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LARGER-PRINT VERSION

Beyond the Obama Plan For Faith-Based Initiatives

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Recently, Senator Barack Obama announced his plan for the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives if he became president. Although his proposals are in the right direction, other formative measures can be taken to strengthen community and individual empowerment through more assured nonsectarian processes.

In the faith-based program initiated by President Bush, federal funds given to religious organizations for social services were not to be used to proselytize. Rather, the funds were to be distributed by these organizations to people in need, regardless of their religion, and to be used for secular social and economic activities. Senator Obama stated that he would uphold these important guidelines while extending the scope of the nondiscrimination clause to include people hired by faith organizations to administer community initiatives. Though a positive step, the extension is likely to only moderately allay concerns about government-religion entanglement and the use of the program to promote partisan interests, especially in the context of recent allegations from some of the program's former officials.

In its current form, the program supplies some guidance to religious organizations, large and small, about ways to access federal funding. To this end, point people, assigned in the eight participating federal departments and two agencies, assist religious groups in the application process on how to provide financial support for their faith-based initiatives. Senator Obama suggests extending this support through training of religious groups on how the federal funding system works and how to obtain the finances they need to run their social services. This training would give many organizations an opportunity to make a real difference in their communities that they may not have had otherwise.

Senator Obama's plan to target and expand initiatives that address key areas the program currently contributes to, most prominently afterschool and summer programs in education that would serve 1 million students, is also bold. Indeed, altogether, his proposals are helpful. However, additional reforms would enable religious organizations with federal support to more effectively provide social services while more rigorously maintaining the separation between church and state.

The following are three suggestions:

1. Connect interfaith partnership to receiving funding: In announcing his plan, Senator Obama referred to the importance of interfaith coalitions. He said that they are needed to impact enormous challenges, such as children living in poverty. From a developmental perspective, the importance of partnership here cannot be overemphasized.

In a developmental partnership, each partner brings essential inputs - technical, financial, administrative, labor, and/or other resources - to help achieve the goals of the project. In recent years, the idea of partnership has become an inseparable part of the concept of sustainable development: the more groups and individuals that come together to support an initiative, the more people there are that work to see it endure and therefore the better chance that it will. For example, partnerships mean more eyes on the finances and project materials, which help to prevent corruption and mismanagement.

In the context of faith-based initiatives, opportunities to proselytize a particular religious doctrine or serve a partisan interest become more infrequent when diverse interfaith coalitions participate. Strongly linking interfaith partnerships with funded initiatives will give real meaning to the new name Senator Obama proposes for the faith-based program - Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood

Partnerships.

2. **Require 501c3 nonprofit incorporation:** One way to ensure that federal funds for social services do not mingle with these institutions' general funds, which can be used for inherently religious purposes, is for faith-based institutions to create a separate nonprofit organization in the Internal Revenue Services' 501c3 category. This simple procedure will bring more transparency and organizational structure to the overall management of the community initiatives. The web site of the White House faith-based program currently mentions that some religious organizations have already created a separate 501c3 organization to manage their federally funded social services, but the site stops short of encouraging this practice.

3. **Promote "participatory" initiatives:** Experts in community development and the overwhelming majority of the literature on the subject underscore at least one of its guiding premises: when communities themselves determine, implement, and manage the social initiatives intended to benefit them, the initiatives are significantly more likely to succeed and the attributes of empowerment, including informed decision-making, are better instilled. This observation, based on experience, is captured in Senator Obama's frequent statements, including his recent speech about the faith-based program, that show him as strongly favoring "bottom-up" versus "top-down" approaches to social change.

Participation of community members, from design to evaluation and for the life of the initiative, ought to be a major criterion for federal funding. Support for this goal can be a way for Senator Obama to show he stands by his own words when he says that taxpayer dollars for faith-based initiatives "will only go to those programs that actually work." And such participation will make it more difficult to advance partisan interests because the communities themselves will be ultimately in control of the faith-based initiatives. In addition to training religious organizations in navigating the federal funding system that Senator Obama proposes, skills can be transferred for these organizations to promote community management of development initiatives.

Yossef Ben-Meir is a former Peace Corps volunteer and president of the High Atlas Foundation (www.highatlasfoundation.org), a nonprofit organization that promotes community development in Morocco.

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