

## The contribution of FBOs working with the displaced

David Holdcroft

**Faith-based organisations take from their religious traditions both strong motivations and access to a long history of thinking concerning social and political issues. This can make them ideally placed to fill the gaps in the implementation of human rights.**

Early in 2014 I visited Mavisela, a Zimbabwean woman living in a small shack on the outskirts of a small town in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> She came to South Africa during the great migration from Zimbabwe in 2008, was granted an asylum permit under the general dispensation in force at the time, and has had it renewed periodically, without resolution of her case, ever since. Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) first encountered Mavisela in a local hospital. She was barely alive, weighing 25kg and suffering from HIV and drug-resistant TB. Since then, the organisation has helped her with a variety of interventions which have seen her slowly regain her health, make contacts with the community (both South African and migrant) and begin to find work.

JRS's response to Mavisela's case highlights the type of contribution that faith-based organisations (FBOs) working in the area of forced displacement can make, as well as some of the challenges and pitfalls they face. Like many of her compatriots living in South Africa, Mavisela is most probably not a 'Convention refugee' and this places her outside UNHCR's core mandate of concern. Like most survival migrants, however, she felt forced to move to South Africa where she lives a highly precarious existence in deep poverty. JRS's programme had both the freedom from definitional preoccupations and an on-the-ground network to be able to respond to some of her needs, then subsequently to mount various interventions as we came to know her and the circumstances of her case in more detail. Over time the priority has shifted to enabling her to forge links with the local community, which involves mainly the civil authorities and churches with whom JRS is networked. All in all, by the end the process will have taken around six years, a not unusual time frame for such work.

I would argue that an FBO is naturally placed to fill the gap that exists between governments' core area of concern and responsibility, which is focused on their own citizenry, and that of a relatively young international system of protection which has trouble creating strong links with local communities. FBOs face challenges and risks, however, in attempting to fill this gap. These include, on the one hand, the risk of overstretching and losing focus and, on the other, a diminution of freedom and courage in the face of funders' requirements and the need to achieve measurable outcomes. FBOs can represent the best of their background traditions when they allow the thinking of those traditions to interact with, and be challenged by, the evolution of thinking in professional management, social entrepreneurship and forced migration. I have few illusions, however, of the difficulty and complexity of this task.

Nor do I view religious traditions' contribution to work with the forcibly displaced as limited to FBOs. Indeed, the networks provided by mosques and churches often form the first entry point of a refugee into a new society; this is, in many ways, the greatest contribution that faith groups make and it lacks sufficient acknowledgement. Furthermore, the arguments I make can equally apply to 'secular' non-faith-based organisations working in the sector – FBOs do not have a monopoly on ethics. However, the major religions all have a wisdom that can be creatively brought into dialogue with the identification of needs and current trends in programmatic thinking to result in well-targeted, cost-effective work with high impact.

### The concept of rights

The body of thought by which the Catholic Church applies its beliefs to social and political

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issues is known as Catholic Social Teaching. There are many aspects to this but one in particular concerns us: the concept of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, no matter in what circumstances that person finds him or herself. This dignity endows the person with the status of someone to whom respect must be shown in every way. It is not hard to see the close links this concept has with those values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as many other human rights instruments. Catholic Social Teaching emphasises two aspects of the nature of human dignity and its understanding of the human person which I think are especially helpful.

The first is that it views the person not only as an individual with rights but also as a being-in-relation-to-others, and in many ways dependent upon those others for the realisation of selfhood. Thus a person interacts with others in a plethora of ways, economically, socially, culturally and politically, and finds their identity and meaning principally as a result of these interactions. The person as a result has a right to contribute meaningfully to a community of people. It is not difficult to see that the most significant political mechanism for the realisation of this right is the political community we call the state. When the state, for whatever reason, does not adequately provide this participatory environment, then the person has a right, and indeed a duty, to address this situation, if necessary, by migration.

This challenges us out of our traditional provider-beneficiary mindset. Refugee flight is more to be seen as the active exercise of a right, and there is much less opportunity to view the displaced person as helpless victim. It also follows that countries have a duty to welcome forced migrants and take active steps to integrate them effectively into society in some way or other.

Secondly, agencies which have their foundation in this tradition are provided with broader and more flexible parameters when

faced with issues of definition – of deciding who should be admitted to their sphere of concern. This should provide a guide to a systematic and ethically consistent response to refugees, survival migrants, crisis migrants, internally displaced people and other groupings under the term ‘displaced’. This greater flexibility extends to the nature of the programmes they design, altering the focus from the refugees themselves to the provision of capacity to the host society to help those refugees begin to contribute meaningfully to that society. This in turn opens the door to FBOs implementing projects which involve both members of the host society and refugees, instead of merely targeting refugees alone and heightening the risk of xenophobic backlash from the host population.

It is this more social view of the human person and their rights that both provides a challenge and gives a continuing rationale for FBOs to be actively involved in the sector. It concerns a logical incoherence in human rights discourse and governments’ consequent political response to forced migrants attempting to cross into their territory. The concept of the secular state came into being in the aftermath of the European wars of religion and the accommodation that religion would be allowed to continue, in a more private sphere, in return for secular rulers providing for the physical security of the people who lived within the borders of the state. As the role of the state has developed, so has the responsibility of governments to privilege the rights of its citizens over those of others. The existence of the forced migrant, who appeals to a more universal set of human rights, sits awkwardly with this political accommodation. Our recent history sees governments on all sides of the political spectrum fundamentally struggling with their response to forced migrants as any truly principled response is not politically expedient. The exception is if governments can make the difficult public case that there exist benefits of immigration for the local population that outweigh the negatives of accepting a group of strangers within one’s borders.

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With the international system of protection still nascent in its development and subject to the interests of member states (and funding), FBOs are ideally placed, by virtue of the operative freedom and universal understanding of the human person granted in their traditions, to fill this gap. They can do things that governments need done but do not necessarily want to be seen to be doing. This is not to absolve governments of the responsibility to enact a regime of universal human rights. Nor is it to say that such a role for FBOs is either simple or straightforward. FBOs must hold that dual line of maintaining accountability, both to standards of service and local statutes, and at the same time exercising that freedom which accountability to their own faith traditions elicits.

Conceivably, the greatest contribution of faith communities lies not in their organisations but rather in the already mentioned networks and resultant capacity to allow people on the move to connect and find a welcome and hospitality in an otherwise possibly hostile environment. Experience has shown too that it is the

comprehensive nature of these networks that, if activated, makes the real difference in the crucial first forty-eight hours of an emergency.

It follows that transnational organisations could do well to recognise the peculiar contribution of FBOs and learn how to work better with them. The sector has great need of broad-based cooperation and of the utilisation of the strengths brought by the differences of all the various groups which offer their services. At the same time, FBOs could do well to shake off their fear of working with civil and transnational authorities. In so doing, they will continue to play a vital role in filling the logical gap created by the politics of human rights, while remaining suitably accountable both to civil authorities and to the directions discerned in the light of their faith traditions.

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1. Not her real name.