

Faith, relief and development: the Sri Lanka experience

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A strategic partnership between the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)¹ and Muslim Aid (MA)² in Sri Lanka, now formalised into a worldwide partnership agreement, offers a model for effective, community-based, culturally appropriate and sustainable assistance provision.

In 2006, a deterioration of security in North East Sri Lanka was beginning to put a strain on the already fragile ceasefire between the government and the LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam). On 2 August the Muslim majority town of Muttur (in Trincomalee District) was attacked and besieged by the LTTE. Efforts by aid agencies, the UN and the Red Cross to negotiate a humanitarian corridor into the town came to nothing. A few days later, most of the inhabitants fled. Diverted from their preferred destination by military action, the IDPs walked to the Sinhalese majority town of Kanthale, an area already experiencing inter-ethnic tensions because of the proximity of fighting. Local government authorities were unable to cope with the needs of the IDPs, who numbered some 57,000.

With the influx of tens of thousands of IDPs, the Kanthale area, already an under-resourced region, was extremely tense and violence was common. Most NGOs had left but UMCOR and MA were still working in the area. As the crisis developed, the two agencies gravitated towards each other and within a couple of days were working together, setting up a joint field office and warehouse, and sharing staff, vehicles, aid supplies and logistical support. They and their local partners responded to the crisis by providing emergency water, shelter, medical, food and non food items for IDPs and, later, logistical support and coordination assistance for the international NGOs.

This partnership enabled economies of scale and effective coordination but also had some other, unexpected outcomes. Both agencies worked in coordination with their respective

faith and community leaders and councils to coordinate the mobilisation of thousands of volunteers who brought food and non food relief items to the IDP camps and distribution centres. MA engaged with the imams, the coordinating council for Muslim theologians and communities, discussed the impartial nature of humanitarianism with them and vouched for UMCOR staff's neutrality. Discussions centred on the imperative of both faiths to serve humanity and reduce the suffering of the disadvantaged. This was language which people could understand and relate to. UMCOR did the same through local Methodist priests in Christian areas – and with Hindus whom the priests knew. Soon those villages where UMCOR workers had been held at gunpoint and attacked by villagers a couple of weeks previously welcomed both UMCOR and MA staff.

MA and UMCOR jointly approached the local Buddhist chief monk to ask for help in bringing aid to the beleaguered Buddhist community – a community which was suspicious of NGOs and other ethnic and faith communities. The chief monk was surprised by the joint approach by organisations whose faiths are commonly portrayed by the media as enemies (and therefore perceived as such by communities) but agreed to speak with his constituents; inter-faith cooperation flourished around the humanitarian relief efforts, with the Buddhist temple becoming an aid distribution centre.

This partnership continued once the emergency was over and the security situation had improved. When the IDPs were able to return home some months later,

both organisations provided reconstruction and other return assistance. Following the emergency response, the two partners reviewed their joint operations, identifying key attributes of the partnership as well as wider opportunities for how faith-based organisations (FBOs) can work together to improve operational effectiveness:

The ability to work effectively in an insecure environment:

The sight of two different FBOs working together had a calming effect in many conflict-affected communities. It is doubtful if this could have been achieved in such a short space of time without local faith leaders being engaged by an FBO with which they could identify.

The ability to work for common causes:

The common belief in serving humanity contributes to the ability to work together and can largely eliminate the competitiveness over resources in relief and development.

Working within networks:

Religions offer cultural, social and political networks unsurpassed by any other. An FBO can 'plug into' this network, gaining immediate access to faith leaders – community 'gatekeepers' – and thus an entry point to communities.

Sustainable empowerment and programming:

In traditional societies, making sustainable progress in empowering minorities and vulnerable groups (such as women) without exposing them to danger is difficult. However, although some faith leaders may wish to preserve traditional roles, most have the wellbeing of their communities at heart and can be agents for change. By working with these leaders, a long-term process of empowerment in its truest sense was initiated. The long-term presence of faith representatives in communities enables relief and

development programmes to be supported long after the original implementing partner has left.

Peace, reconciliation, respect and understanding:

Peace does not emanate from high-level political agreements but from communities on the ground. One of the most surprising aspects of the partnership was that it was the first time the majority of people had witnessed different faiths working together in a tangible manner. This is perhaps the area within which this partnership will be most effective – acting as a link between inter-faith dialogue and communities, translating rhetoric into practical action which demonstrates the benefit of dialogue to disadvantaged communities.

Challenges

Cooperation between the two NGOs has developed beyond Sri Lanka and on 26 June 2007, following intense negotiations, a worldwide partnership agreement was signed in the House of Commons in London. However, the partnership has not been welcomed unanimously and various problems were encountered during negotiations:

Formalising the partnership:

The success of joint programming often depends on relationships between individuals, making partnership vulnerable. The concern that the Sri Lankan experience owed more to personal friendships between staff members of Muslim Aid and UMCOR was discussed and a pilot joint funding application was initiated in Indonesia where the two organisations had not been thrown together by force of circumstance. It was found that, with the leadership of the two organisations explaining in detail the partnership and the ideals behind it, the application process and all the joint assessments that this entailed proceeded smoothly and lasting links were made.

Resistance from the supporter

base: Within all faiths, as in secular society, there is a wide spectrum of opinion. The negative reaction of some people in the Christian community in the US can be viewed on various blogs while some in the Muslim community have reportedly voiced comparable opinions. This

is only to be expected. It was found that many misunderstood the nature of the FBO – as a professional relief and development organisation as opposed to a proselytising agent. The dissension, however, provided an opportunity for people to discuss the changing face of relief and development and the importance of inter-faith partnerships.

The erosion of identity:

Concern was voiced that the partnership would dilute the Islamic identity of MA and the Christian identity of UMCOR – that the coming together of the two would produce a compromised organisation not at ease with itself. This is a valid concern. However, the partnership comes together mainly around operational and advocacy issues. While the partners may disagree on theological issues, there are many more areas concerning the world's disadvantaged that they do agree upon.

The distraction of faith leaders:

Some community faith leaders were exposed to the international humanitarian field for the first time and, recognising its potential, became involved in NGO work. Their involvement caused concern that they were being taken away – at a time of crisis – from ministering to the spiritual needs of their communities. Clearly a delicate balance between the two needs to be identified early in an operation to operationalise a 'do no harm' approach.

Keeping the partnership relevant:

The Sri Lanka experience demonstrated that the success of the partnership was its relevance to communities and that high-level dialogue, although crucial, has limited meaning at grassroots level. As the partnership model is taken up, analysed and debated by academia, governments and other interested parties, a challenge will be to ensure that it remains practical, relevant and rooted in communities.

Next steps

The idea of faiths operating together is not new³ but has to date largely been limited to inter-faith dialogue and some cross-funding initiatives. In Sri Lanka the UMCOR-MA partnership demonstrated that there is a huge untapped potential in engaging with faith. The two organisations believe



that faith represents a significant pillar of grassroots relief and development which has remained sidelined due to its potentially sensitive nature. However, virtually all faiths, however different they may be theologically, have a common purpose to serve humanity and aid the disadvantaged.

During an aid distribution to IDPs from Muttur and to the host population in Kanthale, north eastern Sri Lanka.

The Commonwealth Foundation in the UK invited UMCOR and MA to present their partnership model at the 2007 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kampala where it generated significant interest. Over the coming 12 months the partners will be rolling out and further developing the model with the assistance of academics, practitioners, faith leaders and communities. 2008 will see joint country directors' meetings, further meetings between senior, middle and lower management, joint activities at the field level and joint partnership projects with communities of all ethnicities in Sudan, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

This partnership is not exclusive and is open to all non-proselytising faith-based organisations. The longer-term vision is for a consortium of FBOs working together at the community level to bring relief, development, peace, reconciliation and mutual respect and understanding in a world where faith is increasingly manipulated as a tool to drive conflict rather than resolve it.

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1. <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/work/fieldoffices/partners/muslim-aid/>

2. <http://ramadan.muslimaid.org/Page170.asp>

3. eg Geneva-based Action by Churches Together (ACT) International <http://act-intl.org/>