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Local faith actors and protection in complex and insecure environments

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Faith leaders, faith-based organisations and local faith communities play a major role in the protection of people affected by conflict, disaster and displacement. Humanitarians, however, have only recently begun to fully appreciate the depth, scope and variety of protection work being done by faith actors and the complex interrelationships between faith and protection.

Despite sharing common humanitarian values and principles, and common interests in providing protection, faith-based and secular humanitarian actors have often operated in somewhat parallel universes. At the national level, it is not uncommon to see two sets of humanitarian actors struggling to understand, let alone navigate, each other's structures, systems and ways of working despite the fact that both are striving to protect the same communities.

One reason for the divide stems from the fact that Western humanitarianism has been largely shaped by secular values, and has tended to overlook or downplay the influence of faith outside the realm of private belief. Yet while religion has declined in industrialised countries, the vast majority of people affected by conflicts, disasters and displacement are people of faith. For many their religious beliefs and values play a major role in their lives, helping to shape the way they understand the world and their role and place within it, providing a moral compass as to what is right and wrong, and helping people cope in times of crisis. Faith may encourage acts of compassion, tolerance and respect for human dignity, while inspiring social justice, reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Bridging the gap between secular humanitarians and faith actors, and fostering engagement and stronger protection partnerships, however, are not easy tasks. Faith actors' motivations and ways of working are as diverse as the cultures and societies that sustain them, and comparatively little research has been undertaken to understand the scope and variety of their protection

work or what protection roles they are best placed to play, and why. The low visibility of their work and the fact that local faith-based organisations (FBOs) and faith leaders are rarely linked into the humanitarian system also make coordination, collaboration and complementarity a challenge.

There are other challenges too. Many FBOs lack technical expertise, and some may not be willing to take up sensitive protection issues. Being rooted in traditional cultures and beliefs, they may perpetuate harmful traditional practices or encourage stigmatisation (for example, of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence), while other faith leaders and FBOs try to address these issues. Some proselytise. Additionally, while many FBOs practise relative impartiality and neutrality, and most subscribe to humanitarian principles or their equivalents, others fail to do so because of the political context within which they operate.

The potential benefits of working with faith actors, however, are significant. Because of their local ties and widespread presence, the reach of local FBOs into crisis-affected communities often extends well beyond that of humanitarian actors and even state authorities, particularly in complex and insecure operating environments where the legitimacy of state authorities and humanitarian actors are often called into question.

Local faith leaders and FBOs are usually deeply embedded in – and generally respected by – local communities, and are intimately attuned to local cultural nuances and social and political dynamics. They also tend to

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inspire a high level of trust within their community, giving them great influence over local norms, culture and behaviour – all of which is vital for community-based protection work. The sheer size of some of these constituencies, along with their influence and connectedness, often gives them considerable leverage with state authorities and non-state actors.

The long-term engagement of faith actors with local communities and government authorities also allows their protection initiatives to take root and sustain efforts to address root causes, change patterns of behaviour or advocate for changes in law and policy.

Their presence before, during and after disasters and conflicts mean they are well placed to provide both early warning and early action to prevent conflict, and community-based disaster or conflict preparedness. Linked to this, their role as first responders after disasters is often critical. Schools, churches, temples and mosques are frequently used as safe shelters and for coordinating response efforts. Their organisational structures and networks, though often disrupted, provide a ready-made local response capacity. Faith leaders and FBOs can also draw on their social capital to launch new initiatives and gain community support and mobilise volunteers.

Lack of awareness of – or lack of sensitivity towards – the significant role that faith plays in the lives of crisis-affected communities can result in humanitarians finding themselves up against barriers and unexpected



Refugees from Myanmar enter the compound of a Seventh-day Adventist church in Umpium camp in Tak province, Thailand.

consequences, missing opportunities to persuade and mobilise communities, and even causing unintentional harm. FBOs and local faith communities (LFCs) understand the role that faith can play in helping people recover from abuses and they can provide support (spiritual reassurance, religious guidance, counselling, etc).

Faith constituencies also reach well beyond the affected community and so are well placed to prevent and resolve conflicts; deal with refugee and host community tensions; combat xenophobia and racism; mobilise support from the wider society; and address the causes of insecurity that require wider social and political change. Where religion is used as a tool to incite conflict and polarise communities, FBOs and LFCs also potentially have a unique ability to work with and through their faith communities to counteract extremist views, and reconcile the differences and tensions that fuel conflict and drive displacement.

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