# New study: Faith in Action

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A new study by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development and Konrad Adenauer Foundation illustrates the links between religion and population dynamics in West Africa

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**West Africa has one of the fastest growing populations in the world. It is projected to nearly double by 2050, when close to 800 million people are projected to live in the region. As a result, more people than ever will need education opportunities, jobs and health care services – all of which are necessary for people to lead a self-determined life with dignity, and which are already in short supply today. While fertility rates in West Africa are already declining, ongoing interventions are necessary to ensure this trajectory continues. New opportunities for successful interventions that increase the acceptability and uptake of family planning can be found in partnerships with an unexpected group of stakeholders: faith-based organisations.**

In West Africa, religious actors and leaders enjoy a high level of trust. When it comes to sensitive topics such as family size or sexuality, three quarters of West Africans heed the counsel of their priest or imam. Though religious leaders in the region have traditionally been seen as opponents of family planning, a closer look reveals a more nuanced picture. In a new study commissioned by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, “Faith in action – How religious organizations advance demographic change,” the Berlin Institute explored how religious authorities and organisations in sixteen West African countries are engaging on critical sociodemographic issues – such as gender equality, family planning and sexuality – and advocating for improvements and greater self-determination in these areas.

**Religion and family planning are compatible**

Traditional views on women and their role in society dominate across religious communities in West Africa. Women are seen primarily as mothers and wives, and having many children is considered a virtue. Therefore, family planning remains a taboo in many parts of the region and appears incompatible with prevailing religious beliefs. But contrary to widespread assumptions, the Koran, for example, does not explicitly reject family planning. Meanwhile, many Christians advocate for women’s ability to make self-determined decisions about using contraception.

“Priests, imams and indigenous leaders can promote progressive readings of their sacred texts and advocate for better living conditions,” says Catherina Hinz, Director of the Berlin Institute. “After all, they are deeply familiar with the challenges facing their communities, from poverty and unemployment to unwanted teenage pregnancies.” Religious organisations can have a direct impact on fertility rates in their communities by raising awareness about the benefits of smaller families. If they offer sex education or health services, they can reach members of the community directly with these messages and sensitize them to the delicate issue of family planning.

**Religious actors already make an impact**

In many West African countries, religious organisations, networks and individual faith actors are already positively influencing population dynamics. For example, the Sultan of Sokoto in Nigeria, spiritual leader for 90 million Muslims, promotes girls’ education. In 2019, he opened the pan-African ‘Keeping Girls in School Conference.’ The meeting brought together politicians and representatives from international development organisations as well as African youth-led organisations and Islamic, Christian and indigenous religious authorities to discuss and address the barriers that often keep girls out of school – ranging from parents who don’t consider educating girls a priority, to the stigmatisation of girls who menstruate. The Sultan called on his colleagues to take responsibility for helping their communities tackle these barriers so that all girls can complete secondary education.

Meanwhile, regional networks like the *Ouagadougou Partnership*, which aims to increase the use of family planning services in nine francophone West African countries, have worked together with priests and imams since it launched in 2011. This led to the formation of an alliance of West African religious leaders who cooperate with each other and exchange experiences about which approaches are most effective. “A trove of best practices is now available that has the potential to catalyze change toward greater acceptance of family planning in other countries and regions,” explains Hinz.

**Secular organisations must use language that respects people’s religious beliefs**

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To advance the demographic transition, religious organisations and leaders should develop gender-neutral interpretations of the Bible, Koran and other religious texts, debunk misconceptions and question traditional gender roles. Their secular partners in governments, health ministries and civil society should support these efforts. They should also identify and use language that respects people's religious beliefs so they can build sustainable partnerships with religious communities and realize the opportunities therein. Collaborating with faith actors can improve gender equality and self-determination, increase the acceptability of family planning, and in the longer term slow down population growth in West Africa.

The study **"Faith in action – How religious organisations facilitate demographic change in West Africa"** is available for download here.

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**Berlin Institute for Population and Development**

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