



THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

A Reflection on the Unique Role of FBOs in Humanitarian Crises

SECULARIZATION VS THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN HUMANITARIAN AID

Until the late seventies secularization was understood, almost universally, to be irreversible, equated with modernization and progress. Religious institutions seemed to have lost much of their influence. Religion had little or no visible role in international relations.¹ This assumption undergirded international institutional and governmental approaches to state-led nation building, development and humanitarian assistance.

Today, it is easily demonstrable that the world, with some exceptions, is as “furiously religious as it ever was” and in some places more than ever.² Worldwide, more than eight in ten people identify with a religious group.³ If modernization has had some secularizing effects, it also has provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.⁴ Whereas some donor nations continue to trend towards secularization, in other nations, including many in regions experiencing crises and conflict, faith is central and ubiquitous. When states become weak, people increasingly identify with, and rely upon, traditional community structures and religious identities for meaning and security. Often, when state institutions collapse in conflict countries, local faith leaders and religious institutions fill the gaps.

In large geographical areas of the current crisis landscape, individuals self-identify primarily by faith, and it is normative that an individual’s faith community is fixed at birth, conveying both a spiritual and political identity. In some of these areas, the idea of the secular as neutral is rejected; the human rights focus of secular humanitarian NGOs is regarded not as neutral, but as related to western secular ideology.⁵ Recognizing and working within this cultural reality serves both the cause of facilitating the humanitarian assistance in the most efficient and sustainable manner, and also that of developing mutual understanding and respect for effective work in the aftermath of crisis.

The significance of individual religious affiliation to those endangered by crisis and conflict, the role of local faith communities, and the influence of local faith figures, increasingly are understood as crucial components of effective response by the international community to emergencies. Experience has shown that communities rely

¹ See Tarek Mitri, “Christians and Muslims: Memory, Amity and Enmities”, in Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas (eds.), *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

² See Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview”, in Peter L. Berger (editor), *The Secularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C., Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

⁴ Mitri.

⁵ Shatha El Nakib and Alastair Ager (2015), *Local Faith Community and Civil Society Engagement in Humanitarian Response with Syrian Refugees in Irbid, Jordan*. Report to the Henry Luce Foundation. New York: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health.

on faith and faith institutions as part of their coping mechanism⁶ in times of disasters, enhancing communication, sharing, and compassion, and offering courage, comfort and hope. Local faith communities have the ability to leverage considerable resources in humanitarian response, including social capital, human resources, spiritual resilience, facilities, and financial support.⁷

FBOs IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Faith-based organizations are uniquely situated to provide critical links to local faith communities in humanitarian contexts, facilitating rapid response to disaster and reinforcing resilience of local communities for peace building and recovery. Faith narratives have much to contribute in offering positive and deeply embedded language about human dignity, human relationships and their meaning in shaping the human rights discourse. Therefore, the moral imperative of FBOs is to provide assistance to people of other faiths, as is especially the case in multi-religious and multi-sectarian contexts. Recent studies demonstrate the increased appreciation for the critical role the FBO community is playing in humanitarian response.⁸ “There is renewed interest in the engagement of faith-based organizations in humanitarian response, mirroring broader attention to the role of faith and faith-based action in the public sphere.”⁹

Governments and institutions¹⁰ addressing issues of poverty, development, crisis and conflict long have relied upon non-governmental humanitarian relief and development organizations as partners and primary actors in meeting humanitarian needs worldwide. A wide range of faith based and faith inspired organizations engage in this work, with variable access to donors. Historically having limited access to policy tables, and suffering the distrust of secular and institutional donors, perhaps due to “poor faith literacy within development circles,”¹¹ faith-based organizations have renewed calls for inclusion by governments and donors, as the critical role they are serving is well demonstrated.¹² An example of this effort yielding tangible results is the Faith Partnership Policy of the British Government, which actively engages with the FBO community.

Religious beliefs and convictions can constitute a basis for critical engagement with human weakness and fragile social and economic orders; and can undergird common efforts for human well-being, dignity, social justice, and civil peace. At the same time

⁶ Conflict-affected communities have significant religious and spiritual resources that include religious leaders, local healers, practices of prayer and worship, and cultural practices such as burial rites. (IASC)

⁷ Nakib and Ager. Moreover we would like to refer to an upcoming publication (end of July 2015, from a few British NGOs on the issue of ebola-response and Faith-leaders. (Christian Aid, CAFOD, Islamic relief and Tearfund)

⁸ <http://jlfic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NEWBuilding-more-effective-partnerships-between-public-sector-and-faith-groups-1.pdf>

⁹ Nakib and Ager.

¹⁰ UN Agencies as well: www.unhcr.org/pages/501a39ce6.html

¹¹ See Katherine Marshall, “Aid Effectiveness and Faith-Inspired Organizations”, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University. Policy Brief No. 4, January 2013.

¹² The powerful significance and influence of religious leaders in international affairs recently has acknowledged at the highest level of the United Nations, as the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, was welcomed in advance of the Paris COP 21 consultations: http://fore.yale.edu/files/Intro_of_Encyclical_at_UN_6-30-15.pdf and <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=27813>

faith-based organizations engage with local faith communities for the benefit of donors and recipients of aid, by adhering to the moral imperative to provide assistance to all people in need regardless of faith, upholding international humanitarian standards and principles, and also reinforcing a foundation of trust and mutual regard for the restoration of plural communities. It should also be noted that international humanitarian principles are consistent with, and ultimately based upon, core theological beliefs of the major world religions, and thus efforts of humanitarian actors and faith-based organizations are complementary.

Specific reference should be made to inter-faith work and alliances between FBOs and faith leaders. This is particularly important in conflict settings, such as post-war Sierra Leone, the recent developments in Northern Kenya, Iraq and Syria, and where conflict resolution, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding should constitute an important part of humanitarian response. In humanitarian aid, the potential for linking faith-based action to protection should be actualized. Several religions pooling their voices and actions to protect citizens will act as a force multiplier.

Numerous initiatives have taken place in the last years, seeking to increase engagement with FBOs. UN agencies, most notably UNFPA, have sought to enhance dialogue and solicit active and strategic alliances with FBOs.¹³ In February 2015, the World Bank convened and participated in a series of encounters designed to build effective partnerships between the public sector and faith groups, including a “Faith Based and Religious Leaders Roundtable” in February 2015, the first high-level meeting between World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim and faith leaders.”¹⁴ As recently as July 2015, a conference was co-hosted by the World Bank Group, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in collaboration with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities and others.¹⁵ In the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit, multiple side-events have taken place discussing the role of FBOs in humanitarian crises, the importance of inter-faith collaboration and the special role that FBOs and religious institutions play in response to populations in need.

Faith-based organizations have particular characteristics that provide both tangible and intangible benefits in specific contexts, particularly where individual recipients of aid and/or local partners are from the same faith community or established ecumenical or interfaith councils, where pre-existing reservoirs of trust provide access to facilities and networks, including community gathering spaces for humanitarian and development operations, and local, motivated staff and volunteers, reducing duplication of aid and services. A sense of shared identity and priorities provides a shortcut to effective partnerships with local communities.

¹³ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/fbo_engagement.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-joins-religious-and-faith-based-organization-leaders-in-issuing-call-and-commitment-to-end-extreme-poverty-by-2030>

¹⁵ <http://jliflc.com/2015/06/new-report-on-building-effective-partnerships-between-public-sector-and-faith-groups/>

CONCLUSION

Humanitarian actors can increase program effectiveness, address fragmentation of humanitarian assistance, and build capacities and relationships of trust that will endure in post-crisis environments, simply by coordinating international aid with local community leaders, who, in most societies, will include local religious leaders, when designing and investing in responses to humanitarian needs. The insights of these leaders, especially local religious leaders, can assist in identifying those most in need and how best to protect. Investing in these leaders can enhance their moral authority for post-crisis peace-building.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The international community and donor governments must commit to mapping the breadth and diversity of faith-based engagement in local humanitarian response.¹⁶ This mapping should show the potential and constraints in working with faith-based partners at local, national and international levels and should also be a basis for healthy engagement without instrumentalization. There should be increased understanding on how faith acts as a powerful motivator for transformational change both in terms of attitude, behavior and action.
2. Governments, the United Nations, and international agencies must recognize and respect the importance of the religious and spiritual concerns of individuals and local faith communities as integral to their identity, and balance normative principles of impartiality and neutrality with the vital role played by the local faith community. Building the capacities of the local community will entail investment in local and regional faith leaders and national organizations. This investment is needed to develop confident and effective advocates on complex issues and in the process can also provide an effective challenge to harmful theologies and practices.
3. The international community and donor governments must recognize and affirm faith-based organizations and local faith communities as unique stakeholders in humanitarian relief, strive to include FBOs and alliances of FBOs in regular multi-stakeholder collaboration, and consult with local faith leaders when designing humanitarian response and delivering humanitarian aid, recognizing that each stakeholder has particular strengths and contributions to make in building sustainable communities.
4. The international donor community must review its mode of operations in humanitarian and development settings, particularly addressing structural challenges associated with working with local or international faith based organizations¹⁷. This entails building capacity in national and local faith based leadership.

¹⁶ Nakib and Ager.

¹⁷ It may be useful to distinguish among faith based organizations (FBOs), faith inspired organizations, and secular humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), all at work in relief and development, funded by governmental donors, churches, government funds dedicated for church purposes drawn from taxes, individual contributions with or without tax advantages, and other public/private donor sources.

5. Religion and spirituality should be considered as aspects of human experience that also require protection in every response to mass forced migration and incorporated in the global protection regime. Therefore, humanitarian actors must facilitate the support to restore cultural, spiritual and religious recovery, particularly in multi-sectarian humanitarian settings.

About ACT Alliance

The ACT Alliance is a unique global alliance of churches and faith-based organizations consisting of over 140 members from all global regions. It is rooted in local churches and faith communities and works in over 140 countries worldwide to tackle issues of poverty and respond to humanitarian crisis irrespective of the faith, ethnicity or identity of the people in need. Our members are rooted in the very communities we serve.

The ACT Alliance has a membership that is distinctive in its diversity of nationality and culture, its rootedness and experience, simultaneous with a strong commitment to professionalism and high standards of work. The ACT Alliance shares people, resources and knowledge, allowing for a focus on increasing the capacity of local and national responders. As a player with increasing global recognition, the ACT Alliance seeks to maximise opportunities to change the debate on poverty, reduce its impact, and influence governments, the multilateral system, wider civil society and the private sector. This is at the heart of our approach.

The ACT Alliance is:

- Unparalleled in its diversity of global membership
- A faith-based alliance committed to working with people of all faiths
- Dedicated to grassroots to grassroots potential, combined with global coverage
- Committed to humanitarian principles, professionalism and international standards
- An advocate for populations, with a voice that has reach and legitimacy within and across countries and regions

The ACT Alliance has a combined budget of \$1.5 billion, 25,000 staff and thousands of volunteers. It is supported by a small global secretariat with presence in Amman, Bangkok, Geneva, Nairobi, New York and San Salvador.

-- Faith *based* organizations are those humanitarian relief and development organizations formed by or with direct or indirect relationship to a specific faith community.

-- Faith *inspired* organizations could be understood as those instituted with a mission statement informed by generalized spiritual principles, perhaps of one of the major world religions, but which are founded and run independently of any specific identified faith community. (Faith inspired organizations are sometimes included in one category of reference as FBOs.)

-- Secular humanitarian organizations are those formed to engage in relief and development work without reference to spiritual foundations, but rather, are generally organized around "universal" human rights principles.