'Welcoming the stranger' and UNHCR's cooperation with faith-based organisations

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Since its creation in 1950, UNHCR has engaged with faith-based organisations, faith communities and faith leaders in carrying out its work. Recently, UNHCR has been more actively exploring the role of faith in humanitarian responses.

The fifth High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges explored 'Faith and Protection', assembling over 400 representatives of faith-based organisations (FBOs), faith leaders and other partners in Geneva in December 2012 for a two-day discussion on partnership with faith-based actors. This was the first formal multi-faith dialogue UNHCR had engaged in to explore the common values underpinning the notion of refugee protection in all of the world's major religions. It also fostered deeper appreciation for and understanding of the role that religion and spirituality play in the lives of those whom UNHCR serves.

Participants in the Dialogue further recognised the importance of UNHCR's existing and potential partnerships with FBOs. They strongly reaffirmed the key principles underpinning humanitarian work[1] (i.e. impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the beliefs of others, diversity, empowerment, equality, humanity, and protection against any form of conditionality) and acknowledged the requirement to respond to humanitarian situations according to these principles.

At the close of the event, High Commissioner António Guterres underscored "the valuable contributions that faith organisations and communities make to the protection of refugees and the displaced". He highlighted a number of concrete suggestions for follow-up, which included a call to develop guidance on 'faith literacy' for UNHCR staff.

UNHCR and faith-based organisations

In July 2014 UNHCR published a 'Partnership Note', setting out broad guidance about engaging with, reaching out to and partnering with FBOs, local faith communities and faith leaders, and giving examples of where faith actors have played an important role at the local level.[2] The Partnership Note recognises that FBOs, local faith communities and faith leaders vary in size from a group composed of a few believers to global religions and broad inter-faith networks. These organisations encompass a range of faith identities and motivations, with diverse degrees of knowledge of and willingness and capacity to observe humanitarian principles.

Faith leaders play influential roles within their faith communities and the broader local community. By providing concrete examples, the Note demonstrates that faith leaders benefit from trust and exercise moral authority over members of their local faith community, and shape public opinion in the broader community and even at the national or international level. These examples were drawn from a survey that UNHCR undertook in 2013 (with the support of a coalition of FBOs) to better understand the breadth of existing partnerships between faith actors and UNHCR at all stages of the refugee and displacement cycle. It explored lessons learned and identified good practices for engagement with faith actors.

Challenges and opportunities

UNHCR, like others in the broader humanitarian community, is committed to upholding humanitarian principles and ensuring that protection underpins all its activities. UNHCR does not engage in partnerships that are contrary to these principles and, in particular, its support cannot be used for proselytising or imposing conditions on delivering aid that are contrary

to humanitarian principles. On the other hand, it must be recognised that faith actors occasionally encounter bias against them among staff from outside of the faith community. The challenges of partnership need to be viewed from both perspectives if they are to be overcome, particularly through positive changes in attitudes and approaches.[3]

From UNHCR's perspective, the most difficult partnership challenges are presented when faith actors promote or condone the following: antagonism towards or exclusion of members of other faith backgrounds; hate speech or incitement to violence directed against individuals or communities of another faith; proselytisation and pressure to convert as a pre-condition for continued support; early marriage or other possibly harmful traditional practices; gender stereotypes, and disregard for the specific rights of women, boys and girls, and for vulnerabilities in contexts where sexual and gender-based violence and negative coping mechanisms are widespread; stigmatisation and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS; and stigmatisation and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals and communities. In addition, local faith communities may lack familiarity with UNHCR's processes and procedures, including its strategic priorities and notions of risk and vulnerability, which can become a source of frustration and misunderstanding for UNHCR staff.

UNHCR staff also recorded that the common difficulty of coordination in complex emergency situations extends to local faith communities, their networks and community-based organisations. Other documented challenges and concerns about partnering with faith actors, especially local faith communities and faith leaders, include a focus on charity-based approaches as opposed to human rights-based approaches to humanitarian assistance.

It is clear that partnership with UNHCR poses specific challenges as well for faith-based organisations. One factor is the inherent inequality of power between a large international organisation and a small local institution. Another is UNHCR's procedures and requirements, which FBOs may be unable or unwilling to satisfy, and the fact that staff rotation may affect UNHCR's institutional memory and presence in the deep field, potentially putting at risk long-standing positive cooperation.

Good practice examples

A number of good practice examples are contained in the Partnership Note and in two publications entitled *Overview of the Survey on Good Practices Examples* and *Analysis of the Survey on Good Practices Examples*.[2]

"... the leaders of the Muslim community [in Bangui, CAR] mobilized some 5km away from the refugee camp on the road to Tirungulu to stop [armed non-state actors] from advancing. This group literally sat on the dirt road to prevent them from moving. They pleaded and invoked the Holy Qur'an, reminding the armed non-state actors of their duties as fellow Muslims."

"...faith-based organisations [in Myanmar] have acted as buffers between warring parties and were hence able to operate in both areas, even at the peak of the conflict. Due to the trust they benefitted from, they were good advocates for protection. They lobbied the government to take full responsibility for the education and health services of IDPs in Kachin state. They also managed to have IDPs released from detention as they were able to vouch for detainees. No other international organisation or local NGO has such a wide margin of manoeuvre to respond to the humanitarian situation."

"The capacity, knowledge and skills of the faith-based organisations and the community religious leaders [in Jijiga, Ethiopia] prompted the office to work closely with them, given their potential to address the protection needs of the refugee community. ...There was a call for the support of religious leaders from the women's anti-FGM group in camps, since the community was challenging [the leaders] on religious grounds."

Notwithstanding the challenges for both sides, FBOs, local faith communities and faith leaders have traditionally contributed to a wide range of protection activities in humanitarian situations, including: providing physical protection and facilitating humanitarian access; deterring violence through presence and accompaniment; mediating tensions between refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities in conflict or post-conflict situations; engaging in reconciliation and peace-building activities; combating xenophobia and discrimination; preventing and responding to SGBV or forced recruitment; improving reception conditions and accompanying the detained; providing legal counselling and asylum case-management; advocating for legislative changes benefitting persons of concern; and supporting refugee resettlement and/or local integration.

Welcome the Stranger

Another initiative that sprang from the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Faith and Protection was a call to develop guidance for faith leaders, which aims to promote tolerance and respect for the human dignity and human rights of asylum seekers and refugees, migrants, IDPs and stateless persons. In early 2013, UNHCR worked with a group of FBOs, networks and religious experts to draft a text consisting of 16 affirmations written in the first person that draw upon principles and values shared by the world's major religions. The document aims to provide faith leaders with an opportunity to affirm the role that faith communities play to "welcome the stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced,
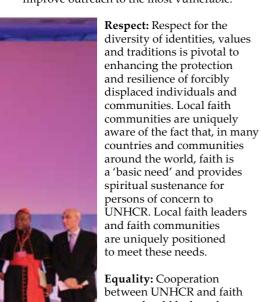

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Signing ceremony for the Affirmations for Faith Leaders at the Religions for Peace 9th World Assembly in Vienna, 21st November 2013.

the other […] to challenge intolerance […] and respect the right of the stranger to practise his or her own faith freely".

The call to 'welcome the stranger' is essentially a statement of belief flowing from principles of hospitality, respect and equality, as these are values that are deeply rooted in all major faiths.

Hospitality: Local faith groups, such as local faith communities, are often the first to respond to individuals, families and communities in the initial stages of a humanitarian crisis. They respond by virtue of their presence in some of the most isolated and remote areas. Recognition of this fact has sparked off renewed interest in engaging with these communities to improve outreach to the most vulnerable.

Respect: Respect for the diversity of identities, values and traditions is pivotal to enhancing the protection and resilience of forcibly displaced individuals and communities. Local faith communities are uniquely aware of the fact that, in many countries and communities around the world, faith is a 'basic need' and provides spiritual sustenance for persons of concern to UNHCR. Local faith leaders and faith communities are uniquely positioned to meet these needs.

Equality: Cooperation between UNHCR and faith actors should be based on a shared set of objectives, and be premised on mutual respect and equality of partnership. Equality should also translate into equal treatment and the right to equal protection according to humanitarian standards.

These principles are a point of departure for dialogue between UNHCR and faith actors and may also help guide partners that wish to establish dialogue across faiths and between traditional and non-traditional humanitarian actors.

From December 2012 through to December 2013, the Affirmations were signed and endorsed by over 1,700 religious leaders, members of faith communities and faith-based organisations worldwide, and were formally launched at a signing ceremony before an assembly of 600 faith leaders at the Religions for Peace 9th World Assembly on 21st November 2013 in Vienna.[4] Faith groups around the world are now using the Affirmations and supporting resources as practical tools to foster support for refugees and other displaced people in their communities.

"A core value of my faith is to welcome the stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced, the other. I shall treat him or her as I would like to be treated. I will challenge others, even leaders in my faith community, to do the same."

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1. See ICRC 'Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief'. www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf

2. UNHCR's *Partnership Note on Faith-based Organizations, Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders* is available in English www.unhcr.org/539ef28b9.html and in French www.unhcr.fr/53ad6b569.html. For the *Overview of the Survey on Good Practices Examples* see http://goo.gl/nLdEeN and for the *Analysis of the Survey on Good Practices Examples* see http://goo.gl/YsFnFM. For more resources, see www.unhcr.org/pages/501a39ce6.html

3. The principles of partnership established by the Global Humanitarian Platform are: equality, transparency, results-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. See Global Humanitarian Platform, 'Principles of Partnership', July 2007. http://tinyurl.com/GHP-Principles

4. The multilingual Affirmations document (in Arabic, English, French, German, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish and Turkish) is online at www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html