




Faith as an asset in a community development project: The case of Madagascar



Authors:

Zo R. Rakotoarison¹ 
Stephanie Dietrich^{2,3} 
Heikki Hiilamo^{2,4,5} 

Affiliations:

¹Centre of Mission and Global Studies, Faculty of Theology, VID Specialized University, Stavanger, Norway

²Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway

³Centre of Mission and Global Studies, VID Specialized University, Stavanger, Norway

⁴Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

⁵National Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland

Corresponding author:

Heikki Hiilamo,
heikki.hiilamo@vid.no

Dates:

Received: 26 Jan. 2021

Accepted: 28 May 2021

Published: 06 Sept. 2021

How to cite this article:

Rakotoarison, Z.R., Dietrich, S. & Hiilamo, H., 2021, 'Faith as an asset in a community development project: The case of Madagascar', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6470. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6470>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Contributing to the emerging religion and development literature, this study sets out to analyse the role of faith in the context of a particular development approach, 'Use Your Talents' (UYT) at the Malagasy Lutheran Church in Madagascar. By analysing the views of lay Christian informants with regard to their involvement in the UYT project, the study asked *what is the role of faith as an intangible asset in an asset-based community development project?* The qualitative data were collected through participant observations and interviews conducted in four congregations across Madagascar in 2018. The results showed that church teachings and biblical stories created a normativity of good and desirable behaviour in the context of the asset-based community development project. Faith may constitute an asset when it promoted the individual's capacity to achieve positive economic and social change.

Contribution: This research broadened the understanding of religion in the context of asset-based community development projects. The results showed that the participants attributed their engagement in community development to their religious calling. The belief in the existence of a higher power not only seemed to influence individuals to act but also enabled them to feel empowered and have something to contribute. As a contribution to sociology of religion, this study showed that community development can be part of Christians' and congregational holistic activities that depended on local knowledge and resources. Faith not only motivated individuals to engage in community development, but also it seemed to represent the essence of their engagement.

Keywords: emerging; literature; faith; asset; individuals; social change.

Introduction

After decades of ignorance, international development agencies have come to embrace faith-based organisations (FBOs) as important actors in poverty alleviation. The development characterised by Tomalin (2018) as a 'turn to religion' highlights the fact that despite modernisation and secularisation, religious values and faith actors are important determinants in the drive to reduce poverty and in the structures and practices that underpin it. The first two United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address the need to end absolute poverty and hunger in the world (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). The goals concern especially countries in the Global South that suffer from an underdeveloped state and municipal structures. In these countries, the public authorities lack the capacity and resources to address local needs to meet with the UN goals. This is why community-led initiatives come to the fore. Churches, religious communities, and FBOs have for a long time been engaged in community development ministries and activities side by side with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and residents' communities (Swart & Nell 2016). The distinctive feature of FBO's community development actions relates to the role of religion and faith as a motivation and a goal for actions (Clarke 2013; Haugen 2019). Whilst secular organisations such as UN agencies or the Red Cross tend to emphasise neutrality and reject any affiliation with religions, FBOs underscore the role of religion and faith in community development actions. However, the provision of livelihood and the promotion of physical welfare are also core aspects of the churches' and FBO's existence in their communities. Community development projects can be used for explicit evangelisation, but the role of religion can also be internalised and subtle.

This study sets out to analyse the role of faith in the context of a particular asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, 'Use Your Talents (UYT)' at the Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM) in Madagascar. This study uses qualitative data from participant observations and interviews conducted in four congregations across Madagascar in 2018. By analysing the meanings underlying that Christian informants attach to their involvement in UYT, this study asks what the role of faith as an intangible asset in an ABCD project is. The structure of the article is as follows:

Firstly, following this introduction, we will outline the conceptual framework for the study including discussion on ABCD and the concepts of religion, faith and spirituality. Secondly, we will present the research methods and design. We will then present and discuss the findings, which bring us to the discussion and conclusion.

Recent years have witnessed growing scholarly interest in religion and development (Swart & Nell 2016). The research has demonstrated the fact that traditional Christian mission churches, despite the ambiguous legacy of colonising evangelisation, have long been active in community development to improve people's lives (eds. Shanguhya & Falola 2018). That is the case especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which was almost completely colonised by European countries. More recently, the African-Initiated Churches (AICs), which are without the burden of colonialism, have become increasingly active in community development (Öhlmann, Frost & Gräb 2016).

Jones and Juul Petersen (2011) criticised the religion and development literature for ignoring the role of faith, for being instrumental in its approach, for having a narrow focus on FBO and for being normative. In a Pacific island context, Clarke (2013) showed that NGOs, government departments and donors in Vanuatu acknowledge the role of Christian churches in actively working to reduce poverty. Whilst recognising the potentially negative consequences of religion in development (e.g. gender inequity, the protection of vested interests by those in authority and extremism in international politics), the study purposely adopted an appreciative view of religion in development. The churches in Vanuatu do not explicitly distinguish between spiritual activities and community; they instead emphasise the holistic Christian ministry. This has not prevented a number of international and national NGOs from seeking to partner with churches to assist them in community development projects. Amongst many examples, one can mention the Presbyterian church addressing climate change issues in collaboration with an Australian-based NGO and the local government (Clarke 2013:348).

Bornstein (2003) ethnographically studied the role of faith in World Vision's national office in Harare, Zimbabwe, and the work of this NGO in the field. For Harare staff members, faith was primarily a disciplinary force, whilst in the local communities, faith served to create social bonds. According to Bornstein, involvement in development shapes the religiosity of staff, promoting distinct 'theologies of development'. Candland (2000) had studied circumstances under which faith can serve as the basis of social capital formation in the context of religious association in Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Thailand. To what extent faith is a force for good is not an easy question to answer, as faith can either connect or divide people (Dinham et al. 2006). For example, in a classical study of social capital formation, Putnam suggested that church attendance was inversely related to participation in civic associations in Southern Italy (Putnam 2000). Candland (2000) observed the fact that social

science literature is characterised by an aversion to treating religion as the basis for progressive social solidarity and that the countries where he studied militant religious ideologies have promoted cruel acts of violence against religious minority communities and atheists. However, Candland concluded that faith, whether it comes from Islam or Buddhist thought, could be understood as a form of social capital because a community of believers do not need to have repeated face-to-face interactions to place trust in one another: 'a shared faith may allow believers to trust in each other' (2000:370). The results from the four associations Candland studied showed that the followers of each association went beyond their formal responsibilities as members of common associations.

This study contributes to the religion and development literature through a local-level analysis. The FLM, a traditional Protestant mission church originating from mission activities by Norwegian and North American Lutheran churches in the late 1800s, launched in 2008 a UYT project to tackle the deplorable poverty (Rakotoarison et al. 2019). Malagasy Lutheran Church comprises 1800 Lutheran congregations in central and southern Madagascar FLM. With around 3 million baptised members, FLM is the third largest church in Madagascar and is one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches in the world. Aligning with ABCD, the UYT project was built upon the idea of intensifying work performed locally, without external involvement from traditional development projects and funding. Unlike some externally funded church projects, UYT, with a 'theology of development' based on biblical narratives, put Christian faith at the centre of its actions (Haus 2017).

Conceptual framework

The concept of ABCD originates from the United States, where Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) studied successful community-building initiatives in vulnerable neighbourhoods across the United States in the early 1990s. The core idea in ABCD is to mobilise and harness the local skills, resources and talents of individuals and communities to improve well-being. The local skills, resources and talents are called assets, which is a concept borrowed from economics, indicating an item with economic value. Although not explicitly mentioned, the ABCD approach aligns with the first two SDGs, where community-scale actions promoting new forms of social and economic interrelationship may help to eradicate poverty. They include sharing, commoning, communitarianism and gifting, where repair, upcycling and/or reuse of existing material goods can be used. The goal of zero hunger may be achieved through community-led initiatives for sustainable food production. These types of initiatives are often guided by principles of local provenance and by support and reinvigoration of local, regional, agricultural and culinary and/or economic traditions.

Within community development discourse, an asset, whether tangible or intangible, is a resource with value that an individual or community owns or controls for the benefit of

the community. Assets are conceptualised as building blocks to achieve a positive and sustainable change, to promote the general capacity of individuals to advance, to achieve economic, social, psychological and political goals and to provide security (Nam 2008). An asset comprises personal attributes, competence, skills, collective memories, social networks, materials and properties. Within the ABCD vocabulary, spirituality and faith practice are understood as intangible assets for community development (Haddad 2001; Nordstokke 2014).

Not all scholars (e.g. MacLeod & Emejulu 2014) have welcomed the ABCD approach. The approach has been criticised for its weak evidence base and a lack of theoretical depth and for overlooking the role of societal structures and institutions in enabling or hindering community development. Its critics describe ABCD as a capitulation to neoliberal values of individualisation and privatisation. However, Roy (2017) asserted that ABCD is not a new approach, but is instead a return to old ideas of recognising and appreciating the role of community that predates neoliberalism.

Traditionally, theologians have made a distinction between faith as a conviction and belief in certain doctrines and faith as confidence and trust in God. Religious sociologists have frequently emphasised the instrumental role of religion and the role of religion as an instrument in achieving and obtaining specific goals. Religious psychologists often stress the role of faith as a coping mechanism. All these approaches highlight aspects of human religiosity that are obvious in the encounter with persons of faith. According to Astley (2011:21), faith, religious or not, is understood as a process that gives coherence and direction in life. Faith is often multidimensional and institutionalised. It contains ideas, practices, organisations, experience aspects and more (Ter Haar 2011).

Rakodi (2012) identified three dimensions to understand the links between religion and development. Firstly, a personal dimension seeks to understand what religion means to individuals and how it informs their views, motivations and actions. Secondly, a social dimension is concerned with the ways in which religion interacts with social and political processes. Thirdly, an organisational dimension focuses on the nature, aims and activities of religious organisations. In this study, we are interested in the personal dimension. According to Rakodi (2012), the definitions of religion can be grouped into two. The substantive definitions concentrate on what religion is (particularly belief in a transcendental reality or spiritual being), whilst functional definitions are concerned with what religion does (Furseth & Repstad 2006:24–28). In the context of this study, whilst recognising the value of the first approach, we adhere to the latter approach, where we are interested in the role religion plays in the construction of people's worldviews, actions and social relationships within the UYT projects. Faith is understood as an intangible asset, which does not necessarily signify a positive valuation, as an asset can also have a negative value.

In our encounter with people involved in congregational community development projects, it became obvious that scientific theories developed in the scholarly framework of the Global North cannot embrace the variety of expressions of faith we encountered. Thus, the research revealed an obvious need for broader and contextually adapted theories to analyse our findings. Thus, our research needs to add two additional perceptions for further analysis of our findings.

Firstly, it is of utmost importance to apply an *African* contextual perspective on the role of religion. African faith and spirituality involve human values, attitudes, beliefs and practices:

Africans are notoriously religious. Wherever the African is, there is religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party, or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament.

This famous quote by the African theologian John Mbiti (1969) introduces the perspective on faith and religion that characterises the role that religion also plays in Malagasy society. Although Mbiti's quote is widely known, other African scholars have been critical towards his generalisation of African religiosity. Gyekye (1995, 1997) and Menkiti (1984) are two representatives of diverse perceptions in regard to African understandings of religion and the role that religion plays in the society. The question is not whether people are religious, the question is in what ways are faith and religion experienced and expressed by our informants and what role do they play in everyday life. The predominant role of faith and religion in the life and identity of the people and their perception of their life also permeate the members of FLM (Skjortnes 2014).

Although there is not one overarching 'African understanding' of faith and religion, scholars have emphasised some mainlines within African religiosity, which might also be helpful for our understanding of the Malagasy local context. African religious scholars have underlined that religion in Africa is a human–spirit relationship that guides all endeavours (Awuah-Nyamekye 2010). Correct rituals and consecrations often play a decisive role. In many African contexts, spirits are agents that purposefully intervene in a human's life and negatively or positively influence it. One would also find that faith and religion are life-encompassing and permeate individual, family and community life. In many African contexts where Madagascar is certainly not an exception, the departed and the living come together as the community of faithful and ancestors are also believed to continue to be present after people's death. Whilst Western theology often emphasises the individual's faith and beliefs, in many African contexts, the main emphasis is put on the faith of the community.

Religious and cultural demands are often interwoven. One might therefore prefer to talk about African spirituality than African religion and faith because the term spirituality is less

defined than faith and religion. Spirituality could be defined as the attitudes, beliefs and practices, which animate people's lives and help them reach out spiritual experiences. 'Spirituality' also includes the level of lived experience that means the attitudes and behaviours of human beings, which are typically influenced by their 'ultimate values' and therefore their 'spirituality'. Spirituality encompasses both the individual's faith and the communal level, referring to shared values, ideal, customs and traditions. In our context, the communal level applies to the family, to interest groups in the congregation, to the congregation, to the synod and the national church and to the local civil community and society in which the informants are part of.

At the academic level, 'spirituality' refers to an emerging scholarly discipline, which studies lived communal and individual experiences. Faith and religion are not clear-cut concepts but are instead fluid concepts that have an impact on all areas of the informant's life. We therefore found the 'lived religion' approach useful in our attempt to describe, understand and analyse the role of faith and religion in Use Your Talent practice. According to Ammermann (2013), both religion and spirituality are ways of expressing human connections to transcendence. Lived religion is a way to navigate amongst the expectations (Ammerman 2016) and fundamental issues of life (Ganzevoort & Roelad 2014); it is a mixture of beliefs, practices, relationships, experiences and commitments (McGuire 2008). It is an everyday practice of sacralisation (Ammerman 2016) that intermingles the boundaries between the sacred and the profane (McGuire 2008). Lived religion provides a way to make sense of one's life and to accomplish a desired end, a domain of life where sacred things are produced, encountered and shared (McGuire 2008). It links social life to spiritual life in which a practice is given religious and social significance. Religion existed in a particular time and in cultural settings (McGuire 2008). Both religion and people's understanding of religion undergo change. According to 'lived religion' theorists, social structures and different contexts result in varying practice of embodied religious action.

The UYT project starts with and refers to the biblical Parable of the Bags of Gold (Matthew 25:14–30), later interpreted in Church tradition as 'gifts' or 'skills'. The UYT approach is based on the idea that every person in a congregation can easily grapple the biblical idea of 'using one's God-given talents' for the sake of local community development (Haus 2017). The UYT project has clear parallels in other asset-based congregational community development approaches (Rakotoarison et al. 2019). It is the specific *Sitz im Leben* of the Christian congregation.

Research methods and design

The data for the study were collected through participant observations and semi-structured interviews from four congregations within three FLM synods between July and October 2018, with interview guides tested in December 2017. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)

approved the application for data collection in Madagascar on 29 May 2018 (project title 'Faith-oriented and ABCD in a Malagasy context: a qualitative study of "UYT" capacity building project', project number 60548), confirming that the research followed ethical guidelines in relation to the protection of the rights of the participants in the study. Informed consent was received from all participants.

The sampling strategy for identifying sites and informants included both maximal variation and purposeful sampling strategies (Creswell 2012:207). The sample sites were designed to include both rural and urban areas in the centre of Madagascar and on the coast. The research sites (synods and congregations) were intended to include sites known to be actively, mildly active or not involved in congregational community development work. The basis for the selection of the three synods and the congregations was UYT project reports and recommendations from the national coordination of the same project. The selected sites were not completely representative of the FLM, but they allowed the comparison and gathering of rich and thick data.

The informants were 29 individuals from 11 Lutheran families with the youngest being above 15 years of age. 'Young people' mean individuals between the ages of 16 and 22 years who lived with their parents at the time of the interview (July–October 2018). The selection of informants was based on families not on individuals who reflected the Malagasy collectivist society. This choice also comes from the idea that the family, besides the church setting, constitutes one social institution that influences belief and practice (Hunt 2007:614).

The first families were identified with the help of the local church leaders. A snowball sampling method ensured the identification of the rest of the families. The interviews were conducted in Malagasy by one researcher and were then translated into English by the same researcher. The narratives of two individuals (one volunteer and one lay leader) from the interviews that the authors conducted together in October 2018 are included, making the number of informants 31. The taped interviews made a total of 20 h 59 min and 9 s voice data with 279 pages of transcript. The sample design aimed to access both those engaged in and those who wished to participate in a community development activity. The basis for selecting the families was the position of parents in the church. Position means serving as a volunteer in the church, such as being members of a committee or being a deacon (a voluntary worker).

The recorded interviews were transcribed and then processed using the following steps implemented in iteration: organising of data, coding, forming themes and reporting (Creswell 2012:236). NVivo 12 helped to dissect the data into analytical units and to sort out and organise the coded texts (reduced). We use content analysis as a method to analyse the data. We coded the data in view of responding to the research question and in relation to the

theoretical perspectives. We paid attention to how faith and religion featured in the stories the informants told about their personal experiences of involvement in local UYT projects, what functions religion and faith served in the stories and what was the substance of the story with regard to religion and faith (cf. Smith 2000). The material and results of the analysis were discussed amongst the three authors.

Ethical considerations

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the application for data collection in Madagascar on 29 May 2018 (project title 'Faith-oriented and asset-based community development in a Malagasy context: a qualitative study of 'Use Your Talents' capacity building project', project number 60548), confirming that the research followed ethical guidelines in relation to the protection of the rights of the participants in the study. Informed consent was received from all participants.

Results

By focusing on the understanding of how individuals interpreted their everyday lived experiences of faith in the context of UYT, we identified four themes:

1. the use of talents as an act of personal faith and vocation
2. dependency on and respect for authority
3. a point of tension between Christian faith and Malagasy spirituality
4. faith as an instrument of evangelisation.

The use of talents as an act of personal faith and vocation

The informants related their engagement with UYT projects strongest to Christian faith as personal conviction. Participating in UYT projects was a means to express that conviction. A female participant expressed the theme as follows:

'Unless Jesus is in charge, even if the leaders want to develop, it will not succeed. Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit and it makes people use their talents. Faith and the use of talents go hand in hand. In the use of talents the Holy Spirit is at work in individuals. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God. From that, you have perseverance.' (Site 2, woman, family 3)

As expressed by the informant, personal faith and engagement in using one's talents are undividable. The basis for development is, according to this informant, God's work within and through the individual. In the narratives of informants, personal faith is understood to be more important than direction by the church leadership, particularly for members of the Shepherds' revival movement operating within the church. It is also clear for them that the possibility for concrete human actions is a consequence of divine action and demands human obedience towards the divine reality. Thus, it is primarily God working through the individual and not the individual believer's agency or capability to do good. The informants suggest that God is working through events and circumstances as a result of prayer.

When explaining their personal faith, it was frequently underlined that 'the use of talents' should not be understood as a personal merit, something to boast about, but as a consequence and an act of obedience to God's will. The final actor is not the individual believer, but God through the believer. One informant (S1W1) mentioned that human beings are 'unreliable and unable', whilst another one (S1W2) said God has amazing power that compels you to do what he commands either [*sic*] you like it or not'. The informant went on to say: 'Faith gives life, hope and the capacity to do amazingly [*well*] in the community'. Thus, for these informants, personal faith is a condition for good deeds, although good deeds are not an achievement or merit of the individual, but to God's merit only. The informants underline that God is the utmost power behind everything, including faith and good deeds.

The question whether non-Christians or 'the people of the world' and 'uncommitted Christians' are able to 'use their talents' in accordance with God's will remained open for those who motivated their engagement in UYT as an act of personal faith and vocation. The general impression was that the informants clearly distinguished between people of faith capable of living in the right way and, on the other hand, a perception of non-Christians as not capable of living according to God's will:

'The ability of each person to show his/her faith and love in behaviour, in action, in language and through what s/he wears depends on God's grace.' (Site 2, young woman, family 3)

In other words, these informants expressed a polarisation between Christians and non-Christians related to their capability to do good, whereas the latter were characterised as belonging to the 'devil'. Some informants recognised, however, that non-Christians could 'show love' more than uncommitted Christians and that oddity offers a motivation for the church to encourage its members to use their talents.

According to the informants, 'using your talents' is part of Christian faith. It is seen as a natural consequence of one's personal relation to God. Not 'using your talents' is understood as the absence of real and authentic faith or even interpreted as a result of evil forces or the work of the devil. Practising neighbourly love and using your talents are thus a natural and non-negotiable consequence of personal faith. One woman said:

'In my opinion, the use of talents might be obeying Jesus's word, "These three remain: faith, hope and love but the greatest is love". If you want to be free, you will know how to share love through the talents God gave you.' (Site 2, woman, family 1)

Specifically, informants who were active members of the revival movement or in a position of leadership underlined that personal faith implies obedience towards authoritative sources, like the Bible:

'In my opinion, faith compels you to use your talents. Because if I do not believe that Jesus provides everything but think that I got all I have from my knowledge and strength, then I will not

give what I have to others. But because I know that the earth and everything in it belongs to Jesus, then I have to share with those who need my talents.' (Site 2, woman, family 1)

According to informants' perceptions, one way to show love is using one's talents: sharing new practices, for example, with new and more effective agricultural techniques. The Parable of the Bags of Gold is interpreted as a divine story telling believers about the need to act in accordance with God's will, that is, using your talents, in order to benefit from this talent and escape eternal damnation. Using talents is explained through the perception that God in the future will make believers accountable for how they use their gifts. The worthless servant will be thrown 'outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt 25:30). Using the talents appears as a form of submission to God, obedience to divine law and fear of eternal damnation; it means that Christians feel obliged to do good deeds.

Dependency on and respect for authority

In addition to informants' submission to God, their use of talents also derives from their dependence on their leaders. That was the case especially for those who are not active members in a church group. Informants describe a clear division of roles and tasks within the church and situate themselves and their actions within that structure:

'When the church plans to engage in development work, the church committee hold a meeting. Whatever the committee decides, they will encourage Christians to contribute.' (Site 3, woman, family 3)

From this account, it seems that the individual's decision to engage in UYT is based on the decision of a committee. The FLM has committees composed of elected or appointed individuals. Development ideas and activities stem from these committees. The church expects the committees to work for their well-being and the fulfilment of its mission. Use Your Talents is a collective way for the church to address its own and its members' needs. An individual Christian relies on and respects the church's method of work as expressed by this informant:

'I must be willing to contribute because I rely on Jesus. So depending on the decision of the leader I cannot do it alone, unless they say, "We should do this or that to develop our church." Everyone has to agree if she or he wants that development.' (Site 1, woman, family 3)

The informant implies that the total dependence on leaders is related to reliance on Jesus. The link is understood in family terms. The Christian congregation represents a spiritual family in which Christians view themselves as children under the responsibility and guidance of their leaders, their 'father-and-mother' or parents. The leaders are the representative of Jesus and reliance on Jesus is equated with dependence on and respect for these leaders. Leaders are selected individuals to whom church members give their trust through elections. They are expected to be wise and caring for the well-being of the church and Christians, thus

following the decision of leaders seems logical and beneficial. As a result, Christians respect the word of their leaders as children respect their parents.

In one congregation, the development activities were the result of the church leader's initiative in inviting a regional church development organisation to assist the local community to have access to clean water. A female deacon attributed her use of talents to the instructions the church gave to the deacons to do pastoral work in the community. Another informant explains his use of talent as a result of the appeals his teachers made in the Lutheran agricultural school to use what the students learned when they are back in their home village. Informants also relate their respect for authority to the process of living in faith:

'If the person is mature in faith, they accept to clothe themselves in humility, compassion and kindness. But because they are immature, they think that they are someone, then they dare to oppose (the leaders) and debate (ideas).' (Site 2, man, family 3)

This informant implicitly considers obedience to be a Christian virtue. The statement reflects an idea that the use of talent is a positive acceptant disposition of the heart. Some informants fear that if they initiate activities without the approval of the church, they will be identified as a 'sect'. During the group interview, one woman reasoned with another that even if she shares her concerns about finding practical training for the youth with the church leaders, they will neither listen to her nor take into account her ideas. This is because of the fact that she is not in a position of leadership. A large number of female informants reported other people's ignorance of their ideas and concerns. Informants reported subtle ways of voicing their frustration and wishes through behind the scene comments and prayer requests during group meetings.

Some informants believe that the use of talents is the instrument the church uses to get material support from members in return. One informant suggested that the quality of Christians' life constitutes an asset to the church. The work of the church and its success depend on material means. So for the church to function properly, in addition to taking care of its members' spiritual life, it also invests in activities aiming to improve its members and the local populations' livelihood. Christians having a good standard of living ensure their commitment and participation in the life of the church. Some informants imply that economic gain shapes an individual's motivation to attend church. Some informants use their talents to exert influence and show that they are trustworthy:

'What propelled my use of talent is my new position. I was a vice president of the neighbourhood. When the president left for another church, people automatically converted my position to presidency. I became the one in charge. The spiritual life of the former president was strong and the Christians were very zealous. So if I the 'child' successor impede people's spiritual development, then I think I am responsible if Christians' enthusiasm drops.' (Site 2, man, family 3)

The use of talent as a leader is a way to show one's responsibility and respond to the members' expectations.

Leaders' ability and action support and ensure the spiritual life of the members. Responsibility acts as a pressure on leaders to use talents.

Christians also use their talents when their own aims align with their understanding of the church teachings. For example, in an area where a petty theft is pestering farmers, a man taught agricultural techniques to his neighbour, reasoning that his use of talent corresponds to the teaching of the church that aims at creating a healthy, thriving and peaceful community with material security. Informants interpret the Bible and the church teaching as moral guidance on how to construct an idealised liveable community without social ills and where 'everyone will live by their work' S2M2. This implies, as some informants say, that the church, compared with the unreliable state structure, is the source of stability that will benefit the community. Christians are the agents who bring stability to the community.

In brief, informants experience and understand their use of talents within a traditional family relationship perspective in a new context: the church. This traditional view constitutes a point of tension illustrated by the next theme.

A point of tension between Christian faith and Malagasy spirituality

The use of talent project forms a space where Christians and non-Christians meet in the community along with their traditions. Traditionally, Malagasy people believe that fertility of the soil and of humans rests on the blessings from the ancestors. The traditional ritual of sacrificing an ox often governs access to that blessing. The cult of the ancestors, which in some areas is a duty for all members of the family and the community, is against Christian belief in God and is understood as a form of idolatry. In areas where Christians constitute the minority, taking part in activities constitutes an emotional and spiritual tension. Some Christians condemn any form of participation in the traditions, whilst others justify their action with passages from the scriptures. One of the informants described this ritual and all the expenses related to it as a waste, which did not develop people. Another informant shared the condition of his use of talent in relation to the tradition as stated below:

'I use my talent according to the saying "use your talent". You should work to increase your talent not bury it. – It is as I said earlier, to use it according to the Holy Scripture. Sometimes in the "fokontany" (sub-region), non-Christians act in opposition to the Holy Scripture, as a result, I am not part of it. When the work develops people, it is noble not worthless activities, thus I use my talent to do the work.' (Site 3, man, family 1)

The tension results in some Christians problematising the faith of those who are in favour of Malagasy tradition and categorising them as immature. One informant suggested that the use of talents corresponds to the Malagasy notion of a good person:

'But if someone is unwilling or dislikes doing duties, maybe s/he is not a person of faith but needs some kind of motivation. He would probably need a much stronger campaign.' (Site 2, man, family 1)

For this informant, Christians are supposed to be good people who work for the benefit of the community, have a sense of responsibility, work and do their best. If the person is not good, then the person has no faith. This makes Christian identity and action the standard measure of a true and higher power, morality and transcendence. Another informant stated that sharing personal talents with neighbours contributes to the community's well-being. This shows that an individual has a spirit that shows his humanity. A good person strives for the harmony and balance of the community:

'Everything you have, your purpose in life is useful for others. This means that your existence is essential, that everybody needs one another The same goes for knowledge, my knowledge is complete with other people's knowledge so that everybody can work together. That is what community is.' (Site 2, young woman, family 3)

Possessions and capacities vary between individuals, families and communities. These differences generate the logic of interdependence. One informant viewed using talent as a question of community survival and sharing is an anticipation of the future for a common benefit:

'Let us say, for example, that there are insects that destroy the crops. I used pesticides while others did not. What I produce will not cover all my needs for a year. Thus, I have to buy food. If my neighbour's crop fails, where will I buy when I need some? Both of us will die! That is the reason I share what I can share so that both of us will live. If the crops are abundant, the price in the market also decreases.' (Site 2, woman, family 1)

Ideally, each Christian uses their talent for community development, but not all of the informants in this study did. Several women reported that communal activities are not always successful because of disagreements, disappointment and mistrust. A woman held that some church leaders are using the other members to get rich. Various situations such as unaffordable prices and insecurity also ruined group and church plans. This is how one informant explains these issues:

'I always emphasize that often the devil has made his way into the church. That is the reason why the church does not develop. Even if the leaders intend to develop, whenever the devil enters the scene, the development will never come. The reason is the devil creates many hindrances, many schemes.' (Site 2, woman, family 3)

According to this informant, any action that goes against the well-being of the community, including selfishness, belongs to the realm of the devil. The devil stands in opposition to the church, which implies God and his goodness.

To sum up, the use of talents represents a characteristic of a good person in a traditional Malagasy view. However, not all the criteria of a good person in this view fit totally with the Christian's understanding of being a true Christian.

Some Christians use this tension as an opportunity to evangelise.

The use of talents as an instrument of evangelisation

Particularly, those informants within the revival movement interpret their use of talents as compliance with Jesus's command to 'make disciples'. It is regarded as one way amongst others of preaching the gospel:

'What I learned is that Christians should stand as Christian in all aspects of life: in their behaviour, their relationship with others, their words, their clothes. All that should show that you are a Christian. When people comment or persecute, you should not be ashamed of being a Christian but be a living gospel, to show Jesus in everything either in love or in behaviour.' (Site 2, woman, family 1)

According to this informant, UYT has become a performative evangelisation. Preaching the word is not considered enough: behaviour, special clothing and action complement evangelising the non-Christians. Informants perceive their use of talents as an instrument to bring individuals to faith. It is also assumed that poverty keeps some Christians from attending church services regularly:

'When they see the wellbeing of their families, they are willing to come to church regularly ... We taught (a new agricultural technique) people because sometimes, not having an offering is a hindrance for them to come to church. So we asked ourselves, what should we do so that people will always have offerings.' (Site 2, man, family 3)

The church's contribution and engagement in helping people to improve their livelihood is considered as a reason for church attendance. Consequently, the benefit from the use of talents is a visible sign that attracts one to faith. One informant maintained that the experience of being blessed was a more powerful evangeliser than words:

'We, Christians evangelize families where people do not know God. Some refuse to come to faith. They say the call has not yet arrived. I won two non-Christians for Christ. It was two because one was demon-possessed and I drove it out of the person. Once the illness went away, the person accepted to be confirmed.' (Site 1, woman, family 1)

Well-being amongst Christians, including the opportunity to heal the sick, is considered an effective instrument to attract new converts particularly in an area where Christians constitute a minority. In the context of FLM, well-being is constructed as a blessing from a spirit. The use of talents lightens people's suffering. The success of the project proves that a powerful spirit is at work. In contrast, if Christians do not use their talents, people would be critical towards both Christians and the church. Informants also perceive the use of talents as a kindness shown to neighbours that, in turn, shows God's goodness and the benefit of being Christian:

'When you give a person a responsibility within the church, their spiritual life is kindled. The sparkling spiritual life results in a smooth division of tasks. You see, people have talent.' (Site 2, man, family 3)

Discussion

The results of this study show that the complex role faith plays in asset-based congregational community development. Religion is now a serious topic for development studies, suggesting, in turn, that it has become more relevant for development policy and practice at the level of global institutions. The results of this study show that at a local level, the FLM has not secularised its discourses to become legitimate global development actors (cf. Tomalin 2018). UYT is not instrumentalising religion to serve neoliberal development goals. This study found that informants attribute their engagement in community development to their religious calling. The belief in the existence of a higher power not only seems to influence individuals to act but also enables them to feel empowered and have something to contribute. Participants believe that God supports a healthy and peaceful community and they are called to work towards that goal. The informants' primary aim was to secure their livelihood and food first and at the same time to contribute to a healthy community. The results also confirm the idea that religious values such as love, spiritual growth and conversion drive the engagement in community development (Tomalin 2018).

Based on the experience of informants, it was also found that the use of talents is the result of informants' understanding of the church structure as a family relation, in which members depend on and obey their leaders, just as children obey their parents and parents care for their children. It appears that community development can rest exclusively on local strength and succeed independent of outside resources, but as the critics on the ABCD approach (MacLeod & Emejulu 2014) argued, the sole responsibility of development may be put on the local leaders and on the community. This reinforces the dependence of church members on their leaders and sustains asymmetrical power relations within the church and the community. The findings also show that the church has a communication problem as some members, most specifically women, are afraid to voice openly their concerns and no one pays attention to their ideas.

Another important finding was that UYT as a religious public performance created a space for Christian belief and the Malagasy cult of ancestors to compete. Whilst Christians make the Bible a reference and model of life and action, non-Christians believe that their ancestors are still alive and bless and influence their lives. Christians interpret the action of venerating and respecting ancestors to be against development, particularly when respecting involves financial costs. Christians believe that their God and their values represent the highest standard. This belief is the basis of their hope that their engagement in community development will be fruitful, both spiritually and materially.

Finally, it was found that UYT was used for evangelisation and the strengthening of faith commitment. Confirming Haugen (2019) and Clarke's (2013) idea that religion might be the goal of development, our findings show that

evangelisation might be an intrinsic element of development activities. UYT represents for the informants a spiritual activity that characterises both the work of God and a pointer to God. It is a call for faith for non-Christians and an instrument that revives the spiritual lives of non-committed Christians. Both as a religious majority and a minority, Christians promote acts of kindness in order to gain members (Candland 2000).

The strength of this study lies in the original data collected from a local level.

As the data were collected from only four congregations within three FLM synods, the findings may not be representative of all synods. The specific Malagasy context may also limit the generalisability of the findings.

This study represents an approach where poverty reduction is removed from direct engagement with global development institutions. The findings, consistent with Clarke's study (2013), show that community development is part of Christians' and congregational holistic activities that depend on local knowledge and resources. Through UYT, the FLM employs religious modes of communication to engage with local faith actors who cannot participate in these global development discourses and practices. As indicated here, faith not only motivates individuals to engage in community development but also seems to represent the essence of their engagement (Rakodi 2012). The church's teachings and biblical stories such as the passage in Matthew 25 create a normativity of good and desirable behaviour. Faith may constitute an asset in the context of the UYT project when it promotes the individual's capacity to achieve positive economic and social change (Nordstokke 2014).

Conclusion

The church's teachings and biblical stories create a normativity of good and desirable behaviour in the context of an ABCD project. Faith may constitute an asset when it promotes an individual's capacity to achieve positive economic and social change.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All the authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Funding information

The authors received no financial support outside their institution for the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not available because of confidentiality clause required by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Ammermann, N., 2013, 'Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52(2), 258–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12024>
- Ammermann, N., 2016, 'Lived religion as an emerging field: An assessment of its contours and frontiers', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29(2), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2016-02-01>
- Astley, J., 2011, 'Forms of faith and forms of communication', in J. Sullivan (ed.), *Communicating faith*, pp. 16–30, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC.
- Awuah-Nyamekye, S., 2010, 'The role of religion in indigenous health practice in Ghana: Implications for Ghanaian universities in Ghana's development', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138, 36–56.
- Bornstein, E., 2003, *The spirit of development: Protestant NGOs, morality, and economics in Zimbabwe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Candland, C., 2000, 'Faith as social capital: Religion and community development in Southern Asia', *Policy Sciences* 33, 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004857811117>
- Clarke, M., 2013, 'Good works and God's work: A case study of churches and community development in Vanuatu', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 548(3), 340–351. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12030>
- Creswell, J.W., 2012, *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*, 4th edn., Pearson, Boston, MA.
- Dinham, A., Farnell, R., Finneron, D. & Furber, R., 2006, *Faith as social capital: Connecting or dividing?* Policy Press, Bristol.
- Furseth, I. & Repstad, P., 2006, *An introduction to the sociology of religion*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. & Roeland, J.H., 2014, 'Lived religion. The praxis of practical theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18(1), 91–101. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0007>
- Gyekye, K., 1995, *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, rev. edn., Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Gyekye, K., 1997, *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Haddad, B., 2001, 'Theologising development', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110, 5.
- Haugen, H.M., 2019, 'What is gained and what is lost by the faith-based organization (FBO) term?', *Mission Studies* 36(2), 262–288. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341652>
- Haus, S., 2017, *Use your talents: The congregation as primary development agent*, Digni, Oslo.
- Hunt, S.J., 2007, 'Religion as a factor in life and death through the life-course', in J.A. Beckford & J. Demerath (eds.), *The Sage handbook of the sociology of religion*, pp. 608–629, Sage, London.
- Jones, B. & Juul Petersen, M., 2011, 'Instrumental, narrow, normative? Reviewing recent work on religion and development', *Third World Quarterly* 32(7), 1291–1306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.596747>
- Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J., 1993, *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, Distributed by ACTA Publications, Evanston, IL, Chicago, IL.
- Macleod, M.A. & Emejulu, A., 2014, 'Neoliberalism with a community face? A critical analysis of asset-based community development in Scotland', *Journal of Community Practice* 22(4), 430–450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2014.959147>
- Mbiti, J., 1969, *African religions and philosophy*, Heinemann, Nairobi.
- McGuire, M., 2008, *Lived religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Menkiti, I.A., 1984, 'Person and community in African traditional thought', in R. Wright (ed.), *African philosophy, an introduction*, pp. 171–181, University Press of America, Lanham, MD.
- Nam, Y., 2008, 'Welfare reform and asset accumulation: Asset limit changes, financial assets, and vehicle ownership', *Social Science Quarterly* 89(1), 133–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2008.00525.x>
- Nordstokke, K., 2014, *Mapping out and mobilising diaconal assets*, Regnum, Oxford, pp. 214–225.

- Öhlmann, P., Frost, M.-L. & Gräb, W., 2016, 'African initiated churches' potential as development actors', *HTS Theological Studies* 72(4), a3825. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3825>
- Putnam, R., 2000, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.
- Rakodi, C., 2012, 'A framework for analysing the links between religion and Development', *Development in Practice* 22(5–6), 634–650. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.685873>
- Rakotoarison, Z. R., Dietrich, S., and Hiilamo, H., 2019, 'Tackling Poverty with Local Assets: A Case Study on Congregational Asset-Based Community Development in a Lutheran Church in Madagascar', *Diaconia* 10(2), 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.13109/diac.2019.10.2.119>
- Roy, M., 2017, 'The assets-based approach: Furthering a neoliberal agenda or rediscovering the old public health? A critical examination of practitioner discourses', *Critical Public Health* 27(4), 455–464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2016.1249826>
- Shanguhya, M.S. & Falola, T. (eds.), 2018, *The Palgrave handbook of African colonial and postcolonial history*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.
- Skjortnes, M., 2014, *Restoring dignity in rural and urban Madagascar: On how religion creates new life-stories*, Bible and Theology in Africa 18, Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers, New York, NY. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1220-1>
- Smith, C.P., 1992, *Motivation and personality: Handbook of thematic content analysis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527937>
- Swart, I. & Nell, E., 2016, 'Religion and development: The rise of a bibliography', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3862. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3862>
- Ter Haar, G., 2011, *Religion and development: Ways of transforming the world*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Tomalin, E., 2018, 'Religions, poverty reduction and global development institutions', *Palgrave Communications* 4(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0167-8>