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## **Faith-based organizations and poverty alleviation: a scoping review on definitions and terminology (2010-2021)**

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## **Faith-based organizations and poverty alleviation: a scoping review on definitions and terminology (2010-2021)**

In this paper, we present the results of a scoping review in which we examined the scientific literature (2010-2021) on faith-based organizations (FBOs) working within the field of poverty alleviation, focusing on the way studies define and use the term FBO. 52 relevant studies were identified and included. Our research shows that the term FBO is primarily used in American studies. Moreover, there is no broad consensus on the exact definition or meaning of the term nor on its scope. Because of this lack of consensus and the inherent shortcomings of the term, we suggest to replace the term FBO by the term 'religion-based solidarity initiatives' (RSIs). We define RSIs as: 'Initiatives that, from a religious inspiration, aim at organizing collective action for and/or providing support or services to people in vulnerable positions.' These initiatives can range from small scale ad hoc initiatives till large scale formal organizations.

**Keywords:** Faith-based organizations, definition, poverty, solidarity, religion

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

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## **Introduction**

Prior to the twentieth century, religious initiatives, organisations and congregations often were the main providers of welfare in many (European) countries (Crisp, 2014 & 2017; Claessens, 2017). Despite the secularization of many contemporary Western societies and the fact that in many countries the state nowadays is the main provider of social services, we cannot underestimate the continuing role and importance of religious welfare organisations and faith-based agencies (Crisp, 2017; Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). Not surprisingly, in the last few decades, in the context of research on solidarity and poverty reduction, social scientists have increasingly focused on the role and impact of organizations that are in one way or another linked to religions and/or religious congregations – the so-called **faith-based organizations** (FBOs) (Cnaan & Newman, 2010; Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a; Lusk & Corbett; 2021).

The literature agrees that FBOs are diverse and exist in large numbers. They are typically perceived as organizations that are linked to a particular type of ‘faith’ or ‘religion’. Many of them adopt several roles such as the provision of services and support to people in vulnerable positions and their communities (Schrooten & Trappers, 2019; Sider & Unruh, 2004). The breadth of their activities includes education, services for immigrants, employment support and all kinds of support to people in poverty. In an earlier article (Maes et al., 2023) we focused on the different typologies that were developed to study FBOs and on the variables that are used to distinguish different types of FBOs. A critical discussion of the existing typologies brought us to the conclusion that the field of FBOs is too complex to allow for the construction of an overarching typology that takes into account the many relevant specificities and the many different contexts involved. It also brought up even more fundamental questions: what do academics mean when they use the concept of Faith-Based Organization?; and is it really a good idea to continue to use and to promote this term,

especially also in an international, global context? – these are the questions we want to address in this article.

The term FBO has been developed in the nineteen-nineties in the North-American context, in very specific circumstances, namely when the Charitable Choice Act (1996) allowed congregations to receive funding when they through ‘faith-based organizations’ provided social services (Biebricher, 2011; Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a,b). In an initial analysis of the literature, it is noticeable that it is quite difficult to adapt this concept of FBO to a European context (especially mainland Europe), though of course it is clear that religion-based solidarity has not been absent at all in Europe (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). From our own large ongoing study on FBOs in Belgium we learned that it is in any case not easy at all to apply the concept of FBO in the Belgian context. At the same time earlier studies argue that a clear definition and typology is lacking, especially when using the concept outside North-America (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012; Cnaan & Newman, 2010).

Earlier reviews (Bielefeld & Cleveland 2013a; 2013b; Clarke & Ware, 2015; Hancox, 2019; Offut et al., 2016) on FBOs and poverty alleviation are based on studies that are now more than a decade old and focus mainly on the US context whereas we now see that the term FBO is also popping up in other parts of the world. Therefore, with the issues of definition and terminology in mind, we present a review of recent articles in social sciences and religious studies (2010-2021) that are using the term FBO while focusing on FBOs that in any part of the world provide services, support or organize activities for people in poverty.

## **Methodology**

We use the five-stage approach of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), complemented by the recommendations and adaptations of Daudt et al. (2013); Levac et al. (2010); O'Flaherty & Philips (2015) and Pham et al. (2014), as the methodological basis for our scoping review. In this approach after (1) having identified the initial research questions and (2) the relevant studies, (3) studies are selected according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) data are charted and collated and finally (5) findings are summarized and reported.

### ***Identifying research questions***

In our scoping review we want to answer the following research questions:

1. How do selected articles define and use the concept of FBO?
2. What are the characteristics of FBOs?

With these research questions, we want to look at the formal definitions given by the different authors in the selected articles and at the different characteristics of FBOs that are put forward. This will allow us to look for influential definitions and to determine the elements we should include if we want to formulate our own definition. We used the following guiding questions to process and structure the information we extract from the articles in our scoping review:

- Instead of FBOs, what alternative terms are being discussed or proposed in these articles?
- What is the geographical context of these articles?
- What religions are inspiring the FBOs discussed in these articles?
- Are religious communities or congregations (churches) also categorized as FBOs in these articles?

### ***Identifying relevant studies***

Because the studies we are looking for are at the crossroads of two scientific disciplines, religious studies and social sciences, we searched four different databases: Atla RDB, ProQuest (Sociological abstracts), Scopus and Web of Science. Atla Religion Database focusses on religion and theology, ProQuest and Scopus focus on social sciences and Web of Science covers all scientific disciplines. To ensure a broad coverage of the available literature, we opted for a general key term “(faith-based) or (“faith based) AND organi\*ations” combined with terms related to poverty to include the studies related to the field of poverty aid: poor, poverty, deprivation, destitution, “low income”, underprivileged and deprived. Google Scholar was used to search for grey literature. To ensure a broad coverage of the faith-based organizations field we opted for a general term linked to poverty. Therefore, we used two searches in Google Scholar: “faith\*based organizations” AND poverty and “faith\*based organisations” AND poverty.

Our inclusion criteria were academic articles: (1) published from 2010 onwards; (2) written in English; (3) peer-reviewed; (4) that study contemporary FBOs. Grounds for exclusion were articles: (1) that only mention ‘FBOs’ but do not study them in the article; (2) that don’t mention the term ‘FBOs’ or any significant derivative; (3) with no clear focus on poverty; (4) focusing solely on health care. This last exclusion criterion was added because we want to focus on how FBOs are described within the domain of poverty. A number of articles focus solely on health care for people in poverty, the focus shifts here from FBOs to health care.

### ***Study selection***

The database search was implemented on March 16, 2021. The outcome of this search was a total of 11 results in Atla, 250 results in Sociological abstracts (ProQuest), 74 results in Scopus and 272 results in Web of Science. The Google Scholar search was performed on July

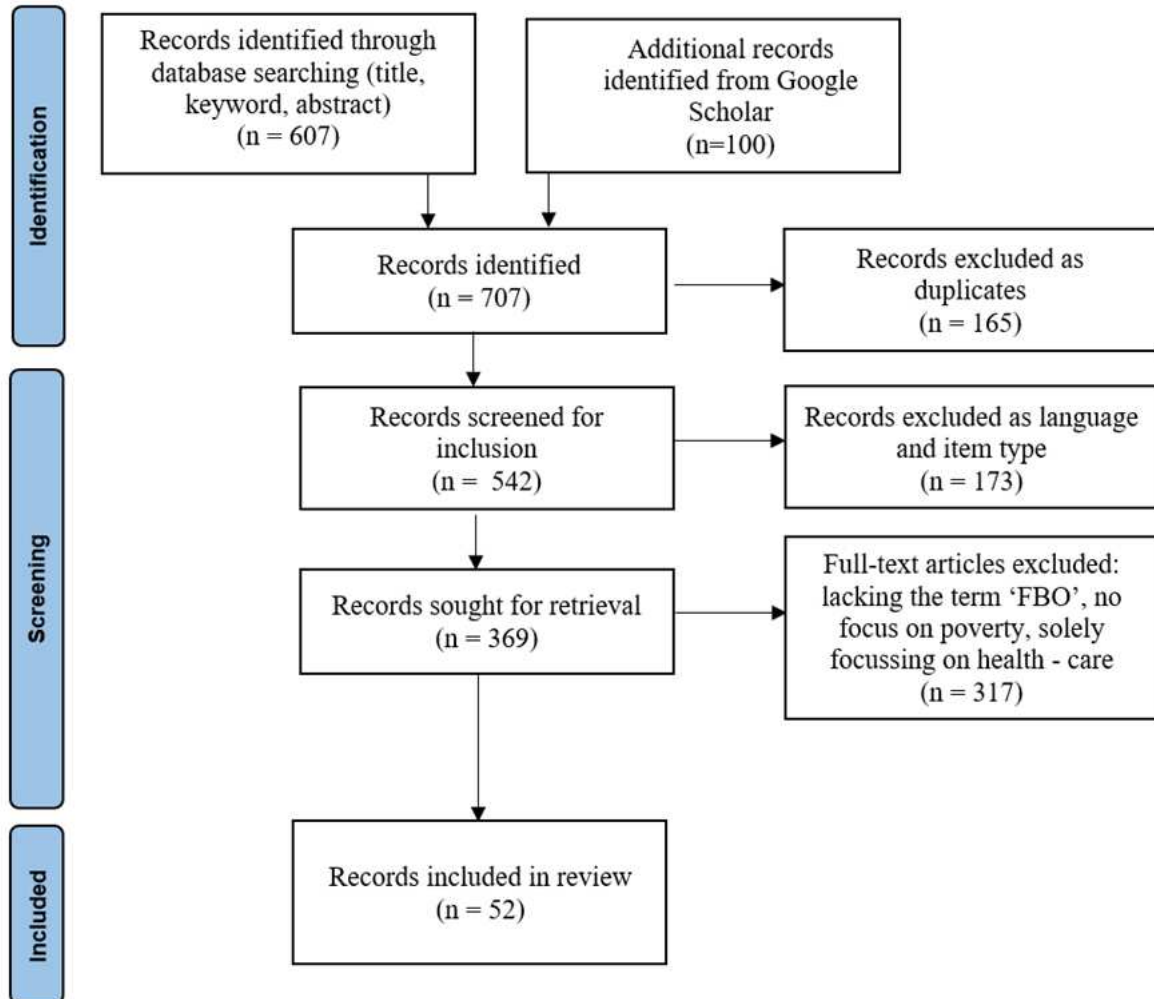
5, 2021. As suggested by Pham et al. (2014 :373), for this search the a priori decision was made to screen only the first 100 hits sorted by relevance.

We found 369 unique records after having identified the duplicates and a first screening taking in account our inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the next phase, the abstracts of these 369 were screened, guided by the inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in another 317 records to be excluded from the review. This left us with fifty-two records for full-text screening (see figure 1).



Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of study selection process. Page et al. (2021)

[Insert Figure 1 here]



## Results

The table below shows an overview of the 47<sup>1</sup> articles selected for full text analysis. For each article we analyzed the following elements, that all can be found in the table: the geographical background of the institutions the researchers are affiliated with, the definition of FBO<sup>2</sup> given in the article; whether or not congregations and churches are taken into account as FBOs; the geographical context of the research, the religions involved in the study and whether the study involves a single case or multiple cases.

Thirty-nine of these articles involve specific case studies, 14 single case and 25 multiple case studies. The other articles study in a more descriptive and general way the situation or the work of FBOs in a specific geographical context or are comparing two contexts. Most of the authors are affiliated to American (29%) or European (32%) institutions. Seven authors are affiliated to African; three Asian and three Australian institutions. When we look at the geographical context of the study, we find that 8 articles focus on the European context, 13 on the African context, 8 on the Asian context, 2 on the South American context and 12 on the North American context.

It is clear that faith-based organizations do not only operate within a national or regional context as social services working on poverty alleviation; an important number of our articles investigates FBOs within the development sector. Most articles discuss FBOs with a Christian background (29). Other articles focus on Muslim organisations (4) or on FBOs linked to different religions (28). A few articles (3) describe FBOs while not discussing specific religious backgrounds. We also examined whether churches and/or congregations

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<sup>1</sup> We left out the five articles that are literature reviews from the table

<sup>2</sup> When the definition of specific author(s) is used more than once, we give the complete the first time it appears in the table; on subsequent occasions we mention the author(s).

were included in the case studies of FBOs. The majority of articles (39) indeed includes them in their research. Four articles explicitly state they do *not* include churches and congregations in their definition and therefore we excluded them from their study as well. Four articles provide no or insufficient information on this.

When we take a closer look at the articles who define FBOs (41), we notice that 23 of the articles use definitions by other authors and 18 provide their own definition. We discuss the use of the different definitions in our general findings section.

[Insert table 1 here]

Table 1 – overview of the articles

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Author(s) geographical context</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Congregations included?</b>	<b>Geographical context</b>	<b>Religions involved</b>	<b>Single or Multiple</b>
Ali & Hatta, 2014	Bangladesh and Malaysia	"Are associated with various religions are active in assisting the community at large and their specific constituents in getting aid, subsidies, community work, and counselling. These organizations have been delivering their services based on their respective religious values. Their social support and services include providing shelter and care to orphans, people with a physical or mental disability, elderly people, the poor, problem children, women, and disaster victims, to name some."	Yes	Bangladesh, Malaysia & Indonesia	Muslim	Multiple
Beukes, 2019	South-Africa	"Are a part of NGOs: they play an important role in addressing a range of socioeconomic challenges within South Africa and are often working at the coalface of poverty and inequality, addressing the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. Faith and religion are an essential component of identity." "If a CBO (community based organisation or grass root	No	South Africa	Christian, specific	Multiple

		organisation) is faith-based, it may also be called an FBO."				
Bolger, 2020	USA	"Organizations that serve the nations' most vulnerable citizens inspired by their faith." White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian, specific	Multiple (2)
Carino, 2016	South-Africa	"The term is used to broadly embrace social development organisations run either by churches or Christians as well as faith-inspired NGOs. It should be noted that the term used to describe FBOs in Chinese (you zhongjiao beijing de cheshan jigou) would roughly be translated as 'religious philanthropic organisations."	Yes	China	Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, Protestant, Muslim	Multiple

Cascale, Nixon, Flicker, Rubincam, & Jenney, 2010	South Africa, Canada & UK	"An umbrella term to encompass a multiplicity of entities connected to a faith community, including: a) (often complex) leadership structures of religious institutions, b) local congregations or assemblies, and c) any formal or informal organisation initiated by a religious institution or some of its members (Liebowitz, 2002). Some of these components of faith networks may not even represent the views of the religious institution to which they are linked or else they may have differing degrees of religious influence" Liebowitz, J. (2002)	Yes	South Africa	Christian	Multiple
Cnaan & Newman, 2010	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Various	Unclear
Dahan, 2019	Israel	"Associations driven by religious motivation."		Israel	Jew	Single
Day, 2013	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian, specific	
Deacon, 2012	UK	"FBDO (Faith - based development organisations) have two missions: (1) provide basic services (such as health, education and shelter) and (2) impart skills and attitudes in order that people can work, save and increase their income. FBDOs partner up with local churches in attempts to bring about change through increasing and supporting entrepreneurship."	Yes	Kenya	Christian, specific	Single

Denning, 2019	UK	"Can take a variety of forms with different degrees to which faith is explicit, but broadly all respond to a form of need." Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	UK	Christian, specific	Multiple
Du Toit, 2019	South Africa	"Any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith." Clarke & Jennings (2007)	No congregations	South Africa	Christian	Multiple
Fridolfsson & Elander, 2012	Sweden	"Any organization that refers directly or indirectly to religion or religious values, and functions as providers of basic, emergency social services, and as instigators of political action, mobilization and contestation" Dierckx, Vranken & Kerstens (2009)	Yes	Sweden	Christian	
Grieve & Olivier, 2018	South-Africa	"The term FBNP (Faith Based non-profit Provider) refers to non-state, non-profit health providers who self-identify as being driven by religious values."		Ghana	Christian	Multiple
Hackworth, 2010	Canada	Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	USA	Christian, specific	multiple
Hankins & Walter, 2012	USA	None		USA	Christian	Multiple
Hiilamo, 2012	Finland	None	Yes	Finland	Protestant	Multiple
Hughes, 2019	USA	None		USA	Christian	Multiple
Jones, 2013	UK	Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	UK	Christian, Muslim	Single

Kirmani, 2012	UK	Comparison of definitions	Yes	Pakistan	Christian, Hindu, Muslim	Multiple
Kose, 2019	Turkey	"A broad group of diverse organizations that distribute social/humanitarian aid with a religious identity and motivation. Faith plays the central role in both gaining donations and running organizations. Some characteristics involve affiliation with a religious body, a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values, financial support from religious sources, choice of programs, and intended outcomes"	Yes	Turkey	Muslim	Multiple
Kvasny & Lee, 2011	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian, specific	
Lancione, 2014	UK	White House Office (1996)	Yes	Italy, Turin	Christian, specific	Multiple
Lengel & Holdsworth, 2015	USA	"As important (inter)cultural sites, and traces an FBOs secular-religious location on the Cultural Identity Spectrum to critically engage cultural discourses surrounding the organization, to shift its identity to serve historically marginalized groups."	Yes	USA	Christian	Single
Littlefield, 2010	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian, specific	Multiple
Lusk & Corbett, 2021	USA	None	Yes	Latin America		



Malcom, 2012	UK	"An organization with a main purpose that is not religious, but which has firm links to a religious tradition."	No	UK		
Mashau, 2012	South Africa	"Any organisation with a focus on faith. Churches on their own are not FBOs they need faith - based organizations in providing help to poor people."	No	South - Africa	Christian	Single
Matous, Wang, & Lau, 2021	Australia, Canada	"Are religiously affiliated they have a particularly strong presence in neglected, underserved and hard to reach populations where government programs may not be available, effective or are not trusted by the targeted communities"	Yes	Philippines	Christian	Single
Mitchell, 2016	Australia	"Formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operates [sic] on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good" Berger (2003)	Yes	Central Europe & Central Africa	Christian	Single
Morvaridi, 2013	UK	Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	Turkey	Muslim	
Moyer, 2015	Canada	Berger (2003)	No	Kenia	Christian	Multiple
Ntakirutimana, 2018	South Africa	None	Yes	South Africa	Christian, specific	Single
Occhipinti, 2013	USA	Berger (2003)	Yes	Argentina	Christian	Multiple

Olarinmoye, 2012	UK	Clarke & Jennings (2007)	Yes	Nigeria	Christian, Islam and traditional religions	Multiple
Philips, 2010	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian	Multiple
Purser & Henningan, 2017	USA	White House Office (1996)	Yes	USA	Christian	Single
Sakai, 2012	Australia	Clarke & Jennings (2007)	Yes	Indonesia	Muslim, Christian, Buddhist	Multiple
Skjortnes, 2014	Norway	Clarke & Jennings (2007)	Yes	Madagascar	Lutheran and Christian	
Snyder, Bell & Busch-Armendariz, 2015	UK & USA	"Can indicate anything from a place of worship engaging in one local activity to large-scale, multi-site and multi-program services agencies only very loosely connected with religious bodies. Politically, they can be conservative or progressive. In this study, FBO is understood as a broad term encompassing all of these categories."	Yes	USA	Not specified	Multiple
Sookrajh & Chetty, 2012	South-Africa	None	Yes	South Africa	Hinduism	Single
Strothmann, 2012	Germany	Clarke & Jennings (2007)	Yes	Pakistan	Muslim	Single

Taylor, 2012	UK	"ROs (Religious Organisations) are difficult to define but include local congregations, in churches and mosques for example, regional and national religious organisations, umbrella bodies such as ecumenical councils or councils of Islamic affairs, and faith-based NGOs working alone or together in consortia. In this paper the term religious organisation (RO) refers to most of these with the possible exception, as we shall note, of local congregations."	Yes	Nigeria & Tanzania	Christian, Muslim	Multiple
Thornton Sakai Hassall, 2012	Australia	Clarke & Jennings (2007)	Yes	Asia	Christian	Multiple
van Zeeland, 2016	Brazil and South Africa	"Are organisations that are based on the core values of their faith. FBOs can be very heterogeneous and complex, making generalizations problematic. The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities uses the terms 'FBOs', 'faith groups' and 'faith communities' for 'entities that are self-defined by common religiously informed profession (faith) and practice (ethics and/or worship), their leaders and congregational and community infrastructures, as well as for faithlinked healthcare providers and NGOs'."	Yes	South Africa and Latin America	Christian	Multiple
Wier, 2014	UK	Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	UK	Christian	Single

Yang, 2014	China	"Provide holistic community care by coupling assistance with promoting more favorable attitudes towards and perceptions of migrants in their communities. Fundamental to the basic protection of refugees is not only their legal recognition and protection but also their acceptance by the local community."	Yes	India	Christian	Multiple
Zavos, 2019	UK	Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011)	Yes	UK	Sikh, Islam and Hindu	Multiple

## **General findings**

Most articles included in this review were found to be published by American scholars, to concern an American context, and/or to use an American definition. The term FBO certainly comes from an American context, and contrary to our initial assumption that it by now would be a widely recognized and broadly used, it still appears to be primarily an American term.

In the United States the term "faith-based organization" for the first time came to the fore in 1996, when the so-called Charitable Choice Act allowed congregations and churches to apply for funds directly when they through faith-based organizations provided social services (Biebricher, 2011; Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a,b). As a result of this act the term "faith-based organization" (FBO) became widely used in the American context. Scholars picked up the term faith-based organizations, and between 1997 and 2011, there was a rise in papers examining typologies, characteristics and definitions of FBOs (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a). In our review eight authors explicitly cite and use the broad description of FBOs of the 1996 Charitable Choice Act.

None of the articles involving American authors question the term FBO; rather, they believe that it is well-known and frequently used. On the other hand we see a lot more various definitions of FBO in the European setting, which is certainly not homogeneous and quite different from the American. Not only regarding the European welfare state environment, but also as far as secularization and the public and private roles of religion are concerned (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). FBOs operating in the United States or from the United States (when working on development aid) get much more and more stable state funding than their overseas counterparts. Because of the recognition of the State, FBOs in the American context are also more accepted (Cnaan & Newman 2010) in the social services field than FBOs in the European context.

Nonetheless, in Europe too, religiously inspired solidarity can play or rather continues to play an important role in the welfare system. Indeed, against the background of the state's retrenchment, religious organizations offer support to the most vulnerable poor people and newcomers in European cities (Beaumont & Cloke, 2012). The European FACIT ('Faith-based organisations and exclusion in European cities') project, that tried to capture this role of FBOs in European cities, resulted in a small increase of articles about FBOs within the European context, though the project did not herald the beginning of a general acceptance or use of the term FBO within the context of poverty relief in Europe. Within the domain of poverty aid in the global south, non-governmental organization (NGO) is a widely used term for the organizations working in development aid. Five articles in our review focusing on this context, opposed the use of the term FBO, as this incorrectly would suggest that FBOs (religion-based initiatives) and NGOs are two separate or even opposing categories (Clarke, 2006; Occhipinti, 2013; Clarke & Ware, 2015).

The term FBO so far has only had limited success in spreading from its American roots and context to Europe and the rest of the world. Because the use of the term FBO was a selection criterium in this scoping review, it seems very likely that a large number of articles on religion and poverty alleviation that were *not* using this term, were not identified and not selected for inclusion. In any case, the number of papers that do combine the keywords FBO and poverty alleviation while not having an American connection, remains quite limited. FBO does not seem to be the undisputed standard term, routinely used by all researchers everywhere, when discussing poverty alleviation involving religious organizations.

Few new definitions can be found in the papers included in this scoping review. Although a limited number of authors (20) present their own definition, most of them

are actually modifications or adaptations of existing definitions. One could argue that the major debates on the definition of FBOs took place before to 2010, and hence before the time period (2011-2021) this scoping review covers. An overview of this discussion is given in the article of Bielefeld & Cleveland (2013a), though one should keep in mind that these authors only focus on studies within the US context. In any case, definitions that are often used in the articles under scrutiny date from the period before 2010. This is the case for the definition of the White House (1996) [used 8 times]; Berger (2003) [used 3 times] and Clarke & Jennings (2007) [used 6 times]. The definition of Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011), used six times, is an exception, though this can be explained by the fact that it is a definition from the British context, where the term FBO emerged only later, after it was already developed in the American context.

### ***Faith and Religion***

A comparison of the different definitions [22] found in our scoping review gives us an idea of the elements that constitute a faith-based organization. All definitions first of all in one way or another refer to religion as base or source. A number of definitions [8] does this by simply repeating the word faith in the term in the definition itself, for example:

*“Any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith” (Clarke & Jennings, 2007)*

*“Any organization with a focus on faith...” (Mashau, 2012)*

Second, there are a number of definitions [8] that, in the definition itself, replace the term faith with religion or religious and talk about the religious values or religious motivation of FBOs. A few examples:

*...delivering their services based on their respective religious values... ” (Ali & Hatta, 2014)*

*“... driven by religious motivation.” (Dahan, 2019)*

Another way of making the link between FBOs and religion, found in six definitions, is by defining FBOs as organizations that collaborate with religious congregations, e.g.:

*“...that partner up with local churches...” (Deacon, 2012)*

Though it is clear in all studies that a religious link is an essential ingredient of the identity of FBOs, a number of authors note a problem with using the word faith in this context. Bielefeld & Cleveland (2013a,b) “reserve the use of the term faith to describe specifically Christian activities” and use the term religious/religion in other contexts. Indeed, probably to avoid a Christian (and more specifically: Protestant) bias (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a,b), faith is replaced in half of the definitions by ‘religion’ or ‘religious’. In any case we believe that when working in a globalized world where in most contexts different religions are present and active, it is not wise to use a term (*faith*-based organization) or a concept (faith) that in important ways too much reflects a Christian (Protestant) preoccupation with personal faith (*sola fide*) and by doing so at the same times singles out the personal, individual experiential dimension of religion - only one of the several dimensions of religion and not necessarily of central importance in all traditions and for all persons as the place where solidarity is born or situated (Glock & Stark, 1965)..



The last element we researched within this religious aspect of the definition of FBO is whether or not churches and/or congregations themselves are included in the definitions and considered as types or examples of FBOs. It is clear that when we look at the case selection of the studies reviewed here, churches or congregations do indeed regularly get studied as FBO cases. For example, Beukens (2019) investigates the Congregation of Paarl and Strothmann (2012) explores solidarity for the poor by volunteers working at the Data Darbar Sufi Shrine and its mosque. The vast majority of the definitions on the other hand do *not* mention churches or congregations explicitly in their definition. There are however a few exceptions:

*"are difficult to define but include local congregations, in churches and mosques for example, regional and national religious organisations, umbrella bodies such as ecumenical councils or councils of Islamic affairs..."* (Taylor, 2012)

*"An umbrella term to encompass a multiplicity of entities connected to a faith community, including: a) (often complex) leadership structures of religious institutions, b) local congregations or assemblies, and c) any formal or informal organisation initiated by ..."* (Cascale et al., 2010 & Liebowitz, 2002)

*"Entities that are self-defined by common religiously informed profession (faith) and practice (ethics and/or worship), their leaders and congregational and community infrastructures, as well as for faith linked healthcare providers and NGOs"* (van Zeeland, 2016)

Mashau (2012) on the other hand (and he is the only one to do so) emphasizes in his definition the fact that churches themselves are not FBOs. *"...Churches on their own are not FBOs; they need faith - based organizations in providing help to poor people..."*

Though we of course fully acknowledge the impressive and wide-ranging ways in which churches as churches or religious communities or congregations as communities and congregations practice solidarity, in our view it would be rather

strange to call churches, communities or congregations themselves faith-based (or religion-based) organizations. This would not only be quite tautological, but would also imply once again the unproven primacy of the individual experience over the communal dimension of religion while at the same time reducing churches/religious communities/congregations to their social function (providing solidarity).

### ***Organizations or initiatives?***

A second characteristic of FBOs, according to the definitions given in the articles included in this review, is the fact that they are presented as *organizations*, i.e. are seen, in one way or another, as structured entities with a shared goal or purpose. The majority of definitions [14] simply repeats the term organization in its definition, without any further explanation.

This choice for the word organization is not without its consequences, as it affects the scope of the studies and the inclusion and exclusion of a number of initiatives. When the emphasis is placed on the fact that one is dealing with formal organizations and therefore the structural form of an organization must be present, informal initiatives or smaller grassroots organizations are excluded (cfr. *infra*). Though in the definition they use, these authors do *not* explain or specify the formal or structural characteristics of faith-based organizations, if we look at the selection criteria used in the empirical part of these studies we do find that these formal organizational characteristics do play an important role. For example, Du Toit (2019) states that: "*Thus, the organizations we included in the study are all recognized legal entities such as nonprofit organizations, trusts, and public benefit organizations, but they do not include the more informal community-based organizations (CBOs) or congregations, denominations, missionary groups, and educational institutions, which might be included in broader definitions.*"

As already stated above, FBO as a term is often rejected within the discourse of development aid because of a preference for the use of the general umbrella term NGO. Therefore, when investigating the organizational structure of a faith-based development organisation, the general structural characteristics of a NGO are put forward: “*a formal [highlight ours] organisation ... which operates on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good*” (Berger, 2003 & Mitchell, 2016). So here too we find this stress on the structural characteristics of the initiatives that are included.

A smaller number of definitions [6] on the other hand point out that they are not only including formal organizations, but are explicitly looking for different types of organizations. A few examples:

*"Can take a variety of forms with different degrees to which faith is explicit, but broadly all respond to a form of need."* (Cloke, Williams & Thomas, 2011)

*"An umbrella term to encompass a multiplicity of entities connected to a faith community, including: a) (often complex) leadership structures of religious institutions, b) local congregations or assemblies, and c) any formal or informal organisation initiated by ..."* (Cascale et al., 2010 & Liebowitz, 2002)

Finally, there is a small number of authors that goes even further and explicitly rejects the term organization (and thus the term FBO), precisely in order to be able to include smaller, often informal entities. For this reason Moyer, Olarinmoye and Snyder prefer the term faith-based initiatives over the term faith-based organizations (Moyer, 2015; Olarinmoye, 2012; Snyder, 2015) whereas Kvasny chooses the term faith-based community organizations (Kvasny, 2011). We agree with these authors that ‘organizations’ is restrictive and fails to detect many types and instances of religiously inspired solidarity. Therefore, we too prefer of the word initiatives over the word

organizations. Using the word initiatives allows to also include and detect small, bottom-up initiatives and forms of religiously inspired solidarity that do not have the formal structure of an organization (Schrooten & Trappers, 2019). From the preliminary results of our own fieldwork in Belgium we know that in migrant churches and religious congregations solidarity numerous solidarity initiatives are taken that on the one hand do not lead (or have not yet lead) to the development of separate and/or more formal ‘organizations’ but on the other hand prove to be clear examples of effective and widespread religiously inspired solidarity.

### ***What FBOs do***

FBOs differ in the way they are based on or inspired by religion and in the way they are organized. If, however, we look at the 13 definitions that specify what FBOs *do* we find a lot of similarities. We can identify four categories of activities: 1) providing basic services, 2) empowering people, 3) politicizing and 4) community work. An example of the first category and second category is given in the definition of Deacon (2012):

*"...have two missions: (1) provide basic services (such as health, education and shelter) and (2) impart skills and attitudes in order that people can work, save and increase their income..."*

To the provision of basic services Dierckx et al. (2009) add the political function of FBOs:

*"...and functions as providers of basic, emergency social services, and as instigators of political action, mobilization and contestation."* (Dierckx, Vranken & Kerstens, 2009)

In his definition of FBO, Yang (2014) emphasizes also the importance of community work:

*"Provide holistic community care by coupling assistance with promoting more favorable attitudes towards and perceptions of migrants in their communities..."*

From these examples it is clear that supporting those in need, in one way or another, is what FBOs are all about. Knowing this, it is quite strange that not only solidarity as a general category (which, inspired by Stjernø (2004), could be defined as the willingness to aid others based on feelings of shared fate) is not used in any definition but that this essential solidarity is also not visible at all in the term FBO itself.

According to the different definitions, FBOs are doing the same sort of work in Europe and the US when combatting poverty and social exclusion: soup kitchens, providing of clothing, help with homework, housing, sometimes also help in finding a job or medical help etc. Moreover, there is one important similarity that all authors (including those focusing on development aid) seem to agree on, that is the fact that, FBOs reach those ‘beyond the fringes of society’ (Cnaan & Newman, 2010; Clarke & Ware, 2015). The definition of Beukens (2019) is an excellent example:

*“...working at the coalface of poverty and inequality, addressing the poorest and most vulnerable members of society...”* (Beukens, 2019)

FBOs are able to do this because they are often embedded in the communities of the people they work with and/or play an important role in community development work (Cnaan & Newman, 2010; Lengel & Holdsworth, 2015; Snyder et al. 2015). This is especially the case in those communities where government programs are not trusted, effective or available. Helping those in need seems to be in the religious historical DNA of FBOs and thus part of the core mission of many of these organizations (Wier, 2014; Grieve & Oliver, 2018; Sookrajh & Chetty, 2012). Matous et al. (2021) point out the benefits of faith-based community programs when compared to secular community-development interventions. According to them church attendance has a positive influence on people’s health, as FBOs can influence the behavior of their members as well as care for them when in need. A faith component that incorporates religious

teachings that fit the participants' religious views can also improve cultural targeting of interventions and in this way help to get the message across (Resnicow et al., 2005).

Another strength of FBOs put forward in the included articles is the fact that because of their religious inspiration FBOs are often embedded in and can rely on large, global religious networks (Snyder et al., 2015; Littlefield, 2010).

## **Discussion**

The term Faith-Based Organization is clearly a U.S. term, created during the development of new legislation enabled religious congregations, through the establishment of specific non-profit secular organizations -FBOs-, to receive state funding for the social services they provided. Within this very specific American context, there appears to be widespread agreement on the use and the general meaning of the term FBO.

Though the definition given by the White House is shared by many, mostly American, authors, we cannot speak of a universal definition of FBO that is widely accepted by both researchers and field workers across the world. Even in the American context, authors describe and/or categorize FBOs in different ways. In the international context, we note that there is no widely agreed upon definition of FBOs within the development aid sector. In this context several authors even explicitly reject the term FBO. Within the European continent we notice a variation of definitions and explanations that show how difficult it is to define the term FBO.

There is not only this lack of consensus regarding the use and definition of the term. We also note a number of important drawbacks of the term FBO. The central presence of *faith* in the term is problematic because this concept is too closely linked to the Christian and more specifically to the Protestant tradition. In a globalized world in which different traditions are present, this is a bias we should avoid (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013 a, b). In addition, the use of the word *organization* prevents us from seeing the full width of religious solidarity as it tends to neglect or even exclude initiatives without a formal organizational structure. Finally, the term FBO is lacking in specificity as it does not refer in any way to what these organizations are doing or are

supposed to do. Solidarity is the core businesses of the organizations studied under the umbrella of FBO but is paradoxically enough not part of the term at all.

We chose to use the term FBO and therefore the search term "faith\*based organi\*ations" in this scoping review because the international literature shows that this term is a key term in research on religion and poverty, used in the U.S. context and in Europe and other parts of the world (Bielefeld & Cleveland 2013a, Crisp, 2017, Beaumont & Cloke 2012). This choice creates an important limitation of the study, as we are only reviewing the literature that uses the term faith-based organizations and, of course, not all research on poverty and religion published between 2010 and 2021. A second limitation of this review is the fact that we, like earlier reviews (Bielefeld & Cleveland 2013&; 2013b; Clarke & Ware, 2015; Hancox, 2019; Offut et al., 2016) and in line with the aim of the larger research project this scoping review is part of, have restricted ourselves to literature on FBOs *and poverty*. Though many FBOs are active in the broad field of poverty alleviation and many studies and reviews focus on these FBOs, FBOs are of course active in many other domains such as international aid, politics, and medical aid. (Cloke, Williams & Thomas (2011) ;Beaumont & Cloke (2012)). , We recommend that further research on the concept of FBO is conducted in other domains to investigate whether the concept takes on different meanings in different contexts and situations.



## Conclusion

To the very specific American background of the concept, the aforementioned lack of consensus and the significant drawbacks of the term should be added that, despite our broad search of various databases over a ten-year period (2010-2021), we only found a limited number of articles that used and/or defined the term FBO. Contrary to what we expected at the start of our scoping review FBO does not seem to be a term that has the wind in its sails and is becoming more popular year after year. Because of all this, in our future research we decided not to stick to the term Faith-Based Organization. If we, as social work researchers, want to study and do justice to the many different ways many different religions all over the world inspire and practice solidarity, we need a more open and better concept. We suggest to replace it by the term 'religion-based solidarity initiatives' (RSIs). We define RSIs as: *'Initiatives that, from a religious inspiration, aim at organizing collective action for and/or providing support or services to people in vulnerable positions.* These initiatives can range from small scale ad hoc initiatives till large scale formal organizations.

This new concept does *not* suffer from a christian or protestant bias, does not have this very specific legal and American background, enables us to include and make visible informal initiatives in which religiously inspired solidarity is shown and practiced and at the same time, unlike the term faith-based organization, this concept clearly distinguishes what types of initiatives we are focusing on: not just any religion-based initiative with what-ever religious or other goal, but specifically those initiatives that are oriented towards solidarity with those in need by providing support and services and/or collective social action.

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