

Reformulating Faith, Development and Public Action in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Key research questions, hypotheses and methods

The proposal takes forward a number of themes analysed in my PhD research. In South Africa, African Independent Churches (AICs) represent around the 40 percent of the Black population, most of whom are very poor. In the past, work on AICs in South Africa has been mainly anthropological or theological. I embed detailed narratives of religious life in township AICs within the broader dynamics of political transition in the post-Apartheid era, the subsequent reshaping of civil society and its relationship to the (new) state. My work describes several AICs in Soweto, and places them within the broader contexts and concerns of politics, economic realities, the search for new identities in post-Apartheid South Africa, and above all the need for tangible development. The AICs provide networks of solidarity in the fight for social rights such as education, health, knowledge on HIV, economic support and housing, security and mutual support.

During the latter part of the fellowship I will conduct a small amount of exploratory comparative research with Muslim communities and their relationship to broader processes of development in South Africa with a view to developing further research. This further step would allow multi-faith comparative analyses of the relationship between faith organisations, public action and politics.

Relation to the programme

The postdoctoral project will build on and help to disseminate my doctoral research, which examined socio-political and economic factors in the growth of Non Western Christianity in South Africa after the end of Apartheid.

Relevance of this research to user groups

The project will have a wide range of potential beneficiaries, academic, policymakers, faith groups and the communities I worked with, to name but a few. The Department for International Development is increasingly recognising the role of faith communities as drivers of, and sometimes resistance to, development. African Independent Church members and leaders in Soweto and beyond are other obvious beneficiaries who have expressed a strong interest in the conclusion of my research. Local religious NGOs, political NGOs, community-based organisations and civic associations are other likely beneficiaries whom I have particularly strong ongoing links with.

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