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The value of accompaniment

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Friendship and compassionate companionship with the most vulnerable provide a powerful type of humanitarian service giving priority to personal accompaniment.

Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic organisation founded in 1980 to respond to the plight of the Vietnamese boat-people, with a mandate of accompaniment, service and advocacy for refugees and other forcibly displaced people.¹ In accompaniment work, we move beyond a mere delivery of services through offering companionship, active listening and solidarity, focusing on individuals' personal needs and concerns.

For us accompaniment is a process echoing the fundamental belief of divine presence on earth, expressing solidarity and compassion. Through accompaniment we aim to lessen the enormous power gap between humanitarian worker and beneficiary and hope to increase the desire for genuine participation by displaced people in programmes and services affecting them.

In virtually all refugee or forced migration stories there lies the menacing background of war and violence; hopelessness in the face of suffering and deprivation; the yearning to be listened to and to tell one's story; and the value of small gestures of compassion and respect. Empowering refugees is to give them back self-worth and hope for the future. Involving refugees in the plans made for their lives is not only sensible but a psychological and moral necessity, a precondition for sustainable, effective projects which should be the hallmark of faith-based organisations' humanitarian programmes. Of course faith-based organisations (FBOs) can and do run large programmes of humanitarian assistance using all their professional expertise but these large-scale approaches must always be in the service of, and never dwarf, personal and human approaches.

Accompaniment can offer an antidote to the 'commodification' of beneficiaries that

unfortunately happens so often in large-scale humanitarian relief operations. We recall our experience in western Zambia, where a sudden influx of new Angolan refugees had arrived in a newly erected refugee camp. Though officially tasked with education services, JRS took it upon itself also to advocate in a broad sense for refugees' concerns and rights with the camp authorities. One issue of importance to the refugees, but of low priority to harassed camp and government authorities, was the register of those who had died since arriving in Zambia. JRS became responsible for keeping a record of the dead, on behalf of the living; in performing this simple yet meaningful service, JRS accompanied the refugees on their journey of life by allowing refugees to formalise the importance of those who had gone before them. Death is perhaps a particularly significant aspect of a faith life, and therefore important for faith-based organisations, but not the only example; there are many places where there is an intersection between faith and the humanitarian instinct. The importance of compassion for those in need or the value of companionship for life's journey – these practices are enjoyed by a faith approach and provide a powerful and special type of humanitarian service, giving priority to personal accompaniment.

A faith-based approach to accompaniment also provides an alternative lens through which to view the programmatic implications of service delivery:

- Because of strong links with local religious leaders and communities, FBOs are in a powerful position to make the case for local integration, stressing values of hospitality and solidarity.
- Humanitarian intervention is often viewed as parachuted-in help from outside but

FBOs usually have a local viewpoint, knowledge and skill base.

- FBOs have been a powerful tool for advocacy work at national and international levels, making known the plight of the forgotten displaced untouched by the 'CNN effect'. For example, the global treaty to ban landmines was in large part inaugurated and later driven by FBOs.
- Because levels of trust between FBOs and the displaced are often higher than with secular NGOs, there is greater likelihood, in our experience, of being able to tap into the strengths, experiences and networks of refugees that may help lead to solutions.
- In Africa and Asia, we have found great respect by religious leaders for the work done by FBOs for displaced, regardless of the church or religion.

No matter in what sector of service delivery, in JRS we have found it valuable to build in details of accompaniment at every stage of our project cycle: in the training of staff on its importance and priority in our work; in our codes of conduct and conditions of service; in our reports, monitoring and evaluation exercises; and in our assessment of impact. FBOs with a strong sense of accompaniment may be better placed to position themselves alongside refugees in protracted situations, although one of the challenges we have found in stressing the value of accompaniment is the delicate timing of letting go, especially after a prolonged presence. FBOs may not always be the first on the humanitarian scene but often they are the last to leave. Also, secular INGOs and UN agencies may lack local familiarity and knowledge, and have to face the realities of frequent staff rotation, as well as bureaucratic difficulties of conducting cross-border programmes.

Another challenge facing FBOs, and certainly present in JRS, relates to the different understanding of what constitutes the best approach to service delivery. FBOs are usually close to the population and know

them well, working from the perspective of accompaniment and empowerment of the most vulnerable. This profound understanding of the needs of the community can sometimes collide with indicators of service delivery proposed by external agents who do not know the community. To the extent possible, a sense of mission should guide a set of evidence-based, best practices in the field, which in turn serve to advance the mission. Yet, in practice it is often difficult to conceptualise specifically how the mission and practices can best be linked. In the complex environments in which FBOs operate, we believe that the best approach is one guided by a set of values, yet drawing from and using best available evidence operationally – what could be termed 'evidence-informed mission work'.

In over three decades of service to refugees and IDPs, JRS considers that one of the defining elements of its identity – accompaniment – is central to most religious traditions, and is also a unique element that they can bring to humanitarian service. Accompaniment as practised in JRS is defined by a cluster of attitudes and values: solidarity, hope, respect and dignity, friendship, open listening, hospitality, striving for justice, and opting for the poor and marginalised. Like many other FBOs who aim to be close to and in solidarity with those they serve, JRS has found in accompaniment a practice and a dimension that offer deeper quality of service as well as benefits well beyond those of a rigid calculus of output and impact.

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