



Research Programme on Religious Communities
and Sustainable Development

POLICY BRIEF

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Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings

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Abstract:

This policy brief reports on preliminary findings of the online survey *Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona*. It is the first survey comprehensively exploring the development and relief efforts of religious leaders worldwide as well as their social and theological views on the pandemic. Religious leaders see their communities suffering primarily from the economic challenges caused by government restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, religious leaders overwhelmingly support the preventive measures introduced by their governments. Consequently, they use their influence to reinforce the importance of adherence to the preventive measures. In regions where governments' handling of the pandemic is less efficient, the demand on religious leaders to fill the void is high. Concerning the post-pandemic world, religious leaders see it as imperative to “build back better” by advancing social justice, economic equity, ecological sustainability and international cooperation.



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Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings

Introduction

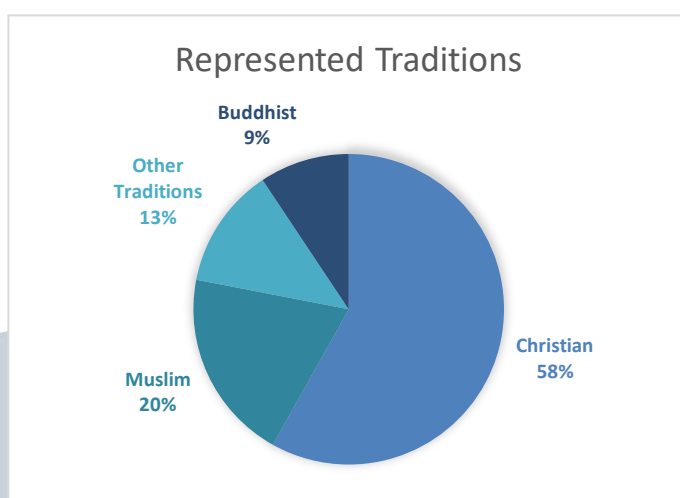
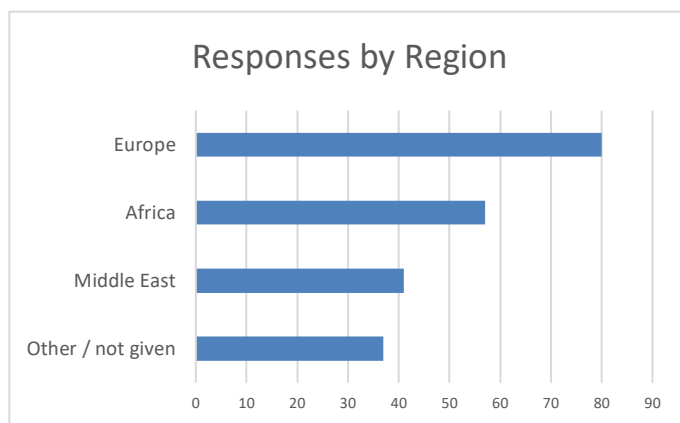
The corona pandemic radically changed people's lives worldwide. Almost everywhere, the pandemic has created fundamental social challenges and intensified existing economic hardships. In this situation, religious communities are not only providing relief and psychosocial support but are highly influential actors in the public discourses. Against this background, the survey *Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona* explores religious leaders' views on the current challenges, their practical reactions, and their views on a post-pandemic future. What messages have they been giving to their communities in light of the pandemic? What did or would they say to their governments?

The online survey has been conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) since June 2020 and is still ongoing. It is the first study to explore religious leaders' perspectives on the pandemic now and in the post-pandemic future, and to offer a view of their spiritual and relief activities. The survey can be accessed here: <https://hu.berlin/corona-survey>.

Research Design and Target Group

The four principle research questions are (1) how religious communities are affected by the pandemic, (2) how religious leaders act in response, (3) how leaders view social and theological aspects of the pandemic and (4) what priorities they identify for the post-pandemic world. The study's target group are leaders of all religious communities worldwide at all leadership levels (local, regional, national, international), as well as leaders of faith-based organisations (FBOs), interfaith and ecumenical organisations. At the time of writing, 215 responses have been recorded. Responses cover 27 countries.

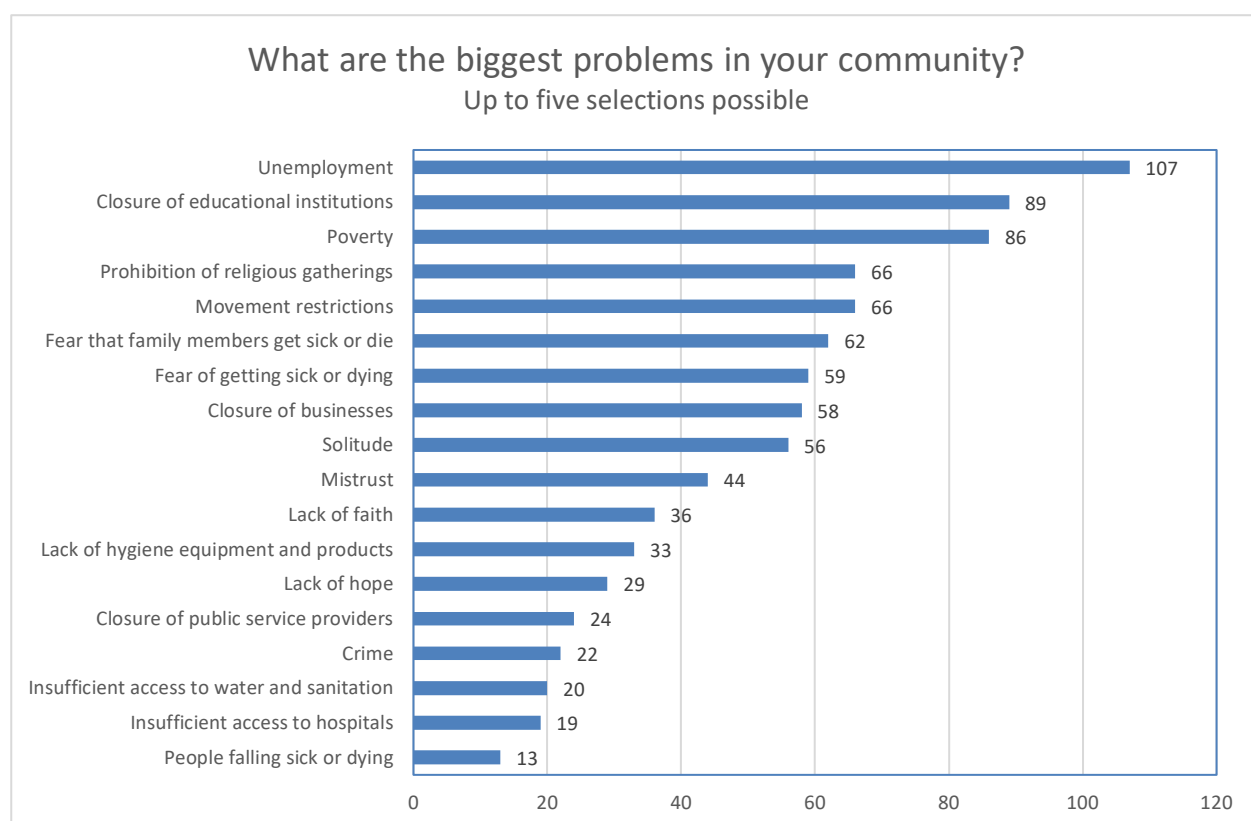
The survey allows respondents to choose multiple leadership roles. This reflects the reality that leaders frequently combine different functions and serve as clerics and organisational leaders simultaneously. Respondents are also able to choose more than one religious tradition, in order to accurately capture the perspectives of inter-faith actors.



Results

Community-Level Problems

When asked about the biggest problems in their community, leaders most frequently chose (1) *unemployment*, (2) *closure of educational institutions* and (3) *poverty*. All three are indirect consequences of the pandemic caused or aggravated by preventive measures to curb its spread. By contrast, the challenges directly related to the pandemic as a health threat were chosen least frequently: *insufficient access to hospitals* and *people falling sick or dying*.



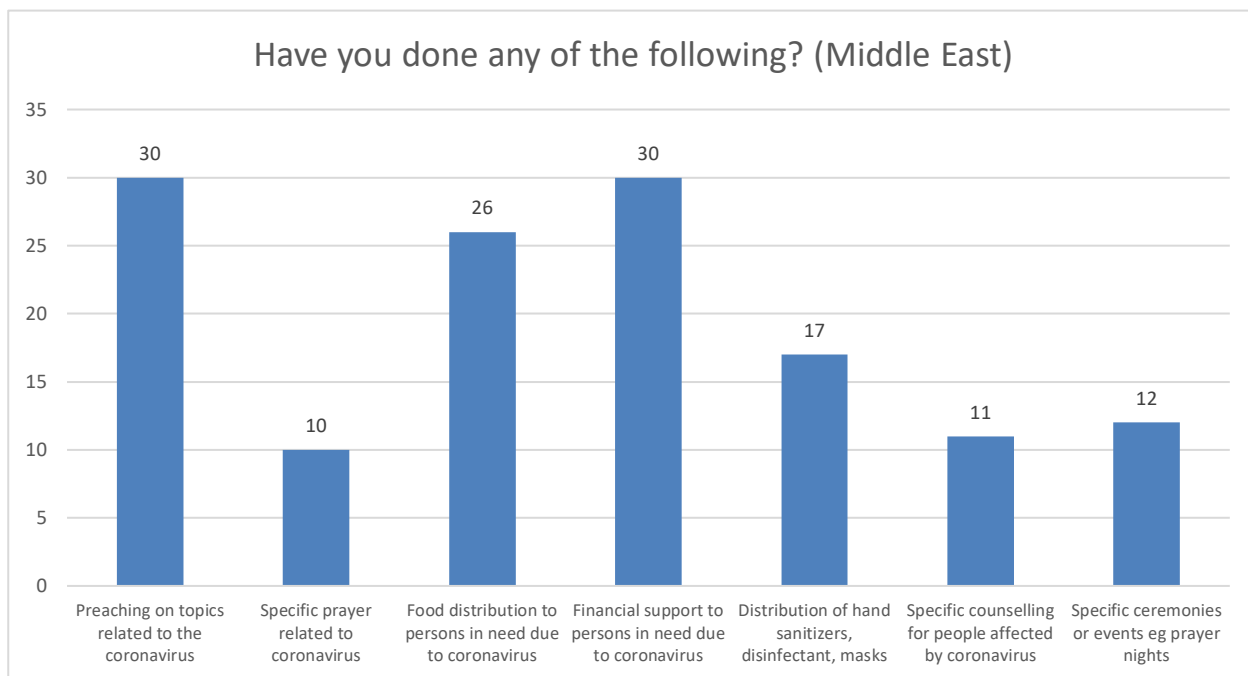
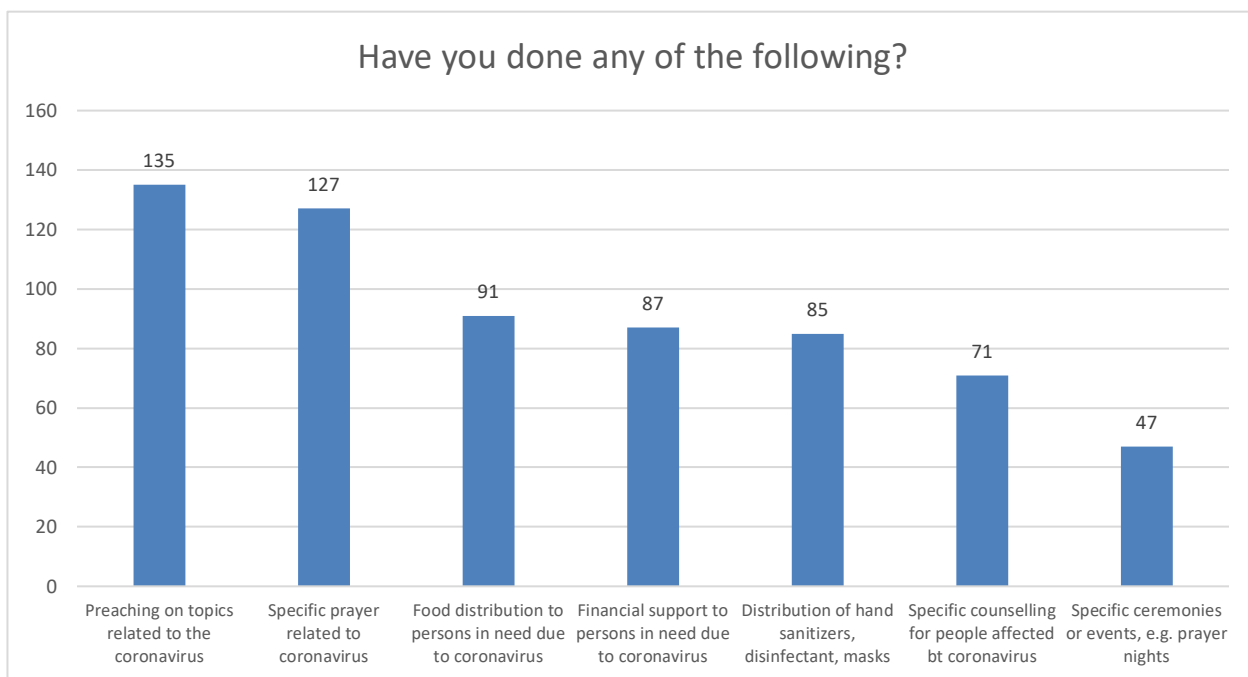
At the core of the three most pressing challenges lie economic concerns. This includes, albeit in less obvious ways, the concern of closed educational institutions. The economic impact of corona-related school closures is considerable. A recent World Bank report estimates a 10 trillion USD loss in earnings over time for the generation of students affected by the closures.¹

Responses to this question change regionally. *Unemployment* and *closure of educational institutions* are viewed as most serious throughout the entire sample. The threat of *poverty*, however, is seen as much more severe among African and Middle Eastern communities. Here, in the absence of effective public social systems, unemployment leads to poverty more quickly and unavoidably than in Europe. In turn, European respondents more frequently ranked psychosocial challenges higher, e.g. *solitude*, which ranks number one among the European sample.

¹ ‘COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings’, World Bank, accessed 3 September 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/18/covid-19-could-lead-to-permanent-loss-in-learning-and-trillions-of-dollars-in-lost-earnings>.

Religious Leaders’ Actions in the Pandemic

Reacting to the pandemic, most leaders report having conducted preaching and prayers related to the coronavirus, followed by food distribution and financial support to persons in need. Those four activities can count as the core of religious leaders’ response to the pandemic, a response that is characterised by both spiritual care as well as social action.²



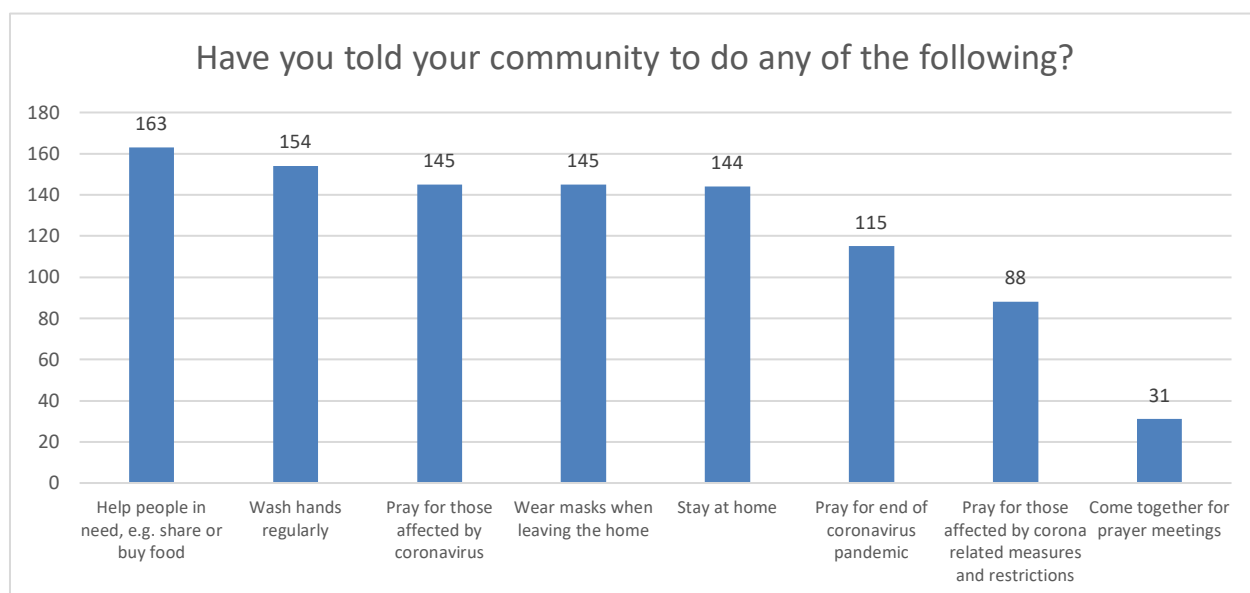
² While at first sight a close fifth rank, respondents likely chose the answer *distribution of hand sanitizers, disinfectant, masks* in relation to two different activities as the pandemic progressed: at first, for distribution to underprivileged community members who cannot otherwise access such items, and later also for distribution among students and worshippers as schools and places of worship re-opened in order to comply to certain hygiene regulations.

Among Middle Eastern respondents, *financial support* ranks higher and is on par with *preaching*. The early stages of the pandemic unfolded during the month of Ramadan (23 April to 23 May 2020) during which Muslims give annual charitable donations (*zakat*) from their savings. Religious leaders are involved in collection as well as distribution of those funds. In Jordan, the office of the Grand Mufti issued a religio-legal ruling (*fatwa*) to increase the *zakat* by allowing donations from fresh income (not just savings) and outside of the traditional time frame of Ramadan.³

Messages to the Community

The first and foremost message religious leaders give to their communities is one of solidarity: to *help people in need* in practical ways. This also emerges as consistent with the qualitative parts of the survey.

Moreover, leaders use their messaging mandate to reinforce compliance to prevention measures. Appeals to *wash hands*, *wear masks* and *stay home* consistently scored high in multiple choice as well as free text questions. The finding is consistent with data collected by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) where “Community-based education / prevention / promotion” scored highest among activities by FBO leaders.⁴



³ Sonntag, Ekkardt, and Philipp Öhlmann, ‘Policy Brief 02/2020 – Religious Communities and Corona in the Middle East’. The Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, June 2020.

⁴ ‘CCIH JLI Survey of Global Faith Based Responses to COVID-19’, JLI, accessed 21 May 2020, <https://jliflc.com/resources/ccih-jli-covid-19-response-survey/>.

Religious Leaders’ Assessment of Government Responses to the Pandemic

Religious leaders generally consider their governments to handle the pandemic well, but to different degrees depending on their context. Among respondents from the Middle East and Africa, only around half agree to the statement *My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well*, compared to over 90% in Europe.⁵

		Africa		Middle East		Europe		
		%	Average	%	Average	%	Average	
My government is handling the coronavirus pandemic well	+2 (strongly agree)		12.3%	0.2	7.3%	0.1	42.5%	1.3
	+1 (agree)		36.8%		41.5%		50.0%	
	0 (undecided)		21.1%		12.2%		2.5%	
	-1 (disagree)		12.3%		34.1%		5.0%	
	-2 (strongly disagree)		12.3%		4.9%		0.0%	
	no answer		5.3%		0.0%		0.0%	
My community expects support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders	+2 (strongly agree)		56.1%	1.4	43.9%	1.1	13.8%	0.5
	+1 (agree)		31.6%		36.6%		40.0%	
	0 (undecided)		5.3%		7.3%		30.0%	
	-1 (disagree)		0.0%		7.3%		12.5%	
	-2 (strongly disagree)		3.5%		2.4%		3.8%	
	no answer		3.5%		2.4%		0.0%	

Agreement to the statement *My community expects support during the times of the coronavirus from religious leaders* shows the inverse pattern: it is higher among African and Middle Eastern respondents and lower among European ones. Religious communities’ expectancy towards their religious leaders is higher where governments are weaker. Religious communities thus function as potent civil society actors and their leaders take on roles and responsibilities during the pandemic that are elsewhere fulfilled by the government.

Perspectives on the Post-Pandemic Future

When asked what they considered important for the time after the pandemic, leaders agree that social, economic and ecological changes are a priority. Over 75% of respondents gave ratings of *quite important* or *extremely important* to the suggestions to *reduce inequalities between rich and poor*, *substantially change the way the economy works*, and *strengthen environmental protection*. On average, leaders endorse increased international cooperation and (albeit by a small margin) reject isolationism for their vision for a time after the pandemic (see appendix, p. 8). The need to increase ecological awareness and protection of the environment does not only rank highest in the leaders’ choices but is also mentioned most often in their responses to the open-ended question about their visions for the future after corona. A respondent from Kenya summarised his vision as follows: “A different model for economic development that is green and inclusive. Build back better by adopting sustainable solutions to environmental challenges.”

⁵ Only European participants used the open-ended question “What is the most important message you would like to give your government regarding the pandemic and related measures?” to actively praise their governments’ handling of the pandemic.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The global pandemic has to some extent confronted communities in very different contexts with similar economic challenges. At the same time, it starkly increased inequalities, namely the vulnerability of communities without efficient public welfare systems. In these contexts, religious communities have high expectations of their leaders for support. Religious leaders are willing to fulfil this role and do so with an attitude of cooperation and integration. As one African Muslim Cleric admonished his government: “Involve all stakeholders such as doctors, scientists, counsellors, nurses, religious leaders, relevant government agencies, NGOs etcetera in the fight against the pandemic!”

Governments and development actors should be aware of the willingness of religious leaders to use their influence to reinforce public health measures. The media has at times been dominated by few incidents of religious leaders defying prevention measures, sometimes endangering their communities’ health. Yet the data suggests that the vast majority of leaders promote government-imposed prevention measures, even as those same measures raise economic stress to acute levels.

Further research is necessary on context-specific coping strategies supported by religious communities, such as formal and informal financial aid in Islamic contexts. For example, the potentials for integration of local and national Muslim leaders into sector coordination mechanisms on basic needs and cash assistance for information sharing and mutual learning should be explored.

References

- JLI. ‘CCIH JLI Survey of Global Faith Based Responses to COVID-19’. Accessed 21 May 2020. <https://jliflc.com/resources/ccih-jli-covid-19-response-survey/>.
- World Bank. ‘COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings’. Accessed 3 September 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/18/covid-19-could-lead-to-permanent-loss-in-learning-and-trillions-of-dollars-in-lost-earnings>.
- Sonntag, Ekkardt, and Philipp Öhlmann. ‘Policy Brief 02/2020 – Religious Communities and Corona in the Middle East’. The Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, June 2020.

Appendix

		%	Average
strengthen environmental protection	+2 (extremely important)	68.8%	1.5
	+1 (quite important)	18.1%	
	0 (moderately important)	3.7%	
	-1 (not very important)	0.0%	
	-2 (not important at all)	4.7%	
	<i>no answer</i>	4.7%	
reduce inequalities between rich and poor	+2 (extremely important)	51.6%	1.2
	+1 (quite important)	27.0%	
	0 (moderately important)	8.8%	
	-1 (not very important)	1.4%	
	-2 (not important at all)	5.6%	
	<i>no answer</i>	5.6%	
increase international cooperation	+2 (extremely important)	44.7%	1.1
	+1 (quite important)	32.1%	
	0 (moderately important)	11.2%	
	-1 (not very important)	2.3%	
	-2 (not important at all)	4.7%	
	<i>no answer</i>	5.1%	
substantially change the way the economy works	+2 (extremely important)	43.3%	1.1
	+1 (quite important)	33.5%	
	0 (moderately important)	9.8%	
	-1 (not very important)	2.3%	
	-2 (not important at all)	4.7%	
	<i>no answer</i>	6.5%	
reduce globalisation	+2 (extremely important)	9.8%	-0.2
	+1 (quite important)	18.6%	
	0 (moderately important)	26.5%	
	-1 (not very important)	19.5%	
	-2 (not important at all)	17.2%	
	<i>no answer</i>	8.4%	
strengthen national borders	+2 (extremely important)	16.7%	-0.2
	+1 (quite important)	14.4%	
	0 (moderately important)	15.3%	
	-1 (not very important)	19.5%	
	-2 (not important at all)	26.5%	
	<i>no answer</i>	7.4%	

Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch

Perspektiven Religionsleitender zu Corona – Erste Erkenntnisse

Diese Kurzstellungnahme gibt einen Überblick über eine vorläufige Auswertung der Onlinestudie „Perspektiven Religionsleitender zu Corona“. Es ist die erste Umfrage, die nothilfe- und entwicklungsbezogene Aktivitäten sowie theologische und soziale Ansichten Religionsleitender zur Pandemie erforscht. Religionsleitende bewerten die ökonomischen Konsequenzen von Regierungsmaßnahmen zur Eindämmung des Virus dabei als Hauptproblem, unter dem ihre Gemeinschaften am meisten leiden. Dennoch unterstützen die meisten von ihnen diese Maßnahmen. Entsprechend nutzen sie ihren Einfluss, um die Wichtigkeit ihrer Einhaltung zu vermitteln. In Regionen, in denen die regierungsseitige Pandemiebekämpfung als weniger effizient wahrgenommen wird, wächst die Erwartungshaltung innerhalb religiöser Gemeinschaften gegenüber ihren Leitenden, aktiv zu helfen. In Hinsicht auf die Zeit nach der Pandemie hoffen Religionsleitende auf einen Wiederaufbau, der sich an Prinzipien sozialer Gerechtigkeit, ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit und internationaler Zusammenarbeit orientiert.

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