

Research in Partnership with Faith-Based NGOs: A Symposium

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and Tony Rinaudo; Kenneth L. Leonard;
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Introduction: Three Papers on Research in Partnership with Faith-Based NGOs

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The symposium brought together three very different papers in terms of objectives, but with similar focus on NGOs. Highlighting models of effective partnerships between economists and NGOs, and discussing the potential contribution of collaborative applied economic research, are some of the main aims of this symposium.

These aims are important given the increase in the number of faith-based NGOs over the last few years and also the expanding role of these organizations in international peace-building, agricultural, and international development. Unfortunately, research on faith-based NGOs' impact in developing countries, the replicability of their successes, and loopholes in design are not very common. This further emphasizes the need for more economic research with similar goals and focus as those of this symposium. This kind of research is especially relevant for Christian economists who have both an academic and faith-based interest in the activities of these organizations.

The first paper in this symposium, Brown et al., discusses the collaborative relationship between World Vision and research institutions. Based on a recent comprehensive synthesis (the Mortons Report), the authors outline strategic options and recommendations for organizations (either government or NGOs) working or planning against the current paradigm/approaches used to meet the needs of pastoralists, and suggest

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12 FAITH & ECONOMICS

other alternatives. An important contribution of this paper is the review of the problems and limitations of the efforts of NGOs working with pastoralists in the horn of Africa, and lessons learned from research on pastoralism.

This part of the paper is educative both for academics and organizations working with pastoralist and other agricultural communities in developing countries. The lessons learned especially provide relevant information for academic researchers interested in this kind of partnership and raise questions that can spur further research.

There are several potential research questions that emerge from Brown et al. First, what are the potential interventions to address overgrazing and overstocking? This is an important question given that both overgrazing and overstocking are two big problems for pastoralists (in addition to aridity). Moreover, there is limited research on the extent, implications, and impact of these problems in the Horn of Africa, as well as possible strategic solutions. Another problem these pastoralists face, also with devastating effect in this region, but which may not get as much attention as aridity, is pests. More research on the economic impact of insects like tsetse, and what policies and strategic options can be put in place to attenuate the effects of these pests on the livelihood of pastoralists, is needed.

Leonard's article provides evidence that lessons learned from faith-based NGOs can be reproduced. The author draws evidence from a survey of health care professionals in Tanzania. One of the contributions of this paper is the innovative use of the Hawthorne effect in identification. The author finds that the practice quality of doctors in NGOs is significantly higher than in the public service, though distribution of ability is similar for the two organization types. He also finds that the average health care professional is not altruistic, but since NGOs are designed to encourage and reward effort, they succeed more with respect to practice quality. In addition he finds that changes in the organizational structure of facilities can have a large impact on the quality of care provided. The possible implications of these findings are that results of NGOs could be replicated in the public sector of the health profession, if similar modes of operation are adopted.

Leonard finds that the distribution of ability of health professionals across NGOs and public health centers are similar. He measures ability by training and education. A potentially interesting question for future research is if experience is distributed similarly across health organizations, and to what extent it affects ability. Another question that emerges from this paper is whether the main results hold only for physician assistants

and nurses, or whether they could be extended to medical doctors also. Both these questions could be interesting areas of future research with practical implications. Moreover, answers to both these questions may provide further support to the main inferences from this paper.

In McNamara et al., the theological underpinning for partnerships between academics and Christian nongovernmental organizations is highlighted. The authors present the case for research partnerships between Christian NGOs and academics. In addition, an overview of an ongoing partnership between a Christian NGO and academics is presented. The authors highlight the goals, strategy, approach, and road blocks in this ongoing process. In addition, some of the practical issues that arise in such partnerships, that both parties need to be aware of, are highlighted. This information is useful because opportunities arise for collaborations between NGOs and researchers, especially for those working in the field of agriculture and development. However, without foreknowledge of issues that may arise, such collaborations might end up without the output desired by either or both parties. Also in this paper, McNamara et al. discuss an ongoing collaborative project in India. The goal of the project is to investigate the links between food insecurity and health outcomes for HIV and AIDS patients. The authors discuss the different ways food insecurity is measured, and present preliminary findings. The India research looks promising from a policy and an academic perspective. However, as with any empirical paper, successful data collection and a clear identification strategy are important to answer the questions of interest and provide policy prescription.

From the three papers, certain themes emerge which I believe can stimulate further research and discussion. Faith-based NGOs may sometimes need to move beyond their present approaches to be more effective in attenuating poverty and ensuring sustainability. Second, it may be possible to replicate the success of faith-based NGOs in the public health sector. Lastly, research partnership between academics and researchers in faith-based NGOs could be rewarding but several roadblocks exist that both parties need to be aware of before embarking on such projects.

Given the results from these papers and the need for more research on this subject, the following research questions come to mind:

1. What is the return to formal education among pastoralists in Africa?
Can it be easily estimated and what are potentially confounding factors in deriving a consistent estimate?
2. Can the impact of market access (road construction) on livelihood among pastoralists in Africa be estimated?

14 FAITH & ECONOMICS

3. Do teachers in faith-based schools perform better than their peers in public sectors? If so, can teacher performance in faith-based school be replicated in the public sector?
4. Are faith-based organizations more effective in health service provision than in education provision in rural economies?
5. When should partnerships between faith-based NGOs and academic researchers be discouraged?
6. Are partnerships between academics and faith-based NGOs plagued with different roadblocks than partnerships with non-faith-based NGOs?

Some of the above questions are more relevant for academic research and discussion, others for policy makers and NGOs. However, these question are important and yet to be answered. ■