

Faith-based humanitarianism in northern Myanmar

Edward Benson and Carine Jaquet

The response of faith-based organisations to displacement in northern Myanmar has been remarkable but sustaining an open and collaborative relationship with the international community remains an ongoing challenge.

The resumption of armed conflict in 2011 in the north of Myanmar led to tens of thousands of people being displaced; three years on, over 99,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain. In this predominately Christian area of Myanmar, Baptist and Catholic communities and organisations have been the pivotal providers of aid. Since the Christianisation of Kachin in the late nineteenth century, churches have been providing public services where the state has not. Over generations this has earned them legitimacy and, perhaps crucially, trust with the population. More recently in the wake of the conflict, churches and their compounds have served logically as safe havens and places where groups could respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of people of the same faith or even members of the same congregation, whether they were in government-controlled or non-government-controlled areas.

Beyond this history of faith-based organisations (FBOs) helping to meet people's needs, it has also been argued that some of their success is due to a position that allows them to cooperate with both parties to the conflict. The Government of Myanmar, though overwhelmingly Buddhist, has little option but to accept churches and FBOs that have responded to IDP needs through their extensive religious networks. Due to their very nature, FBOs feel that it is their duty to respond to the needs of civilians. Even if they are not hugely experienced in humanitarian work, they consider that they have little choice. While international agencies still struggle to gain regular and predictable access to over half the displaced population located in non-government-controlled areas, this is not a problem for the FBOs and their personnel. The provision of suitable land, often such

a major impediment to the provision of shelter in humanitarian operations, has often been solved through shelters and camps situated inside church compounds.

Being small in size has been beneficial not only in avoiding the problems inherent in large congested camps but also in terms of the FBOs' capacity to respond flexibly. The organisations evolved and developed organically as the needs emerged, leaning on their pre-existing presence, knowledge and relationships with the displaced people. Rather than large-scale responses that focus on all beneficiaries receiving the same in an effort to ensure equity, such FBOs can have an approach whereby each person or family receives what they need. One internationally funded programme allowed pre-determined focal points in camps to respond to specific IDP needs. It was hugely popular with the FBOs and when funding channels temporarily dried up they managed to garner the support of local churches or businessmen so assistance could continue.

FBO advantages and constraints

Their clear chain of command has also been cited as an advantage – an ability to take decisions, built on the hierarchy of the churches with Catholic bishops and Baptist pastors having the final say. While the leaders may spend little time on the ground (something that could equally be said of some senior persons in international agencies), they have an army of support staff who do and who are part of a powerful network. Key FBOs have faith enshrined in their name: KBC, the Kachin Baptist Convention; KMSS, Karuna¹ Myanmar Social Services (Caritas Myanmar). The Metta Development Foundation describe their 'driving force' as the embodiment of the words 'loving kindness', words that are found

November 2014



in the Buddhist canon, although interestingly enough the leadership tends to be Christian. Evidence of proselytising appears to have been scant yet perhaps this was not necessary as beneficiaries were already committed to their very familiar humanitarian provider, by being part of the same faith.

Yet despite all these positives, FBOs do also suffer constraints and challenges as humanitarian responders. While assuming the role of large-scale humanitarian responders in the Kachin crisis, FBOs have exhibited a number of trends relating to their structures, staffing and mandates that have arguably created some challenges for them in the response. First, staff turnover can be high and while some staff are highly experienced and professional, others are recruited more on the basis of their faith or connection to the church. Second, in technical sectors, knowledge of minimum standards can be minimal or

non-existent. Third, poor documentation practices, lack of transparency or lack of robust accounting systems can undermine donors' confidence as to what extent they can or should be funded. Their requests for more funding can be based solely on a rationale of what they, the particular FBO, would intuitively like to do but with little analytical approach of the overall situation.

Another concern is the issue of impartiality. While there are a few examples of Catholic camps responding to the needs of Baptist IDPs, and vice versa, camp residents are frequently from one church group as IDPs move to the closest institution that shares their faith – which could be deemed contrary to key principles of humanitarian work. Furthermore, some have questioned whether an already paternalistic relationship between the displaced and their church is amplified to the point that it lacks some of the necessary checks and balances between

the provider and recipient of the aid. This dynamic can limit FBOs' accountability to their beneficiaries and limit the participation of beneficiaries in determining what assistance might best suit their needs.

International assistance

As the displacement continues into its fourth year, the last two years have seen a scaling-up of international humanitarian assistance. However, marrying the two spheres remains challenging for various reasons. First, parts of the international response (such as clusters) were not activated until 18 months after the war resumed, and efforts to introduce internationally recognised standards against this backdrop has predictably been harder. Second, there can be a resentment that international agencies rely on an expatriate workforce, a presence that is temporary while local FBOs are here to stay. Third, some suggest that the influence of international agencies has traces of neo-colonialism, adding to a lack of trust as to what their real intentions are. Whatever the truth, what is clear is how huge the organisational differences are culturally.

Differences are not just cultural but are also structural. While the international humanitarian community organises its response by sectors, local FBOs tend to take a broader, more holistic view and aim to address all the various needs of the displaced. The result can be FBOs being asked to attend a wide array of coordination forums, leading to frustration on their part. International agencies will also usually have clear lines of reporting and information exchange between the field and their head offices in Yangon (Myanmar's largest city). FBOs, however, may be structured around certain religious demarcations, such as Catholic dioceses or Baptist conventions. Some lack any presence in Yangon while others, even if they do have offices there, have minimal reporting or sharing of information across their local offices or with their headquarters in Yangon.

One must accept that greater coherence and convergence between the two spheres

will take time, probably years, despite the frequently impatient world of humanitarian responses. Looking forward, the vision must be one of mutually beneficial partnership. FBOs must be treated as fully fledged equals, not as implementing partners or, worse, as contractors. At the same time, lack of reciprocity or feedback to repeated efforts by international agencies and forums to reach out does few favours to local FBOs, especially if financial support from and recognition by the international community is what they desire. It is naïve to think that donors and international agencies will hand over millions of dollars with minimal influence over what happens to the funds. International frameworks require transparency, consultation and information sharing. Additionally, while much literature and thinking continue to emphasise the advantages of working through and with local grass-roots organisations, local FBOs also compete with their fellow local agencies for influence and credibility.

The need for greater collaboration and trust between international agencies and local FBOs is self-evident although perhaps the hardest obstacle to overcome is the lack of trust. While suspicion is not surprising, few could argue against the fact that if combined, with each sphere contributing with its areas of expertise and comparative advantage, the humanitarian response would be far more effective than if working in parallel or in competition. From both sides it requires a willingness to look outwards and recognise that while the means and the mindset may often vary, what they both wish to achieve and are striving for is much the same.

Edward Benson benson@unhcr.org is Shelter/NFI/CCCM Cluster Coordinator, UNHCR Myanmar. www.shelternficccmmyanmar.org
Carine Jaquet carine.jaquet@gmail.com was the head of UNHCR in Kachin State in 2012-13 and is currently a Researcher at the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia, Bangkok. www.irasec.com

1. Buddhist concept of 'compassionate action based on wisdom'.