

Faith motivation and effectiveness: a Catholic experience

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CAFOD's ability to partner with other faith-based organisations and communities brings significant advantages for its work with displaced people and other conflict-affected communities. However, modern-day humanitarianism does not always sit comfortably alongside some of the practices and approaches of the major religions.

The professionalisation of the humanitarian world since the Rwanda genocide in 1994 has tended to obscure the religious origins of much of humanitarian thinking and practice. The humanitarian work of UK-based international NGO CAFOD¹ is underpinned by Catholic Social Teaching which emphasises the intrinsic dignity of every person and our responsibility to protect human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable. It therefore provides a strong ethical framework for our work, and principles

which we share with some 500 local partners and with Caritas Internationalis's network of 165 Catholic agencies.

The valuable psychosocial role of spirituality and supportive faith networks in reinforcing people's coping capacity is often overlooked by the wider humanitarian community. This recognises that material assistance is not enough and that people draw great emotional comfort and support from their faith and their faith community in times of

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hardship. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), one of CAFOD's church partners runs a project across 34 parishes to support survivors of rape and sexual violence, including displaced women. The initiative came about after a local priest noticed that many women were coming to the parish to talk about their experiences; the church was the only place the women felt they could gather and find support. "God can help you to forget what happened. When I am alone at home I think of bad things but when I'm in the group, I forget." Equally, this is often a crucial factor for partner staff themselves, who may be working on emotionally demanding issues, and who are motivated by and benefit from having spiritual support.

Impartiality and independence

The principle of humanitarian impartiality requires FBOs to provide assistance to those most in need, rather than to those of their own faith. This is particularly important in conflicts perceived to have a religious dimension, and Syria typifies the complexity of adhering to this principle.

CAFOD is supporting church partners in Syria who are well placed to provide humanitarian assistance to all communities affected by the civil war. But interventions are difficult to monitor and there is a nagging worry that pressure from within the Christian communities and church hierarchies (not just Catholic) could lead to assistance being provided to members of one faith community. If true, this would not only compromise their humanitarian impartiality and independence but would also further alienate the minority Christian community from their Muslim neighbours and on a practical level would greatly increase the risks involved in their work. To mitigate this, CAFOD's church partners in Homs not only use information from the parishes to identify those families most in need but they have also established a centralised process to check the lists and ensure vulnerability is measured independently of religious adherence, according to a set list of criteria

i.e. people with disabilities, displaced, older persons, single-headed households, etc.

The increased fragmentation of Syria's religious and ethnic panorama can sometimes make it hard for faith-based NGO partners to work with other faith groups. On the other hand, there is anecdotal evidence that religious groups of all persuasions are working to broker local ceasefires, cooperation pacts or even peace agreements, although this in itself may make them targets. Where this cooperation is occurring, FBOs are well placed to provide assistance to the displaced of all faiths. The delicate balancing of needs and perceptions in such a fraught, complex and dangerous environment often depends not only on the ethos of the organisation but also on the quality and attitude of the staff and leaders of these local partners.

Faith-based versus human rights-based

As well as drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, our responses have to be informed by scientific research and best practice. Our experience demonstrates that promoting dialogue between secular and faith-based approaches can highlight the significant similarities in aims and approaches and the possibilities for complementarity rather than the differences often overshadowing the discourse. Modern-day humanitarianism does not always sit comfortably alongside some of the teaching and practice of the major religions, and this sometimes gives the impression of a clash between faith-based and rights-based approaches.

FBOs should more purposefully apply the ethics, the social teaching and the doctrinal position of their respective faiths to the application of humanitarian, technical and accountability standards. Indeed, these debates should not prevent FBOs from delivering effective and safe humanitarian programmes. Reconciling scriptural interpretation, doctrinal positions and the everyday realities of life is not straightforward, as evidenced by the difficulties that religious authorities of various faiths have had in dealing with issues

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Sister Angélique Namaika (2013 Nansen Award winner) in the Catholic church of which she is a member, in Dungu, Democratic Republic of Congo.

such as family planning, HIV and AIDS prevention, and the respective roles and status of men and women. However, in the same way that some faith leaders can seem obstructive and inflexible in their approach to outside organisations, Western donors can come across to Southern church leaders as equally intolerant when compliance with their principles and approaches is a condition of aid. The fallout from these issues has reverberated across the Caritas network and our local church partners, influencing the way we work with the displaced in all contexts.

Professionalised language

The differences between secular and faith-based NGOs can seem more glaring because, as the humanitarian protection sector moves towards greater professionalisation, there has been a move towards the use of more technical, standardised language. Although

such terminology is now widely used in the humanitarian sector, to local FBOs it can seem both alien and at variance with a faith-based approach. The result of not being able to use this language is that local FBOs struggle to represent their efforts in coordination meetings, for example, and can be excluded and undervalued in the response activities.

Although the language of secular and faith-based organisations about human rights and displacement issues may differ, in essence the organisations are often dealing with similar challenges and have related objectives. Equally, the fact that some Catholic networks may base their work on Catholic Social Teaching rather than the more technical concepts of secular agencies can actually be more appropriate in certain contexts where a human rights discourse may meet with a negative response.

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Advocacy

Approaches that take into account, and adapt to, the local faith-based perspective can have a wider and deeper effect as partners are able to talk about issues in a way that is easily understood by, and has resonance with, local communities. Through its networks CAFOD is able to invite local priests, bishops and members of the communities they serve (including refugees and IDPs when appropriate) to speak in international fora and to advocate for policy change. For example, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui and President of Caritas Central African Republic (CAR), has worked closely with other faith leaders including Imam Omar Kabine Layama as part of the Inter-Religious Platform there. They have consistently called for the conflict in CAR to be framed by the political, social and economic factors underpinning the tensions rather than religious differences. Given the potential power and influence of faith leaders, both faith-based and secular organisations need to support them to ensure their approaches are evidence-based and free from stigmatisation.

Access to individuals and communities

Faith-based NGOs pride themselves on accessing individuals and communities beyond the reach of most other NGOs through the church's networks of workers and volunteers based in the diocesan and parochial structures. In addition, the church's sustained presence, acceptance by communities and knowledge of the context allow them to cover wider geographical areas and cross-sections of society.

FBOs may also be better placed to act as interlocutors with unsympathetic governments or non-state actors. For example, CAFOD has worked through the church in Sudan, DRC and Eritrea to reach a wide cross-section of faith communities unaided by secular NGOs. In Colombia, only the church could reach certain areas, where the conflict and lack of state presence made access difficult for humanitarian agencies. CAFOD's local church partner, FUNVIPAS, for example, works in FARC's traditional

strongholds² and is one of the few organised structures to work in the region; this access has enabled them to conduct training on international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to provide psychosocial support to victims of the conflict.

Sustainable and long-term response

When displacement becomes chronic and media interest and funding start to dry up, FBOs may have the advantages of being a sustained presence although the value of this can be undermined by religious institutions' wider focus on pastoral and social work in the communities they serve. This may over-stretch an FBO's capacity and resources and can unfairly leave them open to the charge that they are diluting the efficiency and effectiveness of their humanitarian response (i.e. not acting as 'professional humanitarians'). Ultimately, however, harnessing an FBO's broader approach and deeper knowledge of communities could greatly strengthen humanitarian responses – if there is also a common understanding of and commitment to humanitarian principles and coordination.

CAFOD has started a programme to strengthen partners' humanitarian responses: building their contingency planning and response systems, and strengthening their technical knowledge, programme management and leadership competencies. With this support, CAFOD hopes to enable our faith-based partners to integrate more effectively into the rapidly changing humanitarian response world, enabling them to deliver more effective and robust responses to displacement.

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1. CAFOD is the official aid agency of the Catholic Church of England and Wales, and part of Caritas Internationalis.
2. FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)