

## Reflections from the field

Simon Russell

**Working with religious leaders is an essential element of serving local communities, as is an understanding of the religious life of local communities and how belief influences their decision making.**

Churches, monasteries, temples and mosques are located within, and are part of, local communities and know the situation on the ground far better than most. During the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008, the National Council of Churches was an important network for the distribution of relief but also, equally importantly, provided information to beneficiaries and analysis of the situation to humanitarian organisations.

Using local knowledge can be critical to effective relief. In Karen State in south-east Burma, the typology of displacement used by the Karen Baptist Convention is helpful to understand a very complex situation of repeated displacement over decades. Throughout south-east Burma, Buddhist monks and monasteries have been powerful protectors of local people, providing sanctuary during times of counter-insurgency operations and negotiating with the Burmese army to mitigate some of the worst excesses of these operations. They have been one of the only institutions that could not be ignored by the Burmese military. Nonetheless, they have been unable to prevent the destruction of hundreds of villages and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, illustrating the limits of even their enormous influence against power.

In promoting respect for the human rights of displaced people it is usual to work with faith-based organisations or, more accurately, with religious leaders who often exert considerable influence over their communities. In 2004, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) established a legal aid programme in Mazar-i-Sharif, northern Afghanistan; one highly effective way of advertising its services for women was, with permission of the mosque's leaders, to make announcements

over the loudspeakers of the Blue Mosque's Imam Ali shrine on the weekly Women's Day. More generally, the NRC legal aid programme throughout Afghanistan relied heavily on the influence of local *imams* in its mediation of land disputes, especially as many disputes centred on an interpretation of statute, custom and sharia. The views of local *imams* could be decisive to the interpretation, notwithstanding their lack of education or a poor understanding of sharia.

In its response to the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, NRC was hugely assisted in the distribution of relief items by working with *imams* in remote mountain areas; the *imams* advertised and helped organise the distribution of items, and transmitted prayers for NRC over mosque loudspeakers, giving a seal of approval to the work of the organisation.

Beliefs present some interesting challenges to programming. In northern Uganda, IDPs in camps could only explain occasional fires that burned down huts by the presence of witches among the people. The killing of these 'witches' was a regular occurrence, which no amount of rational explanation could overcome. In South Sudan, protection cluster assessments in 2010 revealed that the major concern of people in conflict-affected parts of the country was the activity of people who transformed themselves into lions ('were-lions') rather than abuses committed by warring parties. Headquarters analysts refused to allow mention of this in the analysis of the assessment results. In Karenni State, south-east Burma, many IDPs have returned to their home areas but avoid their former villages because they believe that bad spirits, created by the traumatic event of displacement, prevent them

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from doing so; return is therefore to areas nearby. Such beliefs are pervasive factors in Burmese life, beliefs which humanitarian organisations may not recognise sufficiently when working with local communities.

Humanitarian organisations and faith-based organisations often have different approaches – and agendas – even where goals are the same. In Tennasserim, south-east Burma, where the influence of Buddhist clergy in determining assistance to displaced people is critical, the provision of water points by UNHCR has sometimes been rejected in favour of water being provided by a monastery. Faith-based organisations can also be faith-based businesses.

From these examples, I would derive a number of lessons. Firstly, working with

religious leaders is an essential element of serving local communities. Second, it is equally important to understand the religious life of local communities and how belief influences decision making. Thirdly, religious leaders and faith-based organisations are not bound by humanitarian principles and come at solutions to displacement from very different angles. And, finally, while religious leaders and humanitarian actors may be motivated by the same concerns for displaced people, agendas can be very different and outcomes unpredictable.

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This article is written in a personal capacity.