

## Factors Influencing the Social Development Perception of Religious Leaders in the Zanzibar Urban Municipality

Nassir Massoud Nassor<sup>1</sup>, Yussuf Ramadhan Zubeir<sup>2</sup>,  
Asha Hayeshi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Science, The Institute of Public Administration Zanzibar

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, The University of Dodoma

Corresponding author: nassreem@gmail.com

### Abstract

This paper explores the factors shaping religious leaders' perceptions of social development in urban Zanzibar. It seeks to answer the research question: Why do religious leaders across different faiths in Zanzibar hold these views on social development? The study used an exploratory qualitative research design to select participants and gather data. Interviews were conducted with 42 religious leaders, including 22 Muslims, 14 Christians, 4 Buddhists, and 2 Hindus. The levels of participation among religious leaders varied according to the size of their respective religions. The sample size of 42 was determined by data saturation, a common qualitative research method. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and subthemes, aiding interpretation of the study's main ideas. The findings indicate that a combination of religious, social, and economic factors influences perceptions of social development among religious leaders in urban Zanzibar. Their perspectives are shaped by their faith and religious beliefs, which influence their decisions concerning community needs and priorities. Economic activities also significantly shape these beliefs, as material progress is often seen as a means to promote fairness, responsibility, and improved communal welfare. Factors such as the nature of religion, religious education, parental upbringing, and economic activities play vital roles in shaping religious leaders' perceptions of social development in Zanzibar. The study concludes that religious leaders in urban Zanzibar see social development as a complex interplay of religious, economic, and social factors. It recommends that understanding policy dynamics is crucial for fostering ethical and inclusive social change in Zanzibar.

**Keywords:** Social Development, Perception, Religious Leaders, Urban Municipality

## Introduction

Social development has been extensively examined, as illustrated by the 1995 Canadian World Conference, which described it as the process of promoting the right to holistic well-being and being influenced by social change (Song et al., 2017). The term includes cohesive processes that improve societal well-being, strengthen relationships, and foster harmonious coexistence. From a theoretical perspective, Human Development theory emphasises expanding individuals' freedom and capabilities. In this perspective, social development is considered successful when people can define and choose lives that they value. The chosen approach is linked to moral and ethical dimensions, often motivated by religious principles that concern social justice, human dignity, and consideration for marginalised groups (Liu, 2025). Religious leaders interpret social development as an ethical and integrated process, primarily shaped by socio-economic factors such as social justice, human dignity, social cohesion, and institutional trust (Chukwudebelu, 2024). Overall, the implication of these factors as the main drivers for social development perceptions demonstrates that social development is an interconnected process involving political, economic, social, and cultural change. However, empirical evidence presents multiple theoretical perspectives. In predominantly Muslim countries, such as those in North Africa, where religious leaders influence public opinion, moral behaviour, and community development, factors such as religious education, religious history, and cultural practices shape perceptions of social development (Koehrsen, 2021). These emphasise the vital role of religious doctrines, social cohesion, and freedom of worship in shaping human development.

In countries with a Christian majority, such as those in Europe and Latin America, economic development is a central factor in social progress among religious leaders (Horsfjord et al., 2022). Religious leaders interpret social development through the lens of economic growth and emphasise issues such as working conditions, living standards, and gender equality (Iqbal et al., 2022). These aspects serve as key indicators for evaluating individual satisfaction and societal interaction levels. However, studies from most African nations indicate that religious leaders with exposure to social sciences and formal theological training are more likely to recognise education, health, gender equity, and poverty alleviation as crucial factors of social development (Sele, 2024). In Tanzania, for instance, religious leaders report higher levels of social development owing to their proximity to government officials, NGO management, and individuals with higher government or personal standing (Kitula et al., 2024). This empirical information supports the view that state authority and political context are essential factors that significantly influence religious leaders' perceptions of social development.

From a historical perspective, Zanzibar's society has been shaped by a diverse mix of cultures and bloodlines from around the world, mainly Arabs, Indians, Persians, Africans, and others involved in colonisation. Social interactions and intermarriage among these groups have made Zanzibar a centre of multiculturalism, complicating efforts to define people's perceptions of social and economic issues that influence their lives. In Zanzibar, the population is predominantly Muslim (99%); therefore, understanding its perception of social development is important. However, political factors have significantly influenced efforts to promote the idea of social development among religious leaders, though this is rarely explicitly acknowledged. The existence of political plurality gives rise to distinct political ideologies that heavily influence the lifestyles of most religious leaders, thereby threatening religious norms, principles, and ideology (Vincent, 2023). This indicates a shift from a perception of social development grounded in the divine that governs life to political views as a central concept. However, the justification of this notion is essential to understanding the key factors that influence religious leaders' perception of social development in Zanzibar.

### **Statement of the problem**

The 1995 Canadian World Conference defined social development as a multidisciplinary field focused on promoting holistic well-being shaped by social change. Simultaneously, researchers have shown that societies worldwide interpret social development differently (Biermann et al., 2022; Berten et al., 2022; Nassir et al., 2025). People living in urban Zanzibar, like those elsewhere, hold diverse perceptions of social development; however, the factors behind these varied perceptions remain controversial. While studies such as Wambura et al. (2022) and Makame (2020) identify factors shaping perceptions of social development among different social groups, such as civil servants and community members, these factors remain underexplored among religious leaders in urban Zanzibar. Although religious leaders play a vital role in shaping social values and public opinion, little empirical evidence exists on what influences their views on social development in this context, and they are often overlooked despite their significant influence over social norms and policy acceptance. This gap limits policymakers' ability to effectively engage with religious leaders in development initiatives. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the factors that influence how religious leaders in urban Zanzibar perceive social development.

### **Research Objective**

The aim of this paper is to examine the factors that affect religious leaders' views on social development in urban Zanzibar.

## Literature Review

The term social development relates closely to social processes at all levels, encompassing the growth of people, institutions, and their environments. The literature highlights four key concepts associated with social development: socioeconomic integration, structural change, institutional renewal, and institutional development (Hariram et al., 2023; Oleg et al., 2023; Hillmann et al., 2021). The core ideas are structural change, inter-systemic integration, and institutional development. From religious perspectives, social development signifies progressive changes in the relationships between institutional authorities and individuals that strengthen social structures and relationships, thereby fostering human equity, welfare, social justice, and participation.

## Theoretical framework

Several theories have been used to explain perceptions of religious leaders, and they are commonly employed to clarify the role of religion in shaping the well-being and welfare of individuals and society as a whole.

### 1. Human Development Theory

In the late 20th century, a theory of human development was proposed that emphasised responses to approaches that limited development solely to economic growth. Amartya Sen's human development theory (1980) is significant because it has two direct implications for the study's perspective and the characteristics of the population it addresses. From the study's perspective, human development theory offers a crucial framework for guiding religious leaders in urban Zanzibar to assess social development by evaluating whether it genuinely enhances capabilities, improves human well-being, promotes education, reduces poverty, and preserves moral and cultural values. Rahman (2025) suggested that if development affects material conditions but undermines religious norms, it may be regarded as misaligned with true community well-being. The community needs the best in their lives to foster their spiritual well-being, potentially for peace, security, and lifelong well-being (Stewart, 2024). Concerning the study's population, the core idea of the theory is that development should not be confined to merely increasing national revenue or economic output; rather, it involves expanding people's freedoms and capacities.

The above viewpoint also influences the social development perspectives of religious leaders in urban Zanzibar. Overall, human development theory is closely linked to religious perspectives that emphasise social justice, moral responsibility, and human dignity. In addition to emphasising dignity and agency, religious leaders may also see development as the moral progress of society. However, Human Development Theory faces some critiques in certain contexts as it remains largely

individual-focused and bases decision-making on enhanced capabilities, while sometimes overlooking religious and cultural factors (Swanson, 2022). Nonetheless, religious leaders usually interpret social development through collective, spiritual, and moral lenses rather than solely through human capabilities.

## 2. Empirical Review

Research consistently shows that judgments of social development are significantly influenced by factors such as education, health, and economic development. Studies from Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria indicate that religious leaders with higher levels of theological education tend to interpret social development as encompassing broader human progress, including community empowerment, gender equality, health services, and educational quality (Sele, 2024; Sele et al., 2024). These leaders strongly believe that social development is a constructive effort that combines religious doctrines with secular education. Conversely, leaders with less formal education often emphasise moral discipline and spiritual growth as the primary indicators of social development, as perceived by religious leaders (Alma, 2019). Consistent with Human Development Theory, research among Christian and Muslim leaders in East Africa suggests that education enhances leaders' understanding of development as the expansion of human capabilities (Alma, 2019). This aligns with the idea that knowledge shapes perceptions of social progress, as it greatly contributes to human development. Furthermore, numerous empirical studies in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that poverty levels influence religious leaders' perspectives on societal progress in their communities (Rakodi, 2024).

Studies from developing countries indicate that improvements in health influence religious leaders' perceptions of social development. For instance, evidence from Rwanda shows that expanding primary healthcare services is linked to faith leaders endorsing government health initiatives (Hezagira et al., 2025). This suggests that improved health outcomes are seen not only as successful service delivery but also as moral achievements that uphold family and community dignity. In Kenya and Ethiopia, research on HIV/AIDS interventions demonstrates that religious leaders' support for national development agendas largely depends on how health programmes align with religious teachings (Otieno et al., 2025; Bethlehem, 2022). Religious leaders in low-income and informal urban settlements often describe social development in terms of fulfilling basic needs such as housing, employment, and food security (Khiba et al., 2024). Conversely, religious leaders in more developed metropolitan areas tend to prioritise social stability, youth employment, and skill development, influenced by factors shaping their views on social progress (Rahman, 2025). Nonetheless, these studies highlight a perceived gap regarding the factors that influence social development among religious leaders across different regions worldwide.

## **Methodology**

The research employed an exploratory design as the primary approach to gather insights into the study. This method was well-suited for uncovering key information and thoroughly examining the factors that influence perceptions of social development and religion in urban areas. The informants were interviewed using a well-structured interview guide. To achieve the research aims, the researcher purposively selected religious leaders. Although the number of religious leaders in urban Zanzibar is not officially recorded, the Worship Centre documented 29 mosques, 5 churches, 2 temples, and 73 madrassas in Zanzibar's urban area, making a total of 110 religious institutions. From these, 42 key informants were chosen: 11 from 11 large mosques, 11 from 11 large madrassas (a total of 22 Muslims), 14 Christians from 5 churches, 2 participants from Hindu temples, and 4 participants from Buddhists temple (making a total of 6).

The selection of mosques and madrassas was based on size, determined by the number of followers and students, while the choice of key participants depended on their positions or ranks within the institutions. Among the 42, only 8 were women; this was due to the nature of the religious study and the areas where participants were selected. Only 2 women were identified from the madrassa and 6 from the churches. The participants were specific, willing, and able to describe the phenomena, and the sample size was justified once data saturation was reached, a core principle of qualitative research. In qualitative studies, the number of key informants may increase in line with the theoretical principle that data collection continues until saturation is achieved (Braun et al., 2021). Their responses were analysed thematically. Initial codes were created to label significant patterns. All issues that were related or shared similar meanings were systematically labelled to identify their categories. These codes provided a foundation for understanding the factors influencing religious leaders' perceptions of social development.

## **Findings and Discussion**

During the interviews, participants were asked to identify factors shaping their perceptions of social development. Many, including the religious education system, the nature of religion, parental care, and economic standards. Most of these factors are directly linked to individual religious perspectives, underscoring religion's central role in shaping social development.

### **1. Nature of Religion**

The nature of religion and its influence on social development were discussed by 37 participants, who represent a group of religious leaders. These

leaders believe that teachings affect both the physical and mental aspects of social development, guided by the commandments of peace, kindness, and solidarity. All participants agreed that their religions promote kindness, peace, victory, and unity, which enhance individual well-being. In their places of worship, pastors, sheikhs, and Osho embody unity and love, rejecting hatred towards vulnerable groups. During the interview, a pastor from Mkunazini Anglican Church stated the following:

“We must deepen our understanding of our theological virtue as we enter the new era. The Church plays a vital role in inspiring and guiding humanity to face the significant challenges ahead.”

The above quotation links social development with religion as a source of inspiration and moral guidance. According to religious leaders, social development occurs when people share resources, problems, and preferences. The quotation illustrates how religion influences religious leaders' views on social development. In traditional perspectives, where compassion, community welfare, and service are central, such as in Christianity's teachings or Islam's concept of Zakat, religious leaders often see social development as a spiritual duty rather than merely a political or economic aim. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa further supports this relationship. Studies in Uganda and Tanzania show that religious leaders are more likely to back development initiatives, especially in health and education, when they are consulted and when policies align with religious values related to family life and social morality (Ssanyu et al., 2026; Mwakisole et al., 2023). For example, HIV/AIDS interventions that collaborated with churches and mosques were more easily accepted and publicly endorsed by religious authorities (Clarke et al., 2011). Conversely, reproductive health programmes introduced without religious engagement often faced resistance, even when they led to measurable health improvements. The study on HIV/AIDS intervention in Nigeria revealed that excluding religious institutions from policymaking negatively affected perceptions of development initiatives (Obuzor et al., 2025). In Cross River State, Muslim and Christian leaders were rarely involved in the development of HIV prevention programmes (Oyo-Ita et al., 2021). As a result, many emphasised abstinence rather than participating in government initiatives, undermining community trust in public health messages.

The findings also suggest that perception is shaped not only by outcomes but also by the moral framing of development efforts. Research by Rizwan (2024) suggests that religious faith and social development are interconnected, as both promote peace, combat discrimination, and foster unity. This finding aligns with the results of this study in urban Zanzibar, where religion strongly shapes identity. In urban Zanzibar, the absence of institutional dialogue often transforms development from a collective project into a contested one. The concept of social development discussed here was also examined by Blom et al. (2020), who argue

that religions play a unique role in fostering peace through local actors, primarily religious leaders, who strengthen relationships, encourage cooperation, and build local capacities. The influence of religious leaders and actors in East Germany and Poland, for example, helped facilitate a peaceful transition to democracy from the 1980s to the 1990s (Zielonka et al., 2022). Interestingly, the case of South Africa shows that the Dutch Reformed Church's strong support for the Afrikaner regime made it vulnerable to peacekeeping efforts and the country's new political developments (Henriksson, 2010). Zain et al. (2025) also found that Islamic criminal laws have become a significant obstacle to social development in Indonesia. From these examples, it is clear that religious ideologies greatly influence individuals' views on social development. Many of these religions strictly prohibit the use of social media, gender interaction, and certain types of work.

## 2. Religious Education

One of the primary factors influencing religious leaders' perspectives on social development is religious education. Religious leaders explained that religion provides knowledge that alters their mindset, enabling them to understand rights and dignity better. They argued that their economic and some social activities stem from their religions. Religions teach all the principles of life. An interview with the Buddhist leader at his house on Vuga Street illustrates the following:

"I have learned to worship, love, care for, work, manage, and respect. My priests have even taught us how to see people. It is religious education that uplifted me."

Christian leaders from Mkunazini Church, on the other hand, clarified the following regarding religious education:

"In all aspects of development, Christian ideology remains a core principle, and its sustainability depends on those doctrines. I utilise the church to enhance my mindset through its education."

The above results show that religious education mainly influences how religious leaders perceive social development. It plays an essential role in shaping their views on social progress by impacting their moral and intellectual beliefs through interpretations of societal issues. Religious leaders develop their worldview and values through both informal and formal theological training, which enhances their understanding of concepts such as equality, justice, and community welfare. Numerous empirical studies support this. Research conducted in Cameroon demonstrates that religious education significantly boosts moral reasoning, civic engagement, and resilience among young people. These findings suggest that organised religious learning effectively prepares individuals (Agyekum et al., 2023). In Kenya, studies have revealed that religious leaders with higher formal religious education were more likely to be receptive to public health campaigns when these were formulated in a compatible way with religious teachings (Mike, 2025). Overall,

religious education plays a significant role in shaping religious leaders' perceptions of social development across different religious sects.

Conversely, religious education also lays the groundwork for economic change, which is a vital part of social development. Farhang et al. (2023) describe how religion functions as a pillar of social and economic progress, equipping students with skills for living, interacting, and communicating. Religion fosters economic growth through vocational training and innovation, leading to social change and a transformed way of life. According to Januari et al. (2024), social transformation involves a lifestyle mainly driven by shifts in political and economic principles that enhance human well-being. However, Nafisah et al. (2024) found that challenges arising from social changes, along with factors such as globalisation, the politicisation of religion, technology, and multiculturalism, are contributing to a decline in religious education today. These factors generally influence people's preference for secular education, which is viewed as more effective than religious education in addressing human development issues. Since religious education often enhances leaders' capacity for ethical reasoning and critical reflection, enabling them to evaluate the wider social impact of development initiatives beyond immediate material outcomes, the lack of this education could undermine moral values and effective social responsibility. Leaders without a strong religious educational background are more likely to overlook long-term effects on family cohesion and social morality, perceiving development initiatives as disruptive processes rather than holistic projects (Adewale et al., 2024). In urban Zanzibar, where religious education holds significant influence, the level and nature of leaders' religious training directly shape how they perceive social development policies, including the programmes they advocate, support, or criticise.

### 3. Parental Care

Results show that 26 participants recognised that parental care affects their views on social development. Participants noted that their parents played a crucial role in shaping much of their children's observable behaviour, experiences, ideology, and skills. The importance of parental care lies in the overall quality of care provided to the child and in guidance on interaction methods, both of which significantly influence the child's development. Participants noted that family background affects a child's social outcomes. An interview with a Hindu priest at his business in Kiponda elaborated on the following:

“My parents' persistent learning has led me to imitate and practise many things. My business, for instance, stems from my father's skills and experience; he has guided me since I was a child.”

A Christian leader was quoted during an interview in his office at his church in Stone Town:

“If parents pay too much attention to their perceptions, a child might take a long time to ignore them. For example, children learn to “love each other,” which lays the foundation for kindness and care in society. In fact, much of what we receive from our parents is helpful for our future.”

The findings above reveal that parental care is essential in shaping religious leaders' views on social development in urban Zanzibar. People's involvement in religious activities begins with their parents' consideration and efforts. Parents teach children important life skills, such as how to work, love, care, protect, and guide themselves. This type of care is crucial for their character development, overall growth, and survival. Parental care includes a wide range of economic support, social interactions, and education. These arguments are also supported by Introvigne (2020), who states that parents are central in guiding obedience, reverence, and the transmission of traditions, norms, and customs within family settings. In Zanzibar's urban areas, where the majority are Muslim, parents play a significant role in imparting moral and spiritual values to children, shaping them as integral parts of social life. Experience from everyday life indicates that parental care not only influences a child's imitation of parental norms but is also key to developing new perceptions that can be maintained throughout life and to preventing the child from resisting. This means that perceptions of social development are inherited from parents and can be transmitted down through generations if no interventions are undertaken to alter them. According to Shahid et al. (2024), proper parental care is a fundamental tool for building children's human capital, ensuring their needs are met, and supporting their effective growth and well-being. In this perspective, the existing behaviours, norms, cultures, and views of religious leaders have been profoundly shaped by the ways their parents treat and guide them.

From the Human Development Theoretical perspective, parental care plays a significant role in expanding human capabilities, opportunities, and freedoms, and is the essential purpose of development. Since development is not only economic growth but the improvement of individuals' abilities to lead lives, they value. The literature highlights that responsible parents are vital in capacitating their children's performance and personality (Alfen et al., 2024). Social development is directly influenced by a broad range of social, cultural, and individual factors, and parents apply these factors to strengthen children's power through verbal and physical activities. On the other hand, parents play a vital role in shaping perceptions of social development, as early family experiences deeply influence an individual's moral reasoning, social awareness, and values. Various pieces of literature support these findings. According to Hietschold et al. (2023), parental economic activities are a source of social transformation, shaping children's characters, interactions, and friendships. Religious leaders who received attentive, nurturing, and ethically guided parental care are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility, empathy,

and concern for community welfare. Nartok (2023) found that, for example, Hindus utilise business and the economy as tools for their children's transformation and guidance for social interaction, which are inseparable. The current economic structure in developing countries, as Chamidah et al. (2024) add, plays a significant role in transforming the younger generation and conveys messages about society's demands and preferences. To wealthier families, business skills are transmitted from parents to children by promoting their children's education and health.

#### 4. Economic Activities

Another factor shaping how people perceive the social development of religious leaders is economic activity, as 21 participants noted. The results show a direct connection between economic pursuits and social relations that contribute to societal well-being. They stated that their economic activities increase income and reduce the number of beggars, low-income individuals, and vagrants. Economic pursuits address social issues and influence peace, security, happiness, and social interactions, all of which are indicators of social development. They also argued that engaging in economic pursuits enhances their reputation, respect, and civility, all of which are key indicators of improved well-being. During interviews with Muslim religious leaders at the Madrassa in Miembeni, Zanzibar Town, the following explanation was quoted:

“Having been here for business for 20 years, I have made many friends. Many people know me, and I know them well. This situation enhances social relations, love, and trust. Above all, my business satisfies my social needs, desires, and interests. I help others strategically to address human weaknesses.”

Another leader (Hindu) shared the following explanation:

“If a person endures poverty and insecurity, faces physical and mental oppression, and values the very essence of freedom, then liberty is an aspect of social progress.”

The quotes above demonstrate that economic activities significantly shape how religious leaders in urban Zanzibar perceive social development. These activities improve living standards, transform people's lives, and redirect their focus towards new opportunities. Many religious leaders in urban Zanzibar engage in business with individuals from different social and economic backgrounds. These activities reflect their perspectives on social progress, as they represent both moral responsibility and material growth within the community. Economic prosperity is often seen as a sign of divine blessing, sparking ethical debates among many religious leaders about justice, fairness, and wealth distribution. In this context, especially in Zanzibar, trade, tourism, and small-scale enterprises are crucial to the local economy. Religious leaders typically assess social development based on its growth and its connection to community well-being and moral principles.

Various pieces of literature support these findings. According to Hietschold et al. (2023), economic activities are a source of social transformation, shaping individuals' characters, interactions, and friendships. Nartok (2023) found that Hindus utilise business and the economy as tools for social interaction, which are inseparable. The current economic structure in developing countries, as Chamidah et al. (2024) add, plays a significant role in transforming society and conveys messages about society's demands and preferences. Economic activities promote the education and health of their followers. According to Ezugoh et al. (2024), social development broadly describes society's upward movement towards efficiency, energy, quality, complexity, productivity, understanding, enjoyment, and achievement. This suggests that economic activities not only influence human socialisation but also enhance people's well-being across different levels of development. However, while many pieces of literature accept the findings of this study, others attempt to challenge or compromise them. For example, Peace et al. (2020) criticise the improper distribution and structure of economic opportunities, arguing that they influence whether individuals perceive social development as inclusive, fair, and sustainable, or as unjust, as demonstrated in many contexts and regions, including Zanzibar.

Unequal distribution of economic benefits is a significant cause of negative views of social development. According to Van Niekerk (2022), when economic growth mainly benefits urban investors rather than rural ones, foreign stakeholders rather than local communities, or a small elite rather than the majority and marginalised groups, these groups may feel excluded from the benefits of development. This imbalance fosters social resentment and ensures that development policies favour only a privileged few. McGranahan et al. (2022) emphasise that true success in development involves expanding opportunities and freedoms for everyone; therefore, unequal access to credit, jobs, or land undermines the core of social development, blocks progress, and damages public trust in social development efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The study found that religious leaders in Zanzibar view social development as a blend of religious, economic, and social factors. Their perspectives are shaped by their faith and religious teachings, which guide decisions about community needs and priorities. Economic activities also play a significant role in shaping these perceptions, as material progress is often seen as a means to promote fairness, responsibility, and improved community welfare. At the same time, religious leaders' engagement with government policies, social changes, and cultural challenges influences how they interpret and respond to development efforts. While religious institutions often advocate compassion, justice, and inclusiveness, some

individuals may struggle with limited economic understanding or rigid beliefs, which can hinder progress and lead to resistance to change.

### Recommendations

The study recommends developing a policy that actively engages religious leaders in Zanzibar's social development. To achieve this, government offices, development organisations, and religious institutions should collaborate to support programmes that empower communities economically, educate citizens socially, and promote shared moral values. A key suggestion is to strengthen religious education by incorporating topics on environmental care, economic development, and social progress. This broader approach can help religious leaders better understand and contribute to sustainable development. Moreover, regular discussions between policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society are essential. These conversations can foster trust, resolve misunderstandings, and encourage cooperation. In addition, partnership as a policy component is highly recommended. Multi-sectoral partnerships are a strategic recommendation because social development is shaped not only by early family socialisation but also by advancing collaboration, social interaction, and institutional exposure.\*\*\*

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