Ecumenical social activism and transnational connections between Brazil and Britain: Theoretical and practical understandings of ecumenism

Abstract

This article, in the first of a two-part series, focuses on how activist practitioners in Christian faith-related non-governmental organisations relate to and develop ecumenical relationships/networks within their work on issues that cross international borders between Brazil and Britain. We draw on literature and interviews with practitioners within related Christian organisations giving their accounts of links among organisations in the two countries which they understand as being ecumenical. Attention is drawn to the complexities of understanding theoretical meanings of 'ecumenism' within historical developments, different contemporary contexts, and networks that connect these together. We highlight the significance of ecumenism to what Christian social activists do and how ecumenism has informed both the rationale for their engagement and the institutional framework for their initiatives. The article explores the diverse, sometimes quite intricate, connections among such organisations, following a double pattern: a growing visibility of faith-based *social activism* and a strategic recourse to network-based forms of institutional and collective action, both as an operational and political resource. A new integrated analysis is offered of how the interviewed practitioners in Christian organisations described the development of these network relationships across borders and differences, with a particular innovative focus on Brazil and the UK. The article draws on thematic analysis of 42 semi-structured interviews with practitioners (conducted 2015-2018), with supporting online research (2015-2022).

Key words:

Ecumenism, Christianity, transnational networks, social activism, power

Introduction

This article is the first of a two-part series exploring ecumenical relationships and networks of activist practitioners in Christian faith-related non-governmental organisations on issues that cross international borders between Brazil and Britain. An approach to transnational network-building is used drawing on literature and interviews with practitioners within related Christian organisations giving their accounts of links among organisations in the two countries. These links include whether there is a British global ecumenical agency with an office in Brazil, a British organisation supporting projects of Brazilian organisations, or Brazilian and British organisations participating in transnational or global networks of advocacy. They also include ecumenical links between organisations/churches within each context, as far as they can be articulated with social activism of some sort. This first article highlights the diverse, sometimes quite intricate, connections among such organisations, following a double pattern: a growing visibility of faith-based *social activism* and a strategic recourse to network-based forms of institutional and collective action, both as an operational and political resource. This goes beyond more conventional accounts of "religion" as a

transnational (f)actor in international relations, and nation-bound forms of religious social and political activism, calling for more complex views of how religious motivations, strategic action, and engagement with non-religious structures and agendas interconnect *glocally* (that is, though a local-global complex dynamics) in contemporary scenarios.

Through this analysis, we aim to offer a new integrated analysis of how the interviewed practitioners in Christian organisations described the development of these network relationships across borders and differences, with a particular innovative focus on Brazil and the UK.

To do this, we begin in this initial article by outlining why studying transnational social activism is important, before outlining the empirical approach taken in this research, which will be provided in the next piece. We go on to consider the complexities of understanding theoretical meanings of 'ecumenism' within historical developments, different contemporary contexts, and networks that connect these together. Next, we begin to engage with some of the empirical data underlying the argument, by highlighting the significance of ecumenism to what Christian social activists do and how it has informed both the rationale for their engagement and the institutional framework for their initiatives (as organisations and movements). This sets an important theoretical and practical context of diverse understandings of ecumenism as a basis for more extensive analysis of the empirical data in the subsequent second article in this series. There, we consider practitioners' perspectives on how they view their potential and role, by focusing on the different rationales that they deploy which shape who they prioritise in terms of their ecumenical engagement with other Christian actors, and why, as well as how this fits within their wider networks of relationships. Together, the analysis across the two-part article series focuses particularly on the forms of everyday ecumenical relationships that are being shaped, and how these can develop different forms of power that result from this engagement that support them in achieving their aims.

1. Why study transnational religious social activism?

Previous research increasingly highlights the importance of recognising religious faith as a factor within social action, social welfare and international development practice. This contribution has included mobilising religious constituencies to get involved in this work at different levels and in different ways, whilst contributing to various opportunities and

controversies in terms of the impact this may have in practice (e.g., United Nations Development Programme 2014 and many others including: Singh, Marquette, and Alolo 2007; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Gwiazdowski 2014; Bäckström and Davie 2016). Detailed studies highlight the complex dynamics for organisations working across national borders within this field, as they engage with glocal issues and connect to varying degrees with those who hold similar and different identities to themselves across different scales (Haynes 2016; 2001; Lehmann 2016). Whilst wider sub-disciplines such as social movement studies and international development studies have engaged with the complexity of these international and glocal connections more widely (as represented in Kriesi et al. 2019; Haynes and Hennig 2013), there remains much scope for theoretically understanding further the role of religion and religious movements (e.g. Snow and Beyerlein 2019; Smilde, Velasco, and Rubin 2014) and secular/religious dynamics (Wilkinson 2020) within these. Related literature has included explorations of particular denominational movements involved in service across borders (Cherry and Ebaugh 2014), with complex interactions with local faith actors (Kraft and Wilkinson, 2020), as well as various instances of ecumenical Christian social service internationally (Ampony et al. 2021; Stamatov 2010). According to Stamatov, there are strong historical links between the emergence of long-distance advocacy and religious social engagement, which originates in the growing critical stance of religious activists following the post-XVIth-century European colonial expansion, taking sides with new and potential (cf. Stamatov 2010, 608).

When moving from this wider international context to explore specific transnational links involving connections between particular national and local contexts, and particular religions (in this article, focusing particularly on Christianity), more specific trends can be identified that indicate ways in which transnationalism, glocalisation and specific religions might intersect[1]. Research shows complex relationships across different geographic scales between local faith actors and international development agencies or political movements (Kraft and Wilkinson 2020; Paredes 2010). As well as in comparative work, these complex relationships across scales can be seen in more detailed studies of the complexities of these dynamics and

[1] There is a variety of approaches to how these three dimensions of analysis relate. Our focus is on ecumenical social activism and the building of network links among partners from different national contexts, observing Brazil and the UK as our cases. Thus, we do not address issues related to transnational missions and how they interact with local contexts (for some relevant work on this perspective, see Corten and Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Csordas, 2009; Oosterbaan et al., 2021).

relationships for and within single organisations as cases (cf. Loy 2017 on Christian Aid; Freeman 2019 on Tearfund). Within such literature, one can find connections that have roots in long-term historic processes, in which, for instance, religion and colonialism are linked, and/or where the challenges of subsequently consolidating mission initiatives abroad stimulated the building of relational bridges locally and across borders. Such connections have developed in which religious agency and social activism cross ways, either following existing transnational movements or leading new efforts. An example of the latter can be seen in Tearfund's intentional use of 'social movement' and 'movement building' conceptual terminology (Daehnhardt 2020). In such cases, action may include dimensions of bridge-building, collaboration and enhancing the reach and visibility of small-scale actions through connections and dissemination across borders, whilst also often being entangled in complex identities and conflicts (e.g. Kraft 2020; Burity 2014; 2022). Ecumenism historically provides one of the languages and driving forces for these transnational and relational experiments in taking social action together, particularly between some different Christian groups, whilst the patterns of emergent relationships being complex and contextually variable (see Witte 2005; Wilkinson 2020; Werner and Ross 2021). As Stamatov argues, the history of such long-distance engagement with social issues from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, "display a persistent pattern in the origins of long-distance political advocacy: religious actors, radicalized in conflicts with rival imperial actors, embark on a course of political advocacy and, in the process, develop the institutional forms of what we know today as transnational activism." (Stamatov 2010, 616)

To illustrate such points briefly, and focusing on recent developments, let us highlight some contextualised examples of comparative trends from previous literature on each of the two countries that inform our analysis. From a Brazilian perspective, there has been a sustained process of engagement in political and social activism by a growing Pentecostal/Evangelical minority (which rose from 9% of the population in the early 1990s to a third of it in the 2020s); this generated momentum for a proliferation of projects run by denominational bodies or various forms of faith-based NGOs (Burity 2006; Tanaka 2019). This process of engagement in activism has pointed in markedly contrasting directions: a conservative Evangelical/Pentecostal mainly proselytising social activism and an ecumenical critical social activism. The latter has roots in many decades of ecumenical work in Latin America, taking a clearer identity from the mid-1950s, but showing the features we will analyse in this article as from the 1980s. Ecumenism here was for a time indistinguishable

from the liberation theology movement, but it has developed more distinctive and plural features over the past three decades. In the process, ecumenism has drawn ever nearer to the broad configuration of "NGOised" social movement networks[2] and expanded to take on both more pragmatic, grassroots forms, thus including evangelical and some secular organisations, and interfaith activism (FE Brasil 2006). In terms of social activism, the bulk of the evidence lies with the Catholic Church, since colonial times, through minority movements or official welfare initiatives (education, health service, welfare protection). Catholic Action movements, as of the 1920s, and more radical social engagement since the 1950s have been quite significant and provided an umbrella for other forms of church-based social activism among Protestants and even secular movements.

Within Britain, historic Christian social activism included involvement in forms of social welfare support that predated the development of the welfare state, to which Christian activism also substantially contributed (Jawad 2012; Prochaska 2006); it also historically included various missionary movements into other countries. Christian organisations and church denominations based in Britain have remained active in various related sectors since. This includes forming a substantial proportion of charities, including those operating both within Britain and in wider international development work.[3] Different strands of national and local Christian social action have operated from different political positions and adopted different models, including working within or alongside the state, operating as part of a wider charitable, welfare commissioning and social enterprise market, and protesting against particular domestic and/or international relations policies. When added to a population of

[2] The uses and definitions of "network" have become widespread, generating multiple approaches. We use the term to mean the creation and sustenance of personal and organisational ties around common issues or perceived threats and challenges calling for co-ordinated action. They have both local, transnational and global expressions, depending on the magnitude of the issues they address, or the need for local action to draw wider attention to blocked paths towards acknowledgement and solutions to those issues. Our focus is on networks that connect faith-based groups, organisations and persons across borders, seeking to cross doctrinal and denominational or faith-tradition boundaries. Ecumenism is one of the languages that, developing out of Christian aspirations of unity out of multiple divisions, expanded into deeper understandings of the implications of faith for social life. In building our own understanding of ecumenical networks we have drawn on a vast literature on social movements, transnational advocacy, network theory, ecumenism, as well as on practitioners' views of their engagement. For some of these references, see Keck and Sikkink 1998; Castells 2010; Tarrow 2005; Swyngedouw 2004; Haynes 2016; Ampony et al 2021; Bäckström and Davie 2016; Skreslet 1997; Gorman 2010; Kriesi et al 2019.

[3] According to Bull, Casas and Wharton, "23% (£16.3bn) of the charity sector's income in England and Wales is received by faith-based charities'' (Bull, Casas, and Wharton 2016, 2), with £11.2bn of this in Christian-specific charities. They add that "of all the charities that indicate they work in overseas aid we classified 49% as faith-based. That is the largest representation of faith-based charities working in any area" (Bull, Casas, and Wharton 2016, 9).

increasing religious and secular diversity (Office for National Statistics 2022b), diverse international connections and significant migration (Office for National Statistics 2022a), Britain is in an interesting position in terms of transnational religious social activism links. This is particularly the case with Britain increasingly reflecting on its current place within wider global interaction, including when facing criticisms of the impact of conditional philanthropy, neoliberal economics and colonial power dynamics, and the ways in which Christianity and different views of mission have frequently been entangled in these (Ingleby 2010; Veer 2001; Longkumer, Sørensen, and Biehl 2016).

At the same time, overall declining affiliation and attendance amongst traditional Christian denominations in Britain is creating existential questions and threats for some of these denominations (Voas and Watt 2013). Reducing numbers may undermine some of the traditional support base for transnational activism linked to these specific Christian identities, although some (Rich 2020) have argued that social action might contribute to church growth, at least locally, in some contexts. There remains some growth in some churches in particular areas, (e.g. particularly apparent in London), often supported by international migration of Christians from other parts of the world. There is also evidence of some transnational 'reverse mission' flows from the Global South seeking to re-evangelise Britain (Goodhew 2012; Davie 2015).

The impact of these trends on ecumenical interactions across denominations is mixed, as this article will go on to explore. However, those involved in social activism are increasingly engaging in critical reflection on their substantial engagement in various social issues such as food poverty, debt, homelessness, supporting asylum seekers and refugees and engaging in environmental activism, etc. (Cloke, May, and Williams 2020; Williams et al. 2016; Orton and Barclay 2020). When combined, these trends have prompted increased consideration of different forms of practical cooperation across increasing diversity in challenging conditions in England particularly, whilst involving continued differences over what ecumenicalism might mean and look like within this context (Mladin, Fidler, and Ryan, 2017). This context is also arguably leading some activists to engage in new forms of networking and organisation across Christian and wider identities, including transnationally, whilst supporting emerging recognition of the glocal dynamics in responding more effectively to particular social issues (Orton and Barclay 2020; Burity 2014).

The interactions between these Brazilian and British contexts, with their diverse

connections with religious social activism, within a wider international landscape that includes ecumenical relationships, provides the transnational focus for this article.

2. The empirical approach of this research

Our analysis is based on research involving theoretical literature, web-based documental research, and semi-structured interviews conducted (in person and online) with staff from various kinds of non-governmental or faith-based organisations or ecumenical activists in Brazil and the United Kingdom. Organisations/networks were identified and selected based on the following criteria: (a) that they identified as ecumenical or incorporated an ecumenical (and/or interfaith) understanding in their work - whether working with religious agents and organisations or embodying a faith perspective in their service provision; (b) that they operated transnationally and included the two countries in their regular work - whether by virtue of organic connections, such as an organisation base/office in both countries, or of project-based partnerships; (c) as an alternative to (b), that they operated locally within one of the countries but were part of networks including organisations representing (a) and/or (b). Once contacted, they pointed us to people who could be interviewed and discuss both their own insights and their institutional rationale of the organisations/networks they are involved with. The research project also included Argentina as a further point of comparison, but the interviews done with participants from that country will not be analysed here. Interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018, with 23 conducted in Brazil and 18 in the UK. Online research on the selected organisations' website was also completed between 2015 and 2022, to access documents (reports, position papers, statements, publications, etc.) and news items (that instantiate connections expressing networks in action - through events, press conferences, meetings, public demonstrations, advocacy actions, etc.).

A three-tiered set of cases was then selected. The first tier privileged cross-border links between Brazilian and British ecumenical organisations; the other two sought to capture broader forms of networks, including the former but also setting them against ever more complex scales of intervention, collaboration, and learning. From an initial mapping of UK-based organisations with links in Brazil, the first tier included practitioners from: Christian Aid, Cafod (Catholic Agency For Overseas Development), Tearfund, A Rocha, Anglican Alliance. The second tier included practitioners from more robust networks in which the UK, Latin America and Brazil were represented. Examples are ACT Alliance, Caritas International , World Vision International, the former Jubilee Debt Campaign (which extended well beyond the UK context

to form the Jubilee Network - including Jubilee South, with branches in Brazil and other Latin American countries), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, the Ecumenical Coalition (developed in the context of the World Social Forum experience) and the interfaith alliance Religions for Rights (created in the context of the Rio+20 UN meeting on environmental issues). In addition to these, a third tier included organisations that, operating nationally or locally, have experienced the various crisscrossing dynamics of interconnectedness, glocalisation and incorporation of issues that go beyond any local circumscription. In this case, practitioners from UK organisations Churches Together in England and Wales, Theos, Citizens UK, Church Action on Poverty, Refugee Support Network, Green Christian, and Catholic Association for Racial Justice were included. From Brazil, the following organisations were included: Koinonia, Ecumenical Service Coordination (CESE), ACT Brazil Ecumenical Forum (FEACT Brasil), Diaconia, Lutheran Diaconic Foundation (FLD), Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), and the Ecumenical Youth Network (REJU).

3. Understanding ecumenism as a language of social activism

"Ecumenism" within this research, for both heuristic and ethnographic reasons, was understood *beyond its institutional crystallisation of formal relationships between churches/denominations* (e.g. councils of churches, denominational departments of ecumenism, and regional ecumenical bodies). A wider understanding was employed, in which ecumenism was used to describe *any faith-based action which involves an awareness of religious diversity and seeks to be guided by a sense of connection beyond formal religious differences*. However, we recognise that understandings of this term may be contested in theory and practice (Gwiazdowski 2014; Arenas and Polanco 2021; Hookway et al. 2002; Bittencourt Filho 1996). Part of debates over understandings of this term might include questions relating to how broadly these relationships might extend beyond a Christian religious/denominational identity whilst still being seen as 'ecumenical'. Indeed, these debates may further include whether relationships with those who do not identify as Christian, including those who might identify as atheist/agnostic or with another religion, fit within this terminology or some other term, like 'interfaith'. Although ecumenism originates in a Christian theological intent, we claim, it was never without some kind of wider social expression beyond doctrinal, liturgical, and ecclesiastical matters, as witnessed by its "Life and Work" strand, its connections to the late-19th century and early-20th century socialist movement, and its emphasis on post-war reconstruction, decolonisation and social justice

promotion. That has led to a broader implication of the ecumenical ideal of (Christian) unity, whether thought through in theological and ethical terms or practically oriented towards others from various denominations, religions or none (Hookway et al. 2002; Barreto Jr. 2020). In some cases, these ideals and connections are at the heart of the identity of ecumenical organisations, and may be manifested in various ways including through non-discriminatory provision of services or collective mobilisation to people beyond the particular denominational or faith identity of those concerned. Ethnographically, organisations and groups moved by an ecumenical commitment or identification usually feature such a broad understanding, whether maintaining organisational and programmatic autonomy from ecclesiastical bodies or developing activities that are not circumscribed by church-related aims or rationales.

Ecumenism also represents a proxy for networking as it has historically been conceived and practised as perspectives and action in search of Christian unity and human solidarity across faith, cultural, social divides, and involved a strong element of social engagement (Witte 2005; Thompson 2012). In spite of its polemical history within Christian churches, we find that, on the ground, even some organisations that have resisted the more institutionalised expressions of the ecumenical movement have more recently developed views and practices that can be considered ecumenical, in the broader sense we describe. A similar reasoning might apply for the interfaith implications of the work done by the organisations researched, although here the distinction between principled and pragmatic relationships needs considering, with the need to recognise multiple potential reasons and rationales for engaging in these relationships (Orton 2016). The search for connections and cooperation across denominational differences and physical distances soon led to an ecumenical profile that anticipated - or at the very least mirrored - the network dynamics that became so prevalent in collective action, glocally, since the late-1980s (Burity 2022).

Whilst ecumenism involves a call to church unity (Mladin, Fidler, and Ryan, 2017), from the early years of this movement the prevailing view has been that this would not translate as the creation of a mega-institution, globally spread and hierarchically structured. The tensions between Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, for historical, political and identity reasons, would not go away, and related ritual, doctrinal and organisational differences within and between them would not be smoothed over. Navigating all sorts of theological, pastoral and strategic variations within and across these major sections of Christianity proved challenging to ecumenical thinkers and activists, leading to both narrower

and broader views of unity - strictly Christian, inter-religious, sociohistorical, local-based or global, institution- or solidarity-based, etc. Internal differences regarding the extent to which ecumenism was valued and accepted also mattered: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy are far from internally univocal on so many counts, and this is one of them. Indeed, disputes abound on how desirable and feasible ecumenical ideals are and how legitimate it is to extrapolate from ecumenical commitments towards inter-religious partnerships or dialogue. It is however the case that ecumenism has typically proven to be more conducive to interfaith relations than non-ecumenical views, adding to the difficulties of imagining and bringing about such unity beyond a church-form. In any case, unity was never a given or a trend, beyond deliberate efforts to carve it in some form or shape, and the distinctive ecumenical take has been seeking to articulate differences into (partial and contingent) convergences, cooperation, understanding, in the face of challenging divisions.

These institutional ecumenical developments can be compared and contrasted with forms of ecumenical *social activism* that involve a practice of *articulation* in relation to wider social issues. This articulation can be seen as the result of bringing together different demands, from those rooted in Christian ethical commitment to embody faith through consequential actions to those aiming to change situations of want, vulnerability, exclusion, oppression, and environmental crises through building movements, coalitions or advocacy initiatives that publicise and politicise those situations (Hall and Grossberg 1986; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Glynos and Howarth 2007). Articulation is not about merging differences into a seamless new agency. It is about establishing relations of *equivalence* between these differences by naming a common adversary or power constellation deemed responsible not only for the production of vulnerability, powerlessness and threat to forms of life, but also for refusing or ignoring responsibility for them. Articulation can also be about finding the need for partial forms of *collaboration, solidarity or impact* under circumstances in which a single group, demand, or movement cannot balance asymmetrical power relations or resources for collective action. Articulation requires the recognition of difference and the undesirability or impossibility of reducing it to sameness or merging differences into a larger whole (Laclau 2014; Clarke 2015).

On the other hand, *ecumenical social action has been a site of constant awareness of the requirements of articulation and conflict*: exercising religious commitment to social justice in contexts of suffering, natural disasters, violence, and conflict often led ecumenical activists to voice “prophetic” discourse - which is a kind of religious articulation of dissent, indignation, judgement and call to transformative action (including repentance and change, even

conversion) - and to navigate very complex attempts to gathering the excluded and those in solidarity with them through a maze of cultures, social divisions, differences in ideology, varying views of what to attain, etc. It is our view that both main wings (ecclesiastical and social activist) of the ecumenical ideal have long been confronted with the complexity of their own goal of *unity*, and the need to produce it through varying, contingent and provisional *approximations*. Networking, as a more recent discourse of social movements, civil society groups and policymakers, is one of the possible translations of articulation in terms of advocacy, movement building, coalition building, and state action, both collaborative and conflictual.

A further conceptual issue to note is that *meanings* of ecumenism may vary within particular contexts, with such meanings (and related identity positionings) being *socially and historically constructed*. Importantly for this research, this includes significant differences between the historical emergence of globalised ecumenical movements, and different national and local forms of ecumenism, as well as resonances and tensions between them as they have developed and been articulated, as we will now consider (M. do N. Cunha 2010; Greenberg 2020). Ecumenical movements in different contexts have found themselves in complex relationships with other movements such as evangelical movements and charismatic movements that have cut across some different denominations by prioritising alternative bases of shared theological perspectives and identities.

Contextual international differences in these relationships and meanings are crucial to recognise, because the global spread of modern ecumenical ideals and organised action as of the 1950s involved a deeper experience of facing cultural differences as well as specific religious expressions in the post-colonial world, leading to an ever more complex web of ecumenical identities and practices. In that respect, the meaning of “ecumenical” was soon drawn into processes of *contextual redefinition* in which dissemination usually involved local adaptations, dialogues or resistances, and looser boundaries, leading to a tense but steady process of decentring of Euro-American understandings of ecumenism (Barreto Jr. 2020). The latter’s strength came to rely on its ability to welcome, negotiate and integrate such differences coming from particular histories of Christianity and their rooting in the former colonies of the West, animated by dreams of independence and development, and calls for justice and recognition.

4. Ecumenical histories and the social activist orientation: global and local

Ecumenical social activism has, thus, an ambivalent/complex relationship with more conventional, institutional church-centred forms of ecumenism, as reflected in both literature (Barreto Jr. 2020; Bouwman 2018) and, as we will see in the second part, in interviewee perspectives from this research project. On the one hand, ecumenical social activism is integral to the very emergence of modern ecumenism, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On the other hand, in practice, activists often found themselves at odds with local churches or denominational structures, experiencing all sorts of tensions. In some cases, there were concerns that ecumenism might lead to a form of faith belonging that no longer contemplated attendance or stable links with existing denominational churches. However, the historical emergence of the ecumenical movement in Europe and its expansion to Latin America show an inextricable link between ecclesiological, diaconal and political understandings of ecumenism (Colonomos 2012; Ampony et al. 2021; Gwiazdowski 2014; Plou 2004). The *Life and Work* wing of the ecumenical movement, moved by a commitment to social and political change among Christian activists, thrived alongside the *Faith and Order* one, moved by an urge to create visible signs of unity among Christian churches.

The intense debates and social struggles of the period, including the First World War and the Russian Revolution, fueled a lot of ecumenical thinking and practical initiatives, from the provision of services to war-stricken communities to political strategies toward reconstruction of state and society (Werner and Ross 2021; FitzGerald 2004, 81–101; Nolde 2009). A connection can also be found between various expressions of Christian socialism and the development of the ecumenical movement, engaging some of its most distinguished leaders (Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, William Temple, and others) (Tillich 2012; Cort 2020, and the special issue of the Journal of Global History of July 2018). The League of Nations had direct engagement from ecumenical leaders in the US and Europe in its formation, through the World Alliance of Churches for Promoting International Friendship, created in 1914, at the very start of the First World War (Donahue 2015; Gorman 2010). The 1910 World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh, a landmark in the history of the ecumenical movement, set as one of its three main concerns the commitment to peace and social justice (Lindemann 2019). The Second World War pushed towards the convergence of both sections of the movement into a World Council of Churches (WCC), that was decided on in 1937, but only set up in 1948, given the war context. Strands of European and North-American ecumenism actively

participated in the articulation of post-war human rights discourse and the creation of international organisations (Nurser 2003; 2005; Laine, Meriläinen, and Peiponen 2017; Bouwman 2018).

The expansion of WCC-led ecumenism beyond its Euro-American boundaries took place already in the 1950s, and the formation of the Church and Society in Latin America movement (ISAL, in its Spanish and Portuguese acronym) provided grounds for the theological and socio-political radicalisation that led to liberation theology in the late-1960s (Plou 2004; Schilling 2018; Míguez 2021; Brugaletta 2019; Amestoy 2011; C. Cunha and Bittencourt Filho 1985). Decolonisation in Africa and Asia also mobilised a lot of ecumenical agents and organisations (Greenberg 2017). Therefore, the connections between ecumenical views, radical social engagement and political participation have long been part of the ecumenical history, both in Europe and Latin America. And through them, a lot of expertise was both gathered and shared, and a web of local, national and transnational ecumenical development and church-based organisations spread in all continents. Ecumenical social activism, therefore, is a source of identity for and a key expression of the ecumenical movement, both historically and at present. This same history has also led to a much broader understanding of its reach, extending both towards secular partners and interfaith relations, without losing touch of more strictly inter-Christian relations.

This widening of relationships was met with disagreement, mistrust and often opposition from conservative Christians, paradoxically spurring tensions and divisions everywhere. Expanding in Latin America in the context of the Cold War, the Cuban revolution, and a lively ideological, social and political mobilisation for change across the region, which both produced progressive experiences and ignited civil-military conservative counter-alliances (including coups and dictatorships, between the 1960s and 1980s), the ecumenical movement promoted or backed forms of theological discourse and social activism that clearly aligned it with left politics (Barreto Jr. 2021; Rosa 2019; Burity 2011; Arenas and Polanco 2021).

In the Brazilian context, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches became hostile spaces for ecumenical dialogue and action of any kind[4]. Here, in the absence of a corresponding Euro-

[4] In a British context, organisations like the Evangelical Alliance have brought together churches across previous denominational boundaries within the evangelical movement, even if this evangelical identity was contrasted with other Christian identifications. The Evangelical Alliance presents its history in the context of being part of a worldwide network and movement (see https://www.eauk.org/about-us), including presenting itself as co-

American-style liberal Protestantism that could provide an ecclesial basis for socially-minded Christians, many of these concerned Christians tended to gravitate around Catholic and secular left spaces, or simply quit their churches and used ecumenical informal groups or official gatherings as points of spiritual survival and fellowship. However, socialist revolutions or struggles in Central and South America in the 1970s (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia), and the 1980s wave of democratisation that put an end to military rule in various countries (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Uruguai, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Chile) (Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005; Garretón 2003; Remmer 1992), allowed for a growing dialogue between a new generation of evangelicals, open to social activism and theological reflection on the cultural, social and political implications of local contexts for the mission of churches (holistic mission theology), and older and newer ecumenical generations (Longuini Neto 2002; Burity 2013; Clawson 2012).

For Brazilian ecumenism, this has been the case in relation to the US and the World Council of Churches, following a first stage, in the early-20th century when the adoption of ecumenism was related to collaboration in mission (exclusively among Protestant churches). In the mid-1950s, a new profile emerged, in close association with WCC-led ecumenical action, and strongly linked to social and political engagement. This is also the moment in which Protestant-Catholic relations become more robust, both theologically and practically. Given the uneasy relations with local churches and denominational structures that followed the country's plunge into a military dictatorship with enthusiastic support from conservative Christians, ecumenical activists were proscribed and forced underground, deepening the chasm between their work and views and those prevailing in churches (Brito 2014, 51–95).

For decades, both Protestant and Catholic British charities have worked in Brazil and strengthened relationships with Brazilian ecumenical and secular organisations. The authoritarian context of the 1960s-1980s pushed groups of ecumenical activists in Brazil underground as well as sensitised some sections of evangelical churches which adopted so-called holistic theological perspectives under the influence of the Lausanne movement[5].

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founding the World Evangelical Alliance in 1951, and being involved in setting up Tearfund in the 1960s. The history of the ecumenical church councils in Britain, leading up to the current Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (and its national counterparts), also involves such network building. However, in both cases, we do not find the kind of conflictive pattern present in the Brazilian experience of corresponding experiences (particularly the recent ones, the Brazilian Evangelical Association, in the 1990s, led by Lausanne-inspired evangelicals, and the still existing, but with very limited representation, ecumenical National Council of Christian Churches.

[5] The 1974 International Congress on World Evangelisation, gathered in Lausanne, Switzerland, galvanised a

Brazilian evangelicalism experienced a noticeable politicisation, in the 1980s, led by the Brazilian branch of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (the Brazilian University Biblical Alliance, ABUB), World Vision-Brazil, the Brazilian Evangelical Theological Fraternity, and a home-grown evangelical think tank, the National Vision of Evangelisation (VINDE), founded by pastor Caio Fábio, who in the early 1990s became the president of the short-lived Brazilian Evangelical Association (AEvB), seeking to raise a representative voice of evangelicals in public life in the new democratic environment. By the late 1980s, a number of connections had developed between holistic evangelical and ecumenical groups, which were only reinforced thereafter (Longuini Neto 2002; Fonseca 2019; Silva and Simões 2017). Also, particularly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, evangelical UK and global NGOs (such as Tearfund and World Vision) adopted pragmatic, grassroots *ecumenical* strategies, and more radical forms of *social activism* (particularly through advocacy and public engagement[6]), thus extending the reach of the word "ecumenical" beyond the classical, institutional definition of ecumenism (King 2012; Freeman 2019; Haynes 2020; Kraft 2020)[7].

These connections have only deepened and strengthened since the 1990s, increasingly including evangelical and non-Christian counterparts. Not only were interactions intensified and extended, but also they became more reflexive and critical, generating calls for mutual accountability and equal terms as European ecumenical organisations became increasingly global in their scope and mediated part of the transfer and implementation of international cooperation development funds. Some of them set up offices in Latin American countries (e.g., Cafod, Christian Aid, World Vision, Bread for the World, ICCO, Misereor), others maintained a sponsoring link to Latin American partners. Such links forged by ecumenical partners over time have proved more resilient than those with secular development donors -

number of trends and experiments in terms of evangelical social action. In the Brazilian case, it was taken up by the more radical wing of evangelicalism, represented by non-denominational movements/organisations such as the Biblical University Alliance (member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students), the Latin American Theological Fraternity-Brazil, World Vision Brazil, and the National Vision of Evangelisation.

[6] The latter expression conveys, throughout this article, the meaning of the Portuguese word *"incidência pública"*, which involves both *advocacy* and *formal engagement in participatory structures* (such as policy committees, forums and consultative government bodies, at national, state and municipal levels), representing "civil society", theme-based, or acknowledged *qua* religious organisations as important brokers. *Incidência* is a word native to the broad field of social activism, being used by secular and religious organisations alike that have drawn closer to the public world of legislative debates, policy design and implementation and judicial litigation.

[7] King writes *a propos* an analysis of World Vision, that "[b]y the 1980s, not only did evangelical relief and development agencies outgrow evangelical missions, they also begin to catch up to the leading mainline and secular humanitarian organisations in size, popularity, and professionalism. Having expanded rapidly, some began to step back to reconsider the theology behind their programs. Progressive evangelicals applauded the turn many agencies were making from one-time relief programs to sustained development." (King 2012, 936)

many of which have pulled out from Brazil and other Latin American countries since the mid-1990s, including some ecumenical ones. These links and experiences form the background for myriad contemporary encounters, partnerships and network-building experiences across borders that will be more concretely discussed in the second part of this article.

The strengthening of links between Christian, interfaith and secular organisations through social activism were also justified by a growing shared perception that the *scale* of issues in the development field had escalated beyond the reach and resources of any organisation or even conventional bilateral and multilateral structures (Burity 2022; Csordas 2009). The "discovery" of network-building, though shrouded in a rising tide of postcolonial claims to more egalitarian partnerships between Northern and Southern actors, followed more mundane strictures stemming from the seismic impact of the demise of socialism in Europe and the former USSR, and the redirection of attention and funding toward the so-called reconstruction of post-communist countries (Skreslet 1997; Swyngedouw 2004; Biekart 2005).

In the Latin American context, funding for local organisations waned that had been justified by violations of human rights and escalation of poverty and urban violence after years of military regimes in many countries. The return to political democracy in the region led to an assessment that the support for civic associations instead of governmental bodies became less critical (Handlin 2015). Many funding or project-sponsoring agencies turned to post-communist Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Others started to face competition as their home governments channelled international development funds through multilateral or bilateral development programmes. The international cooperation also came under the spell of New Public Management practices and the audit culture, forcing a number of realignments in agenda-setting and procedures, with direct impact on the relationships between donors and beneficiaries, funders and intermediary local partners. The adoption of network-based forms of action, then, was both driven by bolder demands for voice and new ideological trends.

5. Exploring practitioner perspectives on ecumenical relationships

In order to provide a more focused analysis, we will now explore those links, networks and changing forms of ecumenism from the perspective of the interviewed practitioners within British- and Brazilian-based organisations, and the global networks in which they feature and

relate. Whilst the range of organisations in which these practitioners were based varied in scale, trajectories, goals and repertoires of action, the data showed patterns of articulation that strongly exemplify the argument made so far[8]. However, what these interviews particularly reveal is the creative agency of the practitioners in how they have sought to re-imagine ecumenism to respond to changing contexts and contemporary challenges within their work. Considering respondent perspectives on changing forms of ecumenism in this first article provides a foundation for our further analysis of themes from the interview data in the second article in this series, where we conceive of their potential to influence change as arising through the ways they use different forms of relational power. These forms of relational power build on the different forms of linking relationships that are at the heart of the different manifestations of ecumenism discussed historically and theoretically above.

Practitioners within the interviews reflected on how ecumenical relationships and related structures had been reconfiguring, in ways which were also reflected in the additional organisational information collected. In Brazil, the links between institutional ecumenism and the web of organisations that identify as ecumenical are diverse and not always crisscrossing. The main ecumenical body, the National Council of Christian Churches (CONIC) gathers only a small group of churches. It is scarcely representative of Protestant churches in numerical terms, but it does include the historically-dominant Catholic Church.[9] However, CONIC has been vocal and strongly immersed in networks of social activism both as a supporting voice and through advocacy (Assessoria de Comunicação CONIC 2022; Conselho Nacional de Igrejas Cristãs do Brasil, n.d.). Another ecumenical body, the Latin American Council of Churches, Brazil branch (CLAI-Brazil) doubles the institutional corporate dimension of ecumenism,

[8] The analysis provided here is based on interviews and documentary research done in Brazil and the UK, including the following organisations and networks (and/or members of their staff): (a) global or regional: ACT Alliance, Anglican Alliance, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, Christian Aid (Brazil and UK), Tearfund (Brazil and UK), World Vision International (Brazil and UK), and Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (Cafod); (b) based in Brazil: ACT Alliance Brazilian Ecumenical Forum (FEACT Brasil), Latin American Council of Churches-Brazil (CLAI-BR), National Council of Christian Churches-Brazil (CONIC), Brazilian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CNBB), Caritas Brazil, Koinonia, Diaconia, Lutheran Diaconal Foundation (FLD), Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), Process of Articulation and Dialogue (PAD), Jubilee South-Brazil, Institute for Social and Economic Studies (INESC), A Rocha Brazil, and Catholics for Choice-Brazil (CDD); (c) based in the UK: Churches Together in England (CTE), Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), Debt Justice (Jubilee Debt Campaign, until May 2022), Citizens UK, Theos, Refugee Education UK (Refugee Support Network, until 2021), Catholic Association for Racial Justice (CARJ), and Green Christian.

[9] On the other hand, other ecumenical bodies overlap with CONIC, such as the Brazilian section of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI-Brazil), which manages to include all of CONIC's churches plus other smaller evangelical denominations, independent churches and ecumenical agencies.

including a wider range of churches as members, plus ecumenical NGOs. Both witness the same perception about a crisis of the ecumenical ideals and ways of organising as found in the UK. However, their connections with ecumenical social activism looks stronger than in the UK. CLAI and CONIC are omnipresent in ecumenical social activism, building links between organisations working on advocacy and development issues and churches (whether denominational structures or local churches). The creation of the Ecumenical Forum in Brazil, which predated and morphed into the ACT Brazil Ecumenical Forum shows it. According to a former leader of CLAI, this started with the World Council of Churches's decision to close down the Ecumenical Sharing of Resources Programme (WCC-sponsored ecumenical international cooperation), by 1997 (World Council of Churches 1987; 1994).

Following the lead of experienced ecumenical leaders engaged from Koinonia and CESE, a decision was made to create an Ecumenical Forum that could provide mutual support for ecumenical initiatives as funding would become a serious issue. He commented: "The modus operandi was [based on] CLAI's regional assemblies, which was an annual process of consultation and sharing. So the Ecumenical Forum, I think, was created, without us being very aware of it, after CLAI-Brazil's process." The initiative also drew closer together traditional ecumenical and evangelical organisations of social action, such as CESE and Diaconia, which used to rival each other. Bridges were also created with World Vision, which developed a very progressive profile in Brazil, and grew to become one of the country's largest NGOs.

However, the troubled links between ecumenical practitioners and Protestant churches in Brazil has led to these ecumenical organisations developing on the fringe of church structures, both locally and at denominational level. Such an ecumenical profile has both provided an identity to dissenting groups in the sea of moral and doctrinal conservatism that Brazilian Protestantism represents, and a discursive bridge with more radical forms of social criticism and engagement (Burity 2013; Barreto Jr. 2020; Bittencourt Filho 1996). However, there is a vitality of shared initiatives under the "ecumenical" label - bringing together in very dynamic, interweaving ways, institutional and activist ecumenism.

As a result, the very word "ecumenical" has been adopted by many secular organisations in the Brazilian field to describe the non-discriminatory reach of their services and appeal, as well as their recognition of the relevance of traditional ecumenical identities (Souza 2016). The boundaries between church-based ecumenism, grassroots ecumenism, and public

engagement ecumenism are thus rendered porous and blurred in this context. A comment by an interviewed Brazilian Catholic bishop provides a telling example of such broad and interconnected meanings of ecumenism:

> There won't be, how can I put it, the valorisation of renewable resources, and attention to the least and the poor, if we don't take care of all these realities together, right? The economic, the ecological and the ecumenical [as words derived from the Greek term “oikos”, JB/AO]. Therefore, ecumenism, proposing as its aim the dialogue between all churches, in the first place, and the interreligious one, between all religions, permeates several aspects, or rather, the aspects that involve the entire life of humanity, the entire life of the planet, and encourages all churches and all religions not to look within, but to continually look from a perspective that encompasses these three tenets of human life, the life of the cosmos and religious life. Because it is not always Christian. Buddhism, Islam... it is not always Christian.

The same informant goes on to claim - clearly inspired by a liberation-theology insight - a tension between an underlying grassroots openness to ecumenism in the way social struggles are articulated in Brazil:

> Our people is, at the grassroots, I would say, almost naturally ecumenical. It is us, pastors, who can sometimes... risk rendering Christian doctrine interpreted in a certain ecclesial or ecclesiastical tradition, risk dividing the forces of the people. The struggle itself is an element that draws together. This is very important to emphasise. What is called people's ecumenism, the ecumenism, so to speak, that has to do with the grassroots of the social, is an ecumenism that already exists. It should be enough, it is important to (...) motivate it, right? It is important to join forces. It is also important to value what is possibly different in the expression of faith of each citizen, while leaving a little to the spontaneity of their expression.

For him, “life” and “theology” find an ecumenical translation in everyday popular struggles:

> We can run, you know, theological schools, theological dialogues, but then it's important to move from theology to life and let theology be, so to speak, soaked in the life and struggle of our people. Grassroots ecumenism takes place there. And pastors and [Catholic] priests, many times, also get converted [to it].

By contrast, practitioners described how England had developed an established institutional ecumenical infrastructure in the form of Churches Together in England (CTE), as well as a wider Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, a historic network of local Churches Together groups, and multiple bilateral ecumenical dialogues between major historic denominations. Churches Together in England describes its membership on its website in the following way: "With more than 50 national churches drawn from the Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Orthodox and Lutheran traditions, as well as Free Churches, Quakers and others, we unite one of the broadest range of churches in the whole of

Europe."[10]

However, whilst patterns varied and groups were stronger in some parts of the country than others, these historical institutional and denominationally-focused ecumenical structures and dialogues were reported as having come under some pressure in their more traditional structured forms, often leading to changes in the forms of engagement:

> Over the last 10 years there's been a significant shrinkage in [formal] ecumenical activity and I suspect it's fair to say that the ecumenical bandwith of churches is much smaller than it was, right? So … I think the less struct[ured], less formalised networking has now replaced that. … I suppose that what's bound up in a lot of this is the issue of the decline of the mainline churches, particularly in the UK. So the Anglican churches, Reformed, Methodists, have all seen, Presbyterians also, have all seen considerable decline. and I think there's a, there really is a fear of ontological threat through many of them. And they have turned inwards.

At the same time, participation has widened (and potentially refreshed) in recent years, reflecting the diversification of denominations and theological traditions arising particularly from increased migration, as the same respondent described:

> [I]ncreasingly Pentecostal and independent evangelical churches are becoming involved in local ecumenical working and in the last few years have sought membership of ecumenical structures, nationally. This is particularly the case with Churches Together in England, which 10 years ago had a membership of 15. It now has a list of member churches in excess of 40. So it has seen a large number of new churches, shall we call them, joining ecumenical structures. So it's a quite complex, diverse scene, really.

This growth in less-formalised and increasingly diverse networking was reported to frequently concentrate around shared issues and concerns, on which churches *could* cooperate and work together, including in their wider social action and witness, though they do not always find grounds to. There are also tensions around those (socio-political) issues where churches do not have a common stance, or may be divided. This was a theme in the interviews too, relating to the ways that activists chose which issues to focus on and how they handled divisive issues. We will return to this in the second article in this two-part series. Networks do not solve all problems, and one of them is who decides to join them. This would require a focus we cannot provide here. Anyhow, for our purposes in this article, these increasingly diverse, looser networks were seen as taking collective action together on issues of shared concern, such as supporting refugees, feeding those who are hungry, or raising

[10]This text, along with a full list of members, along with their dates of joining, can be found at https://cte.org.uk/about/whos-who/member-churches (date accessed, 20/11/23). This membership has grown significantly beyond the original founding denominational members in 1990.

awareness toward environmental concerns; for instance, a CTBI officer illustrates:

> all sorts of ecumenical activity at grassroots level, that is, starting to spring up which is … in spite of the structures that exist within churches and so the growth of food banks has been a critical area of ecumenical activity across churches. So where the traditional ecumenical patterns of say councils of churches in the town might have closed some years ago, they found fresh impetus to work together through say a food bank or a project called Street Pastors.

Structurally, beyond having member denominations, Churches Together in England recognises this practical cooperation in social action by including 85 charities and networks in association with CTE, as well as three national agencies (including Cafod and Christian Aid)[11]; however the extent of informal co-operation and networks extends well beyond these.

At the same time, some critical questions have been raised about what the vision and approach should be for ecumenical bodies such as CTE within such contexts (e.g. Mladin, Fidler, and Ryan 2017). The diversity of connections and shifting approaches may express some tensions with traditional structures at different levels, providing ways of bypassing traditional denominational church structures so that activists did not have to rely on them, or just pragmatic ways evolved by activists to re-focus existing forms of collaboration. Together, these changes had resulted in respondents reporting a shift in the focus and energy of the more active collaborations, as an interviewee from CTE described:

> I think we're beginning to see a whole new way of relating, emerging. I mean, something has been happening over the last ten years or so, I think, at local level. And the old traditional models of Churches Together groups are either being transformed or being left behind as groupings like, you know, I mean, some of the names are extraordinary: so Love Streatham, Cherish Lewisham, you know, I mean, these sort of kind of informal groupings which we've witnessed, many of which have actually grown up from a bunch of church leaders praying for their locality and then working that out in terms of shared mission. And it's all very loose, and it's all very unstructured. Um, but it can be very powerful.

Importantly, in the English context, this metamorphosis towards looser practical ecumenical cooperation in local social action was seen as radically extending and diversifying the range of potential participants, despite continuing theological differences. To illustrate this, one respondent gave the following example:

> It's a way of relating which transcends the boundaries of acceptability that were there 10, 20 years ago. And we noticed it with … churches' responses to the Olympics, where we have partners working together who wouldn't have been seen dead in each other's company, uh, 20 years ago. … The classic example, the nice example, is [x] Parish Church, … "the one on the

[11] See https://cte.org.uk/about/whos-who/national-agencies and https://cte.org.uk/working-together/national/bodies-in-association, respectively, on such links.

> corner with the sort of 'pagan statues'", as they call it. … it was a … water give-out point during the Olympics. So the Salvation Army provided the bottled water. It was stored on Anglican premises and given out by the Coptic Orthodox and Seventh Day Adventists. Well, you know… that really wouldn't have happened 20 years ago… not in that kind of way. … it was fascinating watching those groups really wanting to work with one another.

Whilst one might consider global events like the Olympics a one-off occurrence, a wide range of the social issues that provided the fields and motivations for co-operation were recognised as having glocal dimensions, and involving networks that were not just limited to local action together. For example, many of the respondents from England working in sectors such as international development and environmental action reported some willingness to engage across diverse Christian groups, albeit with complex dynamics involved as we will go on to explore. Wider research in this context also points towards how those taking action on issues like debt and poverty increasingly recognise glocal dimensions, with responses to these concerns being enhanced by networked responses (Orton and Barclay 2020).

In contrast, Brazilian respondents took for granted the minority status of institutional ecumenism and focused on the current challenges of glocal issues and funding dilemmas. In both contexts, there is a complex dynamic of "shrinking" to local-bound actions whilst seeking to strengthen links beyond that (which may reach transnational level). Whereas the crisis in UK-based ecumenism shows a de-institutionalising pattern also connected to perceived mainline churches' decline, leading to more loose, local joint actions, Brazilian ecumenism has never been strong institutionally and its strength has been on the multiplying effect of small groups with strong transnational links with the ecumenical movement and partners[12]. These comparative national and local changes in which social action has become an increasing focus of ecumenical activity were also seen as being reflected within changing trends and structures at an international and global level. For example, according to a veteran Brazilian ecumenical leader, from Koinonia, as many national social activist charities established in richer countries became global in their reach (particularly those with an environmental focus), the World Council of Churches (the former umbrella for so many ecumenical initiatives) lost much of its strength. Agencies that used to fund WCC decided to act directly in the continents, and became increasingly competitive, particularly since the mid-1980s. WCC ceased to be a

[12] This is reflected in the Process on Articulation and Dialogue (PAD, www.pad.org.br), which brings together European and Brazilian ecumenical agencies, to coordinate strategies, actions, and access to funding by 33 Brazilian religious and secular partners sponsored by those European donor agencies that still operate in Brazil (HEKS; Bröt fur die Welt; ICCO, until 2015; and Christian Aid, until 2020). Several Brazilian ecumenical organisations included in this study are also members of PAD, namely, CESE, Koinonia, FLD, and CIMI.

strategic partner and became a more limited one, according to the thematic priorities of the agencies; in this process, the ecumenical movement had to refashion itself.

The 1990s were a turning point in this trend. A major response was going *glocal*, reinforcing the mutual nature of links between European and Brazilian ecumenical organisations. Churches Together in England's website also lists 1990 as the date for its founding membership coming together, and it is notable how many denominations have joined CTE relatively recently. In the Brazilian context, this produced three institutional forms: (a) the creation of the *Ecumenical Forum*, in 1994, which brought together churches, councils of churches, and ecumenical service-providing and advocacy organisations, including European partners - Christian Aid among them (FE Brasil 2006, 8, 18–26); (b) the creation of *PAD - Process of Articulation and Dialogue*, launched by European ecumenical funding agencies (initially ICCO, Christian Aid and Heks)[13], in 1995, to coordinate priorities and funding to Brazilian partners, as well as projecting the latter's views and demands in global forums; and (c) the creation of *ACT Alliance* [14], in 2010, a multilayered articulation of international, global and local organisations formerly under the WCC umbrella, other ecumenical national agencies turned transnational and global (such as CAFOD and Christian Aid, in the UK context), and a wider range of smaller, local and regional organisations that, while not formally members of ACT, have been drawn into its national or regional forums. Although Brazil only included five members of ACT (currently reduced to four), the existing Brazilian Ecumenical Forum which featured over 20 partners from both religious and secular backgrounds became ACT Alliance's regional forum in the country.

However, within and beyond different specific articulations across global, national and local levels, there were different ways in which these glocal relationships and networks were

[13] An international development ecumenical organisation from the Netherlands, ICCO merged with Cordaid, in 2021, and ceased its operation in Latin America. The same happened to Christian Aid, in 2020. Currently, there remain two European ecumenical donor agencies, Heks (Switzerland) and Brot fur die Welt (Germany), working with PAD.

[14] ACT (Action of Churches Together) Alliance was founded in response to a perceived deep crisis of ecumenical social action (related to a crisis of ecclesiastical ecumenism, following trends in Christianity away from Europe and North America and towards more conservative forms of Southern Christianity). The Alliance is a huge global network of 145 members, operating in 127 countries, resulting from the merger of two former ecumenical networks, *ACT International* - created in 1995 to coordinate ecumenical humanitarian interventions in the orbit of WCC - and *ACT Development* - created in 2003 to coordinate ecumenical initiatives in the area of international cooperation for development (see www.actalliance.org/who-we-are). Its Brazilian Ecumenical Forum (FEACT Brasil) preexisted ACT's creation and was absorbed by it due to former and continuing links between its members and ecumenical European partners (mainly from the UK, Netherlands and Germany). It is made up of 23 Brazilian faith-based organisations.

understood, prioritised, formed and deployed within forms of social action to achieve particular aims. Indeed, as our second article in this two part series will explore further, there can be complex power dynamics within and across different layers of these networks, which practitioners have to navigate and engage with when working across geographical and ecumenical differences whilst seeking to achieve their aims.

Conclusion

The ecumenical ideal was never only about church formal unity. It involved a strong element of social activism which sought to bring about a just world, in the wake of the rise of socialist and social liberal movements in Europe, in the late 19th century. Although these two strands eventually merged into the World Council of Churches (developing more complex outgrowings within it), in the late 1940s, they were marked by the intriguing acknowledgement that no unity can take place without diversity. Not only that, they also had to grapple, again and again, with resistances to unity (not to mention unification) coming from powerful currents within Christian churches themselves. In this context, unity, difference and antagonism have become permanent dimensions of ecumenical action. In the wake of the rise of the postcolonial world, struggles for civil rights, new social movements from the mid-1960s around race, gender, peace and the environment, ecumenism came to value difference as part of an ethical commitment to justice, recognition, and freedom. This qualified both notions of equality and unity in ecumenical discourse. Ecumenical social activism incorporated the main thrust of new social movements' agendas as well as became fully conversant with debates on network-building, (g)localisation, coordinated action, and the empowerment of poorer and vulnerable groups and nations in development discourse. Given its tendency to refrain from proselytising and using ostensibly religious language, the visibility of ecumenical contributions to social activism has not always been noticed and duly recognised as a proper driver and supporting factor of global and local social activism.

However, ecumenical social activism (particularly in Brazil) has also been confronted with the withering of funding for international cooperation and the impact of church decline in the donor countries it heavily relied on to maintain its initiatives in the South - whether socio-political or ecclesiastical in nature. Ecumenical agencies have sought to strengthen their links with local partners and generally outlasted the withdrawal of secular NGOs and sponsoring agencies. But eventually, most of them have left. Where partnerships had been developed for many years, very little remained.

This article sought to bring to the fore the inseparable relationship between ecumenism's faith and socio-political identities, and the ways in which contemporary ecumenical organisations have developed and strengthened their links with Southern partners, both religious and secular. Not only this, but ecumenical social activism has been part and parcel of the process of global diffusion of an imaginary of connections across borders and identities that could be called glocal (Swyngedouw 2004; Burity 2015; Robertson 2015). The study of how ecumenical actors have traversed boundaries of national identity, cultural difference, and global expressions of inequalities, oppressive relations, and reactions to the spread of demands for recognition of minorities (several of which actually greater in number than existing hegemonic national and local forces) provides a perspective on public forms of religion that has been eclipsed by current over-emphasis on conservative religion.

Focusing on this particular set of global and local religious actors also helps bring into view the intricate patterns that have historically and currently been woven between global and local, religious and secular, cultural and political, institutional and movement-shaped dimensions of social action, intensified by the spread of logics of connection. These logics will be explored in detail in the more empirical part of this work, to follow in the second part article in this two part series. These logics of connection show the complex forms in which "religion" can be part of transformative social and political action and not simply supportive of the status quo in unequal and/or violent societies. This article has provided theoretical understandings underpinning these contested contextual meanings and complex histories of ecumenical social action, whilst beginning to explore practitioner understandings and perspectives on how these are changing in the current context. Within this, we began to disentangle several threads through a conceptual framework and a methodological strategy that follows ways in which British and Brazilian ecumenical organisations relate, providing a basis on which the subsequent article can explore empirically how they seek to use their relationships across differences and scales to engage in wider networks to advocate for rights, sustainability, and equality, through an articulation of various forms of power.

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