Faith and responses to displacement

colour their vision of Caritas. Staff are aware that some migrants might avoid approaching Caritas for assistance due to an unfounded fear that beneficiary selection may be based upon confessional criteria, and reassure migrants that they will under no circumstances be selected or rejected on the basis of their religion. Information about Caritas Luxembourg’s services is distributed not only through faith-specific networks but through professional communications networks, partner organisations, and government and police services. The temporary residence for asylum seekers in Luxembourg managed by Caritas is deliberately designed as a multi-cultural space, where proselytism is not accepted.

Spirituality and religious belief provide the fundamental inspiration, reference point and motivation of faith-based organisations, which have many comparative advantages when working with migrants but which must practise a zero-tolerance policy regarding proselytism and discrimination, and must at no time compromise humanitarian principles.

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A Luxembourg government perspective on faith in partnership

Max Lamesch

The Luxembourg government works closely with civil society organisations and multilateral agencies in order to improve the living conditions of populations affected by natural disasters or conflicts and to prevent and mitigate the effects of humanitarian crises. Neither the religious identity of these agencies nor the beliefs or values of those being assisted determine the eligibility of its partners. There is, however, a clear set of requirements governing the selection of partners. Firstly, the decision-making processes of eligible NGOs must be fully needs oriented. This means that the organisation, together with its local partners, must remain neutral and impartial in identifying vulnerabilities and selecting communities. Secondly, it is a priority for Luxembourg to reach the most vulnerable communities and to fund humanitarian action predominantly in protracted and ‘forgotten’ crises. Partners may be chosen based on their special access capacity or on their particular know-how in working in complex environments. Thirdly, the preferred partners are organisations with a positive track record, showing high standards of accountability and solid operational structures.

While Luxembourg is fully aware of the differences that exist between faith-based and secular discourses in humanitarianism and of the prevailing criticism towards certain FBOs frequently accused of proselytism, it tries not to lose sight of the operational strengths of its partners. FBOs are often known to be well embedded in local contexts and are therefore well positioned to understand local dynamics and cultural specificities, which can help to provide access to communities. Moreover, because of its global presence and influence, religion can be an important medium through which the psychosocial wellbeing of disaster-hit populations can be improved. In certain contexts, for example, using familiar religious references when providing counselling may prove beneficial in contributing to the restoration of hope and in helping communities to overcome trauma.

And yet, while taking into account these potential advantages, the Luxembourg government pays particular attention to the extent to which partner organisations adhere to the humanitarian principles as laid out in the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief and in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. International humanitarian law and human rights law also reject any kind of favouritism and discrimination based on faith, as well as any form of proselytism potentially distorting a neutral needs-based approach. One of the responsibilities of Luxembourg’s humanitarian aid desk is therefore to scrutinise the work done by partner NGOs – not only FBOs – in terms of their neutrality and impartiality.
International research suggests that staff employed by FBOs tend to have professional backgrounds which are increasingly similar to those employed by non-faith organisations, as a consequence of the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector. If this trend towards mainstreaming organisational cultures, a common set of principles and a converging humanitarian language prevails, the divide between faith-based and secular organisations may one day become obsolete. This could well be to the benefit of people in need. Max Lamesch Max.Lamesch@mae.etat.lu on behalf of the Directorate for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. www.mae.lu


Not in our remit

Maurice Herson

When secular organisations are responding to the needs of displaced people, the religious practices and needs of the communities may not be high on the list of things to be thought about. Indeed secular organisations may struggle to recognise the importance of religion, in life and in death.

At the end of 1990 the Tamil Tigers expelled all of the Muslim residents from Sri Lanka’s Northern Province. Many of those who were now internally displaced went to the Puttalam area on the west coast where Oxfam, a secular organisation, took on much of the task of working with the local government to create camps, providing – among other things – shelter materials.

The most easily available and common roofing and wall material are cadjans, the leaves of a local palm, which are used to make a waterproof form of thatch. However, given the rainy environment and the shallow water table, we also provided rolls of plastic sheeting to be cut up as groundsheets. Quantities were calculated by the number of huts and their area, and the IDPs were instructed to cut the sheeting and give it out for use in each hut. However, when I went to monitor the distribution in one of these settlements I found that a substantial area of sheeting had been designated for use on the floor of the mosque (which had been constructed, like the huts, out of poles that we had provided and cadjans). As the person responsible, my reaction was that we could not provide sheeting for the mosque as it had been given for use in dwellings.

I find it difficult at this distance in time to recall with certainty my arguments and those of the community of those that, as a secular organisation, it was not in our remit to provide for a building devoted to religious observance rather than residence, and the objection that the mosque was for the exclusive use of men and boys rather than the whole community, including women and girls. Whatever their arguments were, in the end they ‘won’ both by virtue of the fait accompli and because I was not able to persuade them otherwise. But in any case we were all of the same mind, that it was in the interests of all that we remained on good terms and continued the work – not just immediate assistance but also capacity building with a new IDP organisation they were forming.

I recall reporting what had happened to my managers, in-country and in the UK, and nothing came of it. Except I have often thought back to it and reflected how I, on behalf of the organisation, did not take notice of the value to the people of having a mosque, or maybe of the loss of community to them in not having one. I had worked with them, and against the local authorities, to let them build village-like settlements rather than rigidly aligned camps but I had not taken the further step of seeing their religious needs. I am still not sure I was wrong but even this bare outline of the situation and its pros and cons indicate some parts of the core difficulty.

By way of contrast, when I was in Somalia in late 1992, we willingly provided shrouds to enable people to bury, with due religious observance, the many people dying of violence and starvation. A far more extreme situation but, somehow, recognising the importance of religion in death seemed easier for an avowedly secular organisation, and staff member, to actively respond to than the importance of it in life.

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