work of other Church-led programs with clergy and to ensure that the Church remained involved during all stages of the intervention, providing access to theological expertise and facilitating trust-building with the clergy. It would also ensure that Church-related institutions would directly benefit by having real-time access to the learnings and outputs of the intervention. The program lead within EOTC DICAC was the Head of Health and Social Affairs, Mr Bentamlak Gelaw, who worked under the egis of the Commissioner, Mr Yilikal Shiferaw. The program focal point and coordinator working directly with Dr. Romina Istratii was Church Teacher Mr Aklil Damtew. The program had the blessing of Abune Samuel, Archbishop of EOTC DICAC. The development of the intervention was also supported with expertise by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA), an organization that has been at the forefront of advocating for domestic-violence-related legislation in the country.

In total, seven workshops took place between May and October 2021 in the city of Debre Birhan in Amhara regional state. Participants were recruited with the support of the local EOTC DICAC office in Debre Birhan from surrounding rural areas with easy access to the city premises. The program design and implementation team, comprised of Dr. Romina Istratii, Church Teacher Mr Aklil Damtew, and numerous other team members at EOTC DICAC, in the Addis Ababa and the Debre Birhan offices, prepared an expression of interest form that clergy could fill in when they visited the local diocese office in town (e.g., for their monthly salary). Each workshop was delivered over two half-days to avoid tiring and overwhelming the participants and to ensure that they would still have time to serve their communities. The workshops

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3   The intervention was initially planned to take place in the Tigray region, the same area where the research had taken place. This was not possible due to the war that broke out in Tigray in November 2020. After a thorough assessment of the situation, it was decided to move the intervention to the Amhara region, home to a large Ethiopian Orthodox population, anticipating that despite a distinct cultural context, the importance and influence of religious parameters and clergy in marriage and the experience of domestic violence would be similar. Consideration was given to adapting the content to the local cultural context, incorporating mechanisms in the workshop design and delivery to achieve this adaptation over time.

were held in Amharic and were delivered by Dr. Romina Istratii and two independent Ethiopian trainers, Mr. Henok Hailu, a trained psychologist with an Ethiopian Orthodox theological background, and Ms. Bezaweet Birhanu, a legal expert affiliated with EWLA. The delivery of the pilot series was followed by a series of "refresher" training sessions around 6-10 months after the original training (March–April 2022), which were also used as a platform to obtain the participants' feedback many months after their original participation in the training. The series concluded with an interfaith meeting in August 2022 that brought together local government bodies and religious leaders to explore the relevance of the program to other faith communities in the vicinity and to assess pathways to sustainability.

A full ethics assessment was completed at SOAS University of London prior to the start of the project (approval code: 292-P193160/REP1022) and follow-up on ethical and risk mitigation consultations were held with EOTC DICAC to ensure the safe and effective implementation of the workshop series. Regarding participation in the workshop series, emphasis was placed on designing the program in such a manner that clergy were voluntarily recruited. Additionally, participants' consent was obtained in local languages, using a culturally adapted template provided by SOAS University of London. Participants were presented with the terms of the consent form by the trainers in Amharic before the start of each workshop and were then handed the consent form in written Amharic to review and sign. Sufficient time was given to explain any terms in the consent form that participants didn't know or were unsure about.

3.3   *Training Content and Delivery*

The workshops were comprised of three units, which were organized thematically to develop the participants' awareness, skills, and knowledge for better responding to domestic violence in their communities. The first unit presented important findings from the ethnographic research that had been conducted by Dr. Romina Istratii to help the participants understand the interplay of religious and cultural discourses and their own role in the community and responses to domestic violence. The second unit presented the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church on gender relations, marriage, and domestic violence to enable the clergy to differentiate between theological teaching and folklore norms perceived as religious and to foster their confidence to distance themselves from norms and practices without feeling that they were deviating from the religious tradition, a major concern among Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. The training integrated relevant homilies by St. John Chrysostom, a highly venerated fourth-century saint locally known as *Qidus Yohannes Afework*, which were translated directly from ancient Greek,

the language spoken by the saint, and through the medium of Ge'ez, the ecclesiastical language of the EOTC, into contemporary Tigrigna and Amharic. This endeavor not only provided useful theological resources but strengthened the credibility of the project in the eyes of the clergy by demonstrating a commitment to their authentic faith. The third unit provided information on the legal framework of domestic violence in the country, available resources for domestic violence victims and survivors, and safeguarding advice centered on consent and confidentiality.

TABLE 1   Training content

Unit	Content summary
Unit 1: Understanding the lived experiences of domestic violence in the countryside and the role of the clergy in the continuation and deterrence of the problem	Understandings of domestic violence
	Conjugal abuse explanations and causes
	The role of faith in marriage
	Local beliefs about *bahri* (human personality)
	The role of the clergy in the local society
	The clergy's mediation practices in marriage
Unit 2.1: Theological training on Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church teachings on marriage, divorce, and domestic violence	The historical development of the Orthodox faith
	The meaning of the Orthodox faith
	EOTC teachings on man–woman relations
	EOTC baptismal differences and their theological justification
	EOTC teachings on Holy Matrimony, including the aims of marriage, age of marriage, "being one" in marriage, gender roles and divisions of labor, male headship, domestic violence, and sexual relations
Unit 2.2: The Teachings of St. John Chrysostom on Gender Relations, Marriage, and Domestic Violence	On man and woman being created alike
	On the aim of marriage
	On marriage as another way to salvation
	Against family interference
	What "to submit" really means
	What male headship really means
	On spousal abuse
	When separation is advised

Unit	Content summary
Unit 2.3: What Makes a Good Teacher: Learning from St. John Chrysostom	Orthodox marriage and how to teach about it Listening attentively and responding sensitively Being a good example in their own married lives Understanding their limitations and working with others
Unit 3: Legal and safeguarding training to support domestic violence victims and perpetrators appropriately	Legal framework on domestic violence in Ethiopia Domestic violence referral services to be aware of How to support domestic violence victims Safety risks for victims and safeguarding protocols Understanding the psychology of perpetrators and victims and survivors How to mediate conjugal abuse situations Concrete steps to take when a victim reports intimate partner violence Concrete steps to approach a perpetrator

In terms of format, the presentations were intercut by group discussions and pair and group activities for the participants to learn in real time and to share experiences. The workshops also served further research purposes by collecting feedback from the participants to enhance the workshop delivery during the pilot phase.

The refresher training sessions were an abbreviated version of the pilot workshops and focused on the main points from all three units, prioritizing the theological component and the Church's teachings on gender relations, marriage, and domestic violence, and appropriate pastoral approaches for supporting domestic violence victims. These stressed the importance of asking appropriate and nonjudgmental questions to understand the conditions of women who approached clergy for advice, respecting confidentiality, and asking for consent before taking any action. The refresher training sessions were followed by a focus group discussion with the participants on the program's outcomes and its future.

During the workshops, the trainers always proceeded with humility and understanding and avoided criticizing the clergy for any lack of knowledge or complicity in blurring religious teachings and cultural norms. The trainers, rather, carefully demonstrated these shortfalls through case studies and testimonials from the ground, as well as scenario exercises. Still, the trainers were very outspoken and confident in communicating the Orthodox theology on gender relations and marriage based on the concepts of oneness and sacrificial love, unequivocally addressing incorrect or incomplete understandings such as around male "headship" and wife "submission" that emerged in community research and during workshop discussions.

3.4 *Participants*

In total, 155 participants took part in the training, and were selected based on the expressions of interest that they had completed voluntarily. Inter alia, the forms asked interested clergy to identify their years of training, experience, previous exposure to GBV training, and number of spiritual children they advised. Among the participants, the majority were priests and deacons, and a few were theology graduates and Church teachers. It was decided by the program team to intentionally recruit clergy with many spiritual children to increase the prospective impact of the intervention.

In terms of previous training, most of the participants had training in liturgical songs and prayers, reporting limited exposure to theological and exegetical training. Only in two cases was training in theological commentary achieved in the higher levels of traditional Church education mentioned as part of the participants' background. It is notable that many stated they had received other gender-related training through either the Church or secular providers.

TABLE 2 Participant profiles

Workshop no.	Age (average)	Age (range)	Years in service (average)	Years in service (range)	No. of spiritual children (average)	No. of spiritual children (range)
2	44.3	35–65	25.5	13–40	67	3–200
3	46.8	23–66	28.5	7–50	103.8	8–250
4	43.3	28–65	21	3–42	14.6	0–84
5	47.7	32–67	27.2	9–45	41.7	12–200
6	45.5	35–65	23.8	3–45	125.8	5–250
7	44.75	30–55	23.7	5–40	144.5	6–300

3.5   *Program Recruitment and Assessment Methodology*

The workshops integrated a pre-workshop information sheet and a post-workshop assessment questionnaire that participants were asked to complete before and after the workshop. Additionally, direct verbal feedback was collected in group discussions after the refresher training sessions. Several limitations could be noted in the intervention's recruitment and assessment method.

The recruitment forms that participants filled in were developed in an effort to depart from the standard practice of recruiting participants through local administrators, which has often been forced and top-down. We instead sought to attract clergy who understood the aims of the workshops and had an interest in the topic of domestic violence, anticipating that they would benefit more from its content. Hence, it is not unlikely that clergy with very conservative or unhelpful views about gender relations, marriage, or the religious tradition – who should be prioritized in such interventions – did not come forward. Still, the rather large sample and diversity of age, education, and theological views represented in the pilot suggests that if such a bias existed, it was rather small. Additionally, the first author's anthropological research engaging clergy and additional discussions with the delivery partner, EOTC DICAC, suggested that most clergy were generally open to responding to domestic violence, even if some may have lacked awareness about the extent of the problem in the community.

Moreover, as was noted, within the traditional Church education system, significant portions of the clergy's training have been based on oral learning and memorization. The implication here is that a written evaluation format might not be the most appropriate with rural clergy. Akin to this challenge, a few participants chose not to answer all the questions asked in the form, and some gave ambiguous, incomplete, or unclear responses. Reasons could have been: a lack of time to respond to all the questions, not understanding the question well, or not having an answer at the time of the workshop's completion and choosing to wait until later to assess the workshop's effectiveness. This recognition informed our subsequent decision to conduct oral discussions following the refresher training sessions. While the open format of these discussions may have hindered some from speaking their minds openly, this was probably minimal as the perspectives shared were diverse and even at odds with each other.

4   Results of the Program Assessment

4.1   *Team Observations*

The first unit of the training that discussed the complex relationship between religious tradition and people's cultural norms was especially welcomed by the participants, evidencing that many of the clergy in the room needed instruction in theological commentary. Such discussions succeeded in communicating to the participants the problem and, by the end of this unit, participants were eager to move to the theological component of the training. This was undoubtedly the most substantive part of the two-day training session and each time captivated the participants, who vigorously nodded when the trainers clarified theological teaching on misunderstood notions. Its effect became evident almost immediately in the group exercises, where participants started to apply the teaching material and repeated many of the explanations offered by the trainers in their own presentations. The third unit of the workshop that covered the legal framework on domestic violence in the country included 30–45 minutes of Q&A with a female legal expert recruited with EWLA's help that often achieved the highest interactivity on the part of the clergy participants, evidencing that many of the marriage-related problems they were called to mediate raised legal questions.

The exercises and group activities were effective in eliciting participants' thoughts and experiences, encouraging communication and real-time learning. Such exercises were intended to help the participants realize that they often faced similar issues and that they might identify better responses if they took the time to consult with each other. It is important to note that clergy generally felt reserved to share their thoughts or questions with their peers, which likely reflects religious and cultural standards of behavior and their own theological training. We noticed this reserve especially with clergy participants who were very young and new in their post, were less theologically educated, and not as confident as those with a Church education or modern theological education background, as well as older clergy who had been socialized and trained to be extremely reticent and humble, as is the norm in traditional Church education. Bringing together different generations of clergy seemed to have a positive effect, as younger participants proved more confident in speaking up and engaging the trainers in discussions, pushing the trainers to elaborate on crucial points, which likely proved beneficial also for the more reticent participants.

4.2   *Participants' Assessment of the Training Content*

In their feedback, participants mentioned that domestic abuse and marital problems were extensive in their communities and that they often felt that they needed to know more in order to respond effectively. They, thus, welcomed this type of training, as they felt that it was tailored to their needs and realities. Numerous comments suggested that unit 1, which provided an ethnographic perspective into the lived experiences of the community, echoed their own realities and experiences, confirming the accuracy of the research findings. Many participants spoke about the centrality and foundational role of marriage in society and noted that the project had understood this, providing an appropriate approach to responding to related problems. Hence, the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on marriage were arguably the most popular with the clergy. Time and again, participants stated that this Patristic knowledge prepared them to respond better to marital issues in their communities.

For others, the explanation of the meaning and the aims of marriage in the Orthodox faith were found especially useful, including the faith's comparison of the conjugal expectations to Christ's relationship to the Church. Many participants spoke about the worldly and non-spiritual way marriage was increasingly experienced and a lack of understanding in the community about the spiritual aims and benefits of marriage. They spoke about the tendency among believers to erroneously identify marriage with procreation, leading to many divorce cases where children were not born. They thought that the training they were given could help them to instill in the faith community a newly found commitment to address the challenges of married life in unity and spousal love.

Other participants noted the importance and usefulness of unit 3, which discussed the country's legal framework on domestic violence, and yet others appreciated the guidance offered on counseling and domestic violence services available for the clergy to signpost victims and survivors.

Regarding the method, numerous participants appreciated what they described as a bridging of a "modern" or "scientific" training method with Church theology and pastoral work. Numerous participants proposed that the content and format of the workshop could become a model to advance knowledge on the topic within the Church, comparing it positively to more traditional types of training that they had been previously exposed to. Other participants spoke about the usefulness of the training booklets, which had been handed to them at the start of each workshop to use as a permanent resource with their spiritual children. Invariably, participants agreed that the training should continue to be delivered in the same manner and, if possible, every month for the same clergy. It was proposed that the training should cover

more topics and be extended to other stakeholder groups and be streamlined in Church-related work.

4.3   *Effects on Participants*

All the participants who responded stated that they felt more prepared to discuss issues of marriage, conjugal cohabitation, and domestic violence with spiritual children. They also consistently reported that the workshops had changed and improved their responses to domestic violence, including how to respond to victims and perpetrators better, how to teach about marriage in reference to the Holy Bible, how to leverage on both a legal/scientific and a theological perspective, and strategies to resolve conflict and marital issues. Many admitted that while they had awareness and knowledge before the training, the workshop helped them to become more confident in teaching others and to identify concrete strategies to respond to issues faced by couples, as illustrated below:

> It has improved me. It has also given me a good knowledge and understanding. Violence that occurs between couples can be corrected and even prevented through counseling and the teachings of the Church. (P10, W5)

Many were subsequently more likely to acknowledge that the problem of domestic violence could not be resolved by them alone with spiritual mediation and to recognize the significant role of psychological parameters in marital issues and domestic violence as emphasized by the trainers during the workshops, as illustrated in the answer below:

> In order to prevent violence between couples, a person should give advice, if that fails to work, then we must notify the concerned body. (P6, W4)

Furthermore, participants felt that the workshop helped them to change their perception about their own role in addressing societal problems and to recognize better the importance of being a "good" example in their personal marriages. Some reported that they were more cognizant of the need to advise spiritual children carefully, taking the necessary time to help them to address marital problems and not rushing them into quick decisions. Numerous participants articulated an increased empathy and understanding of themselves and others, as in the case of the participant below:

It has also helped me become a forgiving person. Before the training, I used to say, "someone said this [to] me … I am mad at this person … why would someone think like this?" and [I would] become sad. I have learned that every person has their own shortcomings, that we all need to put our trust in God and that we can always solve things through time. I do not only need to understand my own problems, but the problems that others are experiencing as well. I have learned to think that people may be under the influence of their environment, family, neighbors, and such. (P1, RT2)

The feedback collected during the refresher training suggested long-term effects, such as changes in some of the participants' personal understanding and behavior. A participant stated, for example, that the workshop enhanced their desire to be a better example in their own married life. Others expressed a renewed sense of duty to teach against domestic violence for fear of not meeting the expectations of their priesthood in the eyes of God.

The refresher workshops, more concretely, evidenced areas in which participants had integrated the theological training to respond to harmful norms and attitudes in the community. One example regarded the holiness of marriage without children, which the trainers had emphasized through the teachings of St. John Chrysostom and the Church. Participants appeared to have integrated these teachings into their own explanations to the faith community, suggesting that the training content had been effectively put to use in some cases.

Nonetheless, the assessment questionnaires and the discussion groups suggested that certain participants may have misunderstood important points made in the workshop, which reinforced the need to repeat the training and to ensure that such misunderstandings were properly addressed. Other comments showed that a few participants continued to think around certain issues in a more conservative or acculturated manner. For example, on the issue of separation (spouses living separately if abuse occurs, but without divorcing), some clergy were still unable to envision situations where a separation might be acceptable.

5   Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research

The assessment results reinforce previous study findings that clergy training tends to be more effective when it is repeated and when participants are provided with support over a longer period (Le Roux et al. 2016; Istratii and Ali 2023). They also confirm the need to engage clergy in difficult conversations

in a culturally appropriate manner. The assessment results from this intervention showed that the theological orientation of the training generated confidence in the participants to teach against domestic violence in the communities and even inspired several participants to reconsider their own behavior in their own married lives and spiritual mediation. This impact was not possible to measure as the evaluation approach was not designed to capture the training's effects on clergy's spouses and their spiritual children.

One of the few studies available that more robustly assessed the impact of a clergy-centered intervention in comparison to a control group was the evaluation of the Korean Clergy for Healthy Families program presented in Choi et al. (2019). The authors conducted a randomized controlled trial to assess the effects of a training module delivered to Korean American faith leaders in a southeastern state of the USA (with n=27 being randomized to the intervention group and n=28 to the control group), showing that the intervention group significantly improved their knowledge of resources and enhanced attitudes against intimate partner violence at the three-month follow-up.

The impact on the wider communities served by clergy is more difficult to assess, which is generally a gap in the literature on faith-sensitive interventions. Moreover, in most studies, the focus is placed on what worked and less so on the challenges or limitations faced, which we have tried to incorporate in this paper. Additionally, much of the available evidence is qualitative, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings, although important exceptions do exist. Boyer et al. (2022) were able to demonstrate by implementing a large randomized controlled trial that religious leaders in western Uganda could motivate men to share power with their spouses and thereby reduce violence through pre-marital counseling courses. The results showed that the program shifted power from men to women and reduced intimate partner violence, comparable with more intensive secular programs. In another study, Le Roux et al. (2020) presented an evaluation of a three-year intervention that addressed violence against women and girls and sexual violence in DRC by means of engaging with communities of faith and their leaders. At both baseline and end line, data were collected from male and female members of randomly selected households in 15 villages. The study showed significantly more equitable gender attitudes and less tolerance for violence against women and girls at the end line, while the positive effects of engaging clergy in DRC were not limited to those actively engaged within faith communities. A third study evaluated a program implemented in Liberia that trained Christian and Muslim faith leaders to challenge harmful faith and customary beliefs and attitudes in the community by means of a GBV prevention and response toolkit that reportedly included a theological framework (Le Roux and Pertek 2023). The data

collected on the usage of the GBV toolkit suggested that the effectiveness could be improved, although the specific impact of integrating a theological framework was not directly assessed.

As discussed in the literature review section, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific approaches and materials used to engage faith leaders, even though this seems crucial for achieving effective engagement with clergy, and by extension the faith communities they serve. Our argument, informed by the pilot presented in this paper, is that the more relevant the theological content is to the everyday conditions and needs of faith leaders, the more effective the training is likely to be. Moreover, our experience suggests that accurate theological teaching that is culturally appropriate can reduce the risk of resistance or mistrust among clergy. In the current project, we specifically placed an emphasis on the importance of religious beliefs, experiences, and mediation in domestic violence experiences and the theological gaps of the clergy that were identified in prior research. Not surprisingly, the participants identified the theological unit as the most helpful for them, granting them the theological and exegetical material and the needed confidence to teach their communities. It would be desirable in the future to replicate the approach in a controlled environment to establish the impact of each training unit and the theological component more robustly, and to compare the outcomes when a more secular approach is taken.

Another important factor that has received hardly any attention in the literature is the effect of the identity and positionality of the trainers in the delivery of clergy-centered programs in the cross-cultural context. In the current intervention, the trainers were practicing Orthodox Christians (albeit from different historical Churches), and they all had an understanding of local life either as indigenous members of the communities engaged, or as researchers with long-term research experience and deep bonds to the faith community. This seemed to make their acceptance easier among the clergy, while the knowledge of Orthodox theology by Dr. Romina Istratii and Mr Henok Hailu made the trainers credible in the eyes of the clergy, which earned them respect. During the workshops, the trainers always proceeded with humility and never presented themselves as "experts," but rather as students of theology and as professional researchers whose motivation was to be of help to the clergy through research. Based on such observations, and our own experience building trust with the collaborating organization and the clergy, we propose that the identity and personal behavior of the facilitators may be an equally important factor for determining how an intervention with clergy will be received. In a postcolonial, decolonial or secular development context, faith communities and clergy may be especially cautious of trainers or groups that are seen as "external" to their community, cultural context, or religious traditions. Hence,

ensuring that the team included respected indigenous theologians and practitioners, including religious teachers in the collaborating organization, and that external team members were humble in their approach and grounded in local realities became essential. Future studies should develop evaluation mechanisms that can account for the trainers' identity and their interactions with the participants in such interventions.

At the larger scale, the project seemed to overcome actual and perceived secular and religious divides that are documented to create barriers for productive collaboration. Project dldl/ድልድል specifically set out to integrate secular and religious conceptual frameworks into the analysis of domestic abuse and to work with theology as understood and experienced in the local cultural and ecclesiastical context. As a research and innovation project it was able to take a flexible, multidisciplinary, theologically and culturally informed approach, which may not be easily transferable to the international development sector as a whole, which is known to be characterized by rigid donor environments, relatively short timelines for project implementation, and highly bureaucratic organizational cultures. More reflection must be given to the long-term nature of faith-sensitive interventions on domestic violence engaging clergy and communities, but especially to the need for sufficient contextualization and knowledge of local religious traditions to achieve trust-building. This should raise questions about who is most appropriate to deliver such interventions, and seems to point to the importance of collaboration and genuine co-creation between specialists in Western societies (who often have access to more funding for designing such programs and may have partial expertise) and indigenous organizations that have the established credibility, trust, contextual knowledge and religious expertise to review and refine such programs and to introduce and deliver the training to clergy in their own communities.

Acknowledgements

Research Ethics

A full ethics assessment was completed at SOAS University of London prior to the start of the project (approval code: 292-P193160/REP1022) and follow up ethical and risk mitigation consultations were held with EOTC DICAC to ensure the safe and effective implementation of the workshop series. Regarding participation in the workshop series, emphasis was placed on designing the program in such a manner so that clergy were voluntarily recruited. Additionally, participants' consent was obtained in local languages, using a culturally adapted template provided by SOAS University of London.

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Book Review

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Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa
and Beyond, edited by Philipp Öhlmann and Juliane Stork. Geneva: Globethics,
2024. Pp. 334. Paperback: $41.85, ISBN 978-2-88931-549-9,
Open Access: https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/4306831

This book seeks to produce new knowledge on the role played by religious
communities in improving ecological sustainability in Southern Africa. This
subject has already been explored in recent times, but overall it remains rel-
evant, particularly in relation to the urgency of addressing the three most
relevant United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 11 "Sus-
tainable Cities and Communities," SDG 13 "Climate Action," and SDG 15 "Life on
Land." This book highlights very well the important role of religious commu-
nities in the attainment of these goals. As this book demonstrates, the major
contribution that religious communities can make in matters of ecological
sustainability is focused on three different areas: ecological theologies, lived
religions, and everyday activities. The book is a valuable resource not only for
scholars but also for practitioners of faith in religious communities; indeed,
the book has a practical component as it offers some policy recommendations
to governmental and intergovernmental actors, religious communities, and
faith-based organizations, encouraging them to further engage with ecologi-
cally sustainable solutions in Southern Africa. This is particularly important in
view of the massive ecological challenges facing Africa, such as global warming
and climate change, with the resultant life-threatening disasters that we wit-
ness every day. These include increased flooding and raging fires in different
regions, the destruction of marine life not only through overfishing but also
due to plastic and other chemical forms of pollution, and the problem of toxic
air pollution in many major cities.

The book reminds us that religious communities are an important sector
of society that can serve as a basis through which policies on ecological sus-
tainability can be implemented. In addition, religious groups are comprised
of people of different cultures, ages, and social backgrounds, which alone pro-
vides different perspectives on the solutions to ecological challenges. Indeed,
religious groups often play an active role in advocating for ecological inter-
ventions in Southern Africa and in explaining to the broader society the chal-
lenges posed by environmental changes. One of the strengths of religious
communities is their capacity to frame and conceptualize those environmental

challenges from within, with images, idioms, and examples familiar to local populations. The book does a great job of displaying how religious communities are relevant in fostering change on ecological sustainability on the ground. Therefore, by contextualizing ecological sustainability within religious spaces, this book offers an opportunity for the understanding of ecological challenges from the grassroots level. In addition, the proposed solutions, such as ecological theologies, ecological activities, and lived religions, offered in this book are all implementable at the grassroots level.

The book deals with different religious groups and contexts such as mainline Christianity; African Independent Churches (AICs), with participation from one of the largest AIC churches, the Zion Christian Church; Pentecostal and charismatic churches; and leaders from traditional African religions, Bahai, Islam, and Buddhism. The book is based on bottom-up religious experiences from vulnerable communities in Southern Africa living in townships, such as Thembisa. One of the chapters identifies very clearly the ecological challenges faced by the population living in these particular contexts:

> We are surrounded by a lot of informal businesses. Therefore, half the time, we breathe polluted air resulting from fires and smoke, and this may lead to respiratory illnesses since we are surrounded by them. That is one of the problems we are having. We breathe polluted air! And then the other one is contaminated water. Most of the water around us is not hygienic. Major health problems result from streams that are not clean. Environmental pollution is the major problem we have in my area. (p. 34)

Ecological challenges such as these are common in almost all Southern African townships, such as Alexandra, Diepsloot, Soweto, Mamelodi, Soshanguve, and Atteridgeville. Therefore, the book should be applauded not only for identifying real challenges faced by local communities on matters of ecological sustainability in Thembisa but also for providing solutions and recommendations that are applicable elsewhere in Southern Africa. Toward the end, the book also provides clear and practical solutions such as "replacing disposable items with reusables, reducing paper waste, conserving water, using solar power for electricity, buying locally sourced goods, implementing recycling systems and many others" (p. 264). These practical steps can be taken by everyone in the reality of the everyday, from governmental and nongovernmental organizations to practitioners of faith and believers in religious communities at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, the book successfully points out the particular contributions that different faith traditions can offer, such as "ecotheology" in the Christian

tradition that "encourages Christians to believe that God holds his beloved creation still in his hands" (p. 126). As a result, Christians in Southern Africa and elsewhere in the world "have good reasons not to give up hope to find solutions for an effective sustainability transition of the global society" (p. 126). Equally, the book sheds light on the role that indigenous communities play in providing solutions to ecological challenges through religious teachings and norms. On a less positive note, perhaps the volume has been a bit too ambitious in claiming to represent all the religious communities in Southern Africa. Although the major religious expressions have been represented in this work, in my view, it would have been better to speak of "selected religious communities" in the region, as the scope of analysis does not fully cover the large variety of religious communities present in this part of the continent. But beyond that, the book remains an important tool in the hands of not only scholars or policymakers but also ordinary people in local communities.

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