

# ECUMENISM AND INEQUALITY

**Sheila Tanaka**

- *The role of faith-based organizations* •  
*for water advocacy in Brazil*

## ABSTRACT

*In the current context of intensifying the dichotomies related to the presence of religion in Brazilian politics, it is urgent to highlight the work of faith-based organizations for social justice. This article contributes to this debate based on the experience of Christian Aid, a global ecumenical organization that has been present in Brazil for 40 years, tackling structural causes of inequality. Taking ecumenical articulation on the water theme as an example, the text spells out innovative ways of forming alliances and developing joint actions among national, regional and global faith organizations.*

## KEYWORDS

Ecumenism | Inequality | Faith-based organizations | Water

## 1 • Introduction - Ecumenism and tackling inequality

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are prominent in promoting human rights and tackling mechanisms of global inequality. The ecumenical concerted action of churches and FBOs has its historical milestone in the post-World War II context. The news that Christian churches would have contributed to fascist regimes in Italy and Germany led to a deep questioning of the social role of churches and their relation to political power. In response, churches in Europe and the United Kingdom joined forces to coordinate aid to war victims and refugees in the first ecumenical concerted action registered.<sup>1</sup> In this context, ecumenical organizations of international cooperation raised, such as Christian Aid in the United Kingdom in 1945 and Heks in Switzerland in 1946. In 1948, a broad alliance of churches formed the World Council of Churches (WCC), expanding ecumenical cooperation in shaping a global network.

The agency of churches in international Jewish support networks in this context also raises a broad debate on the importance of cooperation between different faith traditions to combat forms of exclusion such as anti-Semitism and racism. International ecumenical organizations began to work in countries in poverty and social conflict, strengthening their commitment to the transformation of unjust structures of power around the world. This movement is accompanied by links with theological elaborations that support the political agency of organizations for equality and justice. For these organizations, questioning and challenging the structuring mechanisms of inequality is part of the commitment to faith and Christian witness.

Christian Aid is the official agency of 41 Protestant churches in the UK and Ireland and has been present in Brazil since the 1970s. In its global strategy for the period from 2019 to 2026, it affirms its mission for “a world where everyone has fullness of life; a life lived in dignity, free from poverty and need; where global resources are equitably shared and sustainably used; and where the voice and agency of poor and marginalized are fully realized.”<sup>2</sup> Its work is structured in three pillars: i. actions to mitigate the effects of poverty; ii. long-term advocacy work to identify and challenge the structural causes of inequality; iii. strengthening of faith communities, social organizations and other local actors as spaces of articulation and denunciation, to enhance prophetic voices for justice. These three pillars are interdependent and must be present in all areas of work of the organization. Thus, its theological production, its work of international political influence, its global campaigns and its programs in the 37 countries where it operates have a multidimensional character.

In this way, Christian Aid works in Brazil in partnership with social movements, civil society organizations, churches and ecumenical organizations. The work is oriented to the promotion of community rights to access to land, goods, services and spaces of social and political participation. The recent dynamics of poverty increase in the country, with cuts in public policies and increased private control of natural resources, require faith-based organizations to update their analysis and way of working, strengthening networks and creating innovative tools for dialogue with their foundations. Next will be presented a recent example of a collective initiative of faith-based actors on the water theme.

## 2 • Water as a sacred element and engine of inequalities in Brazil

Unequal access to water is one of the most perverse forms of inequality in Brazil. Although the country holds 20% of aquifers and drinking water sources in the world, more than 34 million people do not have access to drinking water in the country.<sup>3</sup> The lack of conscious management of water resources means that even communities neighboring water sources cannot access them, either because of private control or contamination of rivers and springs.

Contamination and water scarcity in some regions is aggravated by the predilection of official bodies for the private interests of large corporations over the rights of poor populations and communities in urban peripheries and rural areas. The increasing commodification of natural resources is aggravated by the concentration of land ownership where water sources are found and by the lack of environmental control in preservation areas. The exclusion of affected communities from decision-making processes on water resources shows that access to water is related to the unequal structures of political power in the country.

The lack of water in rural communities is also a direct consequence of the development model in the rural areas. Extractive activities of mining and agribusiness generate contamination of rivers and springs and periods of drought in regions that depend on irrigation. In Oriximiná, in Pará, *quilombola* communities and riverside communities face numerous consequences of the contamination of the river in their health and subsistence since mining of bauxite began in the region.<sup>4</sup> In Vale do Ribeira, São Paulo, tomato monoculture has been causing the contamination of the springs, with immeasurable consequences to the health of the population, especially of women.<sup>5</sup> As one of the faces of gender inequality, women are the most impacted as they have to walk long distances to get the water they need to take care of their home and family and as they have more contact with contaminated water in washing clothes and preparing food.

All those issues contrast with the fact that water is a sacred element for all religions, as the source of life and a fruit of the divine Creation with a purifying and unifying nature. The call to care for the planet and its natural resources, or, in other words, the Creation, is present in many sacred texts. In Christianity, water is the symbolic element that concretizes membership in baptism, and the protection of water sources is a commitment to the divine love itself. In African and indigenous religions, water is also present in rituals of initiation and purification as an element that interweaves material and spiritual.

Given this situation, in 2006 the World Council of Churches approved a declaration calling on its member churches to monitor water conflicts in their regions and to take a stand against privatization initiatives and in favor of community access to water. In addition, it also calls on churches to join in the articulation of the Ecumenical Water Network.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this network is to support the exchange of information between churches and communities on the water crisis and local solutions encountered, as well as to promote and coordinate actions of international concern for the recognition and fulfillment of the human right to water.

In response to this convocation, the National Council of Christian Churches of Brazil (CONIC) launched, in cooperation with churches in Switzerland, the “Ecumenical Declaration on Water as a Human Right and a Public Good”, a first convocation to churches and faith organizations to stand for the advocacy of the country’s natural resources by the occasion of the beginning of the International Decade for Action “Water for Life” (2005-2015). In 2016, the Ecumenical Campaign “Common House, our responsibility” also called for ecumenical agency for sanitation and treatment of solid waste.

These initiatives were fundamental to increase the attention of faith-based actors and ecumenical spaces on the importance of acting in the defense of water resources. To deepen these initiatives and take the next step in articulating these actors, Christian Aid and its partners are developing joint initiatives to strengthen ecumenical networks and the agency ability of faith communities for water advocacy.

### 3 • Ecumenical training, advocacy and communication for water

In 2018, a broad articulation of civil society organizations convened the Alternative World Water Forum (FAMA). This articulation took place in response to the World Water Forum, a meeting promoted by large economic groups to proceed private control of natural sources and public water services. The call for FAMA denounced these attacks of private interests and called for the unification of resistance initiatives to discuss the defense of democratic access to water and the defense of communities affected by water conflicts.

A wide ecumenical articulation involving the Ecumenical Forum ACT Brazil (FEACT),<sup>7</sup> Heks, WCC, among other organizations, also called an interreligious space during the event. The Interreligious Tent of FAMA hosted events to strengthen the spiritual dimension of water advocacy and the affirmation of water as a common good, strengthen national and international ecumenical articulations in defense of water and increase advocacy processes. This dialogue culminated in the ratification of an interreligious declaration, in which guidelines of agency for churches and FBOs to deepen their work have been defined. These guidelines are:

- **Spiritual and theological training**, technical and political, to promote communities as subjects of fair relations with nature, specifically water and its territories;
- **Articulation, alliance and advocacy actions** that link local agendas with regional and global processes of sustainable development, climate justice and tackling of sociocultural inequalities;
- **Common communication strategies** that promote exchanges of experience and knowledge, actions of public denunciation

and dissemination of the alternatives that involve the people in the processes of justice for water and the whole Creation.<sup>8</sup>

From this definition, ecumenical organizations and churches have been working together to develop water advocacy initiatives. An initial mapping of Christian Aid identified 22 ecumenical organizations working on this theme in different training, advocacy and communication activities. The FEACTION is one of the spaces where organizations have developed concerted actions and in which the agenda contributes to strengthen the ecumenical movement.

In collaboration with international networks, Christian Aid is mapping theological productions on the theme of water, with support from WCC's Ecumenical Water Network, and developing training courses for faith leaders. In November 2018, a regional course for youth from Latin American churches was offered in El Salvador, with the theme "Water, food and climate justice." The young people selected participated in sessions with WCC experts, the World Student Christian Federation, Christian Aid and the ACT Alliance, and knew the projects against water privatization in El Salvador. The learning acquired on the regional course also fostered materials for training in Brazil, multiplying the impacts of the activity.

A partnership between CONIC, Christian Aid, CREAS<sup>9</sup> and Faculdade Unida de Vitória made possible the development of an online training course for members of faith communities in the country.<sup>10</sup> For a period of three months, approximately 90 participants have access to weekly sessions with audiovisual and text resources, and participate in a virtual discussion forum. The enrolled participants represent 31 churches and faith communities from 21 states, most of them from the North and Northeast, where conflicts over water are latent. The modules were designed to deepen the understanding on multiple aspects implied in the inequality of access to water, understanding its relationship with private control, climate change, gender and violence. Participants will also be provided with tools to develop an advocacy and communication plan for local action. All the modules are also endowed with biblical studies that explain the relation of the themes with the commitment of faith.

During the process of preparing this course, a mapping of organizations identified the main references in each theme. The result of this work is the direct participation of 15 organizations in the production of content, among ecumenical organizations, social movements and specialized associations. Highlighting the participation of Latin American organizations such as the ALC, an ecumenical agency of regional communication based in Argentina, which contributed to the elaboration of communication and gender content, and the Andean Ecumenical Higher Institute of Theology (ISEAT), responsible for the elaboration of theological content, besides CREAS itself as a regional organization that articulates the course. The Ecumenical Water Network also contributed sending materials and indicating specialists.

This process, in addition to strengthening relations between organizations and networks, also guides training for a practical application of advocacy in local communities. Course

participants reported in the first few weeks the problems they face or observe in access to water, and one of the main demands is for methods of identifying institutions and decision-making spaces in which they can exert some influence or present their agenda. With the support of experts, they can develop campaigns and advocacy actions in their churches and faith communities. The mobilizing potential of the initiative is thus observed, virtually linking resources developed by national and regional organizations with communities with little or no support of the government, where churches have a strong political role.

In addition to the training process, Christian Aid and its partners have also developed case studies to identify and give visibility to the perspective of communities suffering from lack of water or contamination. These studies, developed in partnership with the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), *Sempreviva* Feminist Organization (SOF) and Pro-Indigenous Commission of São Paulo (CPI-SP), identify undocumented problems in official surveys and record local voices in the Amazon and in the region of Vale do Ribeira, SP. The cases will be published in a document to encourage prophetic agency<sup>11</sup> for water justice. The local advocacy process, developed by the communities, is thus strengthened by the links between communities, social movements and FBOs.

It is still not possible to evidence the impact of these actions quantitatively, due to their recent character. However, even if their results are not visible for the moment, the initiatives have an intrinsic value as a process. The broadening of organizations' abilities to tackle social justice issues with solid technical and theological bases enables them to build alliances in a variety of agendas. In the effort to foster prophetic voices in caring for Creation and to defend communities facing challenges in access to water, ecumenical articulation is strengthened.

#### 4 • Final considerations

Since its inception, international ecumenical organizations have played an important role in denouncing injustice and linking faith with the advocacy of equality. Christian Aid's work in Brazil reinforces local ecumenical agency in dismantling the structural causes of inequality, reflecting the organization's strategy for the period. One of the organization's focal points in the country is the work with faith communities for the defense of natural resources.

From actions in defense of water, ecumenical action has been strengthened and found renewed ways of doing politics. The activities achieved greater coherence and articulation between initiatives of different organizations. Ecumenical networks, such as FEACT and the National Council of Christian Churches of Brazil, embraced the agenda and included the activities in their long-term planning, influencing the action of churches, member organizations and other networks. The initiatives also strengthened collaboration between faith and secular organizations such as social movements working on water issues. The approach to experiences of other Latin American countries with great learning regarding the challenges of water privatization (Bolivia and El Salvador) and with global networks

(World Council of Churches - Ecumenical Water Network and ACT Alliance) evidences not only the global relevance of the theme, but also a great ability for articulation.

In the current context, it is urgent to strengthen ties and alliances between faith-based organizations that advocate for human rights. International ecumenical cooperation is an instrument of this front and plays a fundamental role in promoting faith as an engine of solidarity, equality and justice.

## NOTES

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- 1 • Romi Bencke and Cibele Kuss, "Ecumenismo e Cooperação Inter-religiosa na Diaconia Transformadora," in *Fé, Justiça de Gênero e Incidência Pública: 500 Anos da Reforma e Diaconia Transformadora*, org. Cibele Kuss (Porto Alegre: Fundação Luterana de Diaconia, 2017): 78-79.
- 2 • Christian Aid, *Estratégia Global 2019-2026* (Londres: Christian Aid, 2019).
- 3 • "Violação dos Direitos Humanos no Brasil: Acesso à Água Potável e ao Esgotamento Sanitário," IDS, Instituto Ethos, Artigo 19 and Conectas, 2018, accessed July 4, 2019, [https://ids-ecostage.s3.amazonaws.com/media/Viola%C3%A7%C3%A3o\\_dos\\_direitos\\_humanos\\_no\\_Brasil.pdf](https://ids-ecostage.s3.amazonaws.com/media/Viola%C3%A7%C3%A3o_dos_direitos_humanos_no_Brasil.pdf).
- 4 • Lucia Mendonça Andrade, *Antes a Água Era Cristalina, Pura e Sadia: Percepções de Quilombolas e Ribeirinhos dos Impactos e Riscos da Mineração em Oriximiná, Pará* (São Paulo: Comissão Pró-Índio de São Paulo, 2018).
- 5 • Christian Aid supports the work of Pro-Indigenous Commission of São Paulo with the forementioned communities at Oriximiná and the work of Sempreviva Feminist Organization with women at Vale do Ribeira.
- 6 • More information about Ecumenical Water Network available at: Ecumenical Water Network, homepage, 2019, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://water.oikoumene.org/en>.
- 7 • Local forum of ACT Alliance, an alliance of 150 churches and faith-based organizations of 125 countries in the world. In Brazil, the forum coordination is composed of CONIC, Christian Aid, Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço (CESE), Koinonia Presença Ecumênica e Serviço and Federação Luterana de Diaconia (FLD), among other 13 organizations and churches.
- 8 • "Mensagem das Religiões e Espiritualidades aos Povos," Interreligious Tent of the Alternative World Water Forum, March 22, 2018, accessed July 4, 2019, [https://conic.org.br/portal/files/MENSAGEM\\_DAS\\_RELIGIOES\\_E\\_ESPIRITUALIDADES\\_AOS\\_POVOS.pdf](https://conic.org.br/portal/files/MENSAGEM_DAS_RELIGIOES_E_ESPIRITUALIDADES_AOS_POVOS.pdf).
- 9 • CREAS is an ecumenical Latin American organization that works with training for human rights promotion in the region.
- 10 • Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches and parishes, as well as representatives of *terreiros*, pastorals and ecumenical organizations.
- 11 • For Christian Aid, the term "prophetic" refers to local and collective agency to denounce poverty, inequality and injustice, and to announce a new reality, built on daily fights.



**SHEILA TANAKA** – *Brazil*

Sheila Tanaka is an adviser to the Christian Aid program in Brazil, holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations from UNESP-Franca, a Master's Degree in Latin American Studies from the Free University of Berlin, works with international cooperation since 2010, and has a long trajectory with social movements in Brazil.

email: [stanaka@christian-aid.org](mailto:stanaka@christian-aid.org)

Received in May, 2019.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Claudia Sander.



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