

## An inter-religious humanitarian response in the Central African Republic

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**Inter-religious action has played a key role in ensuring that social cohesion and inter-religious mediation remain on the international agenda in relation to response in the Central African Republic, where people's faith is an integral part of their identity but where it has been manipulated in a horrific way.**

CAFOD and Islamic Relief have a long history of working together to respond to humanitarian crises when, for reasons of security, conflict sensitivity or other risk factors, either organisation would have been unable to respond without this partnership. Prior to engaging in the Central African Republic (CAR) they therefore already had established ways of working together.

One of the driving factors behind the inter-religious response in CAR was the desire of Muslim agencies in the UK to respond to the crisis there, due to both the growing humanitarian needs and also the expectations of their supporter base. With the exception of Islamic Relief, the UK's Muslim agencies who had expressed an interest in CAFOD's programming and the possibility of partnership were not funding any programmes in CAR, and none of the agencies had a presence in-country. The continued state of insecurity and violence, largely targeted at Muslim populations, and an increasing number of attacks against international NGO workers and property, prevented Muslim agencies engaging in CAR. Partnership with Christian agencies, which were working closely with the Inter-Religious Platform in-country<sup>1</sup> and had been advocating for a greater focus on inter-religious mediation, provided a conflict-sensitive solution that enabled these Muslim charities to respond to the crisis.

Both sides increased their options for funding. For CAFOD it was an opportunity to access funding for its partner organisations who were working in-country through the private donations of the Muslim charities such as Islamic Help and Muslim

Aid and also through Islamic Relief's and Muslim Charities Forum's (MCF) relationships with institutional donors.

From the start of the current crisis in CAR, religion has been manipulated by those in power. The Inter-Religious Platform,<sup>2</sup> comprising Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Imam Omar Kobine Layama and Pastor Nicholas Guérékoyame Gbangou, has continuously worked to communicate a message of moderation, tolerance and respect through dialogue with communities but also by example in their own actions. As tensions and violence between communities increased, the Archbishop and the Imam decided to live together at the Archbishop's home, to offer protection to each other and to set an example of peace and cohesion despite the ongoing conflict.

### Advocacy

The efforts of the Inter-Religious Platform have also been instrumental in drawing international attention to the crisis in CAR. With the exception of heightened media interest around December 2013 and January 2014, the crisis in CAR has remained largely neglected by the international community. Recognising and inspired by the symbolic value of the Inter-Religious Platform, CAFOD actively sought to amplify its advocacy



November 2014

efforts by approaching MCF and exploring opportunities for joint messaging on advocacy issues. It was felt that this relationship could help amplify CAFOD's advocacy messages, not only because of MCF's reputation within the sector but also because of the traction that a united voice between Muslim and Christian organisations would have with political decision makers. Having focused much of its initial response to the crisis in CAR on advocacy and having invested a large amount of time analysing the situation, CAFOD was also able to provide significant advocacy capacity to Muslim charities, most of whom had no presence in the country and limited capacity to advocate on these issues.

It was through this link between CAFOD and MCF that relationships between Catholic and Muslim agencies working on CAR were developed in order to extend this symbolic value to the delivery of aid. Baroness Berridge stated in the UK Parliament in June 2014, "If the Christian community in the CAR gets

its food aid from UK Muslim aid agencies, this will help to rebuild much-needed trust among the communities." It was this vision of promoting social cohesion through joint inter-religious humanitarian programming, mirroring the actions and messages of the Inter-Religious Platform, that was a driving factor in establishing working relationships between Muslim and Catholic aid organisations in response to the crisis in CAR.

### Investment and achievements

CAFOD was already coordinating a lot of advocacy work on CAR, and MCF were engaged on these issues and regularly attended meetings. It was MCF which directed Islamic Help and Muslim Aid to approach CAFOD to enquire about CAFOD's role in CAR and seek guidance on how they could support this work in partnership. In response to the requests of Islamic Help and MCF, CAFOD convened a meeting between a number of Muslim charities and its US sister agency Catholic Relief Services (CRS)



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Imam Moussa Bawa and Sister Maria Concetta in Zongo, Equateur Province, DRC, across the river from Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. The two religious leaders work together to try to heal the wounds that have divided the Christian and Muslim communities in CAR.

to discuss potential funding, partnership and joint programming opportunities.

As a result of this meeting, CAFOD, Islamic Relief, MCF and Muslim Aid undertook a week-long joint mission to CAR. This was a significant investment in establishing working relationships between the agencies. The group was able to visit numerous projects replicating the approach of the Inter-Religious Platform and examples where Catholics, Muslims and Protestants were working together to heal the wounds of the conflict and were trying to bring about mediation and reconciliation. The visit allowed agencies to assess the needs of affected communities and further explore options for joint programming and funding. In addition the mission helped amplify the group's advocacy messages as it added significant symbolic value and also allowed those on the mission on their return to speak with policymakers and supporters from their own first-hand experience of the country.

Through their joint inter-religious efforts, the grouping of UK faith-based NGOs has been able to obtain access to UK policymakers which they have used to continuously highlight the need to support social cohesion in CAR. This access, in part, was facilitated by the international regard for the work of the Inter-Religious Platform.

To ignore faith would severely limit any analysis of the current situation in the country. In CAR itself, religious institutions are perceived by communities as a source of sanctuary and shelter. Almost every church is surrounded by an IDP camp, providing relief to Christian and Muslim communities sheltered there. The joint mission has also since enabled some programme collaboration; Islamic Relief is now directly funding CRS to implement shelter and food security programmes and has established a more permanent presence in Bangui.

However, this process has not been without its challenges. The five organisations who undertook and hosted the joint mission (CAFOD, CRS, Islamic Relief, MCF and

Muslim Aid) required significant investment and capacity, particularly in organising the visit to Bangui. The maintenance of these relationships similarly requires investment and capacity, which is not always available due to competing demands. Whilst it was fairly easy to coordinate communications and advocacy in the immediate aftermath of the joint mission, as time passes coordination between five agencies can be challenging.

### Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the crisis in CAR continues, and efforts to promote social cohesion will require scaling up in-country. There are clear advantages to pursuing an inter-religious approach to the humanitarian response in CAR and for Catholic and Muslim organisations to work together. Working with different faith organisations enables a conflict-sensitive approach as well as helping to amplify advocacy messages and gain traction with decision makers. There is still a need to advocate on, for example, adequate conditions for the safe return of all those who have been displaced by the conflict and to ensure that humanitarian programmes enable these conditions for return.

The impact of this inter-religious approach to programming in the promotion of social cohesion, given the volatile situation, is difficult to measure. That being said, there are clear examples in the work of CRS with Muslim communities that such engagement has increased humanitarian access and facilitated some dialogue between groups there. Whilst every emergency context is different and requires its own analysis, in similar situations where religion plays an important role both in the conflict and in the reconciliation process, working with different faith organisations is not only sometimes necessary but preferable.

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1. See article by Nzapalainga, Layama and Gbangou on page 4.

2. While the grouping of religious leaders is referred to internationally as the Inter-Religious Platform, its official name is La Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses en Centrafrique.