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## Faith, relief and development: the UMCOR-Muslim Aid model seven years on

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**Seven years ago, a strategic partnership between the United Methodist Committee on Relief and Muslim Aid in Sri Lanka was formalised into a worldwide partnership agreement. The partnership offered a model for community-based, culturally appropriate and sustainable assistance provision – so why did the partnership not reach these goals?**

On 26 June 2007, a ground-breaking partnership was formalised at the Houses of Parliament in London between the UK Islamic NGO Muslim Aid (MA)<sup>1</sup> and the US Christian NGO the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)<sup>2</sup>. The long-term vision for this partnership was to develop a model whereby a consortium of faith-based organisations (FBOs) would work together to bring relief, development, peace and reconciliation and provide a space for developing mutual respect and understanding in a world where faith is increasingly manipulated as a tool to drive conflict rather than resolve it. An article in FMR issue 30 in 2008 covered the story of the partnership and challenges that were anticipated. Some of the anticipated challenges proved prophetic and, seven years on, the partnership – although operating as an occasional cross-funding mechanism – as originally envisaged has yet to reach the hopes of those early days.

### The beginning of partnership

In August 2006, the Muslim majority town of Muttur (in Sri Lanka's Trincomalee District) was attacked by the LTTE. Efforts by aid agencies, the UN and the Red Cross to negotiate a humanitarian corridor into the town came to nothing, and a few days later most of the inhabitants fled to the Sinhalese majority town of Kantale. With the influx of tens of thousands of IDPs, the Kanthale area, already under-resourced, was extremely tense and violence was common.

Most NGOs had left but UMCOR and MA were still working in the area. As the crisis developed, the two agencies gravitated towards each other and within a couple of

days were working together, setting up a joint field office and warehouse, and sharing staff, vehicles, aid supplies and logistical support. Both agencies worked in coordination with their respective faith and community leaders and councils to coordinate the mobilisation of thousands of volunteers. MA engaged with the imams, the coordinating council for Muslim theologians and communities, discussing the impartial nature of humanitarianism with them and vouching for UMCOR staff's neutrality. Discussions centred on the imperative of both faiths to serve humanity and reduce the suffering of the disadvantaged – language which people could understand and relate to. UMCOR did the same through local Methodist priests in Christian areas, and with Hindus whom the priests knew. MA and UMCOR also jointly approached the local Buddhist chief monk to ask for help in bringing aid to the beleaguered Buddhist community; with the chief monk's support, inter-faith cooperation flourished, with the Buddhist temple becoming an aid distribution centre. The UMCOR-MA partnership continued once the emergency was over and it was agreed to work on developing a longer-term institutional partnership.

### Difficulties in developing the partnership

Developing the partnership in the form that was envisaged was always going to be problematic. The concern that the Sri Lankan experience owed more to personal friendships between staff members of the two NGOs proved to be justified. Within a year after formalising the partnership, many key staff at the field offices in Sri Lanka had left or been replaced as had some key headquarters-based leadership which had supported the initiative.

There were thus no opportunities for an incubation period in which the relationships at field and particularly at senior HQ levels required to cement the partnership could grow and develop. The staff changes left the NGOs with few senior staff who had been involved in developing the partnership and with little knowledge of the initiative.

Even though the partnership remained strong at the grassroots level for a while, it failed to garner enough support with two stakeholders: the faith communities in the NGOs' home countries which formed their core support, and the trustee/senior management level at HQ. For UMCOR there was negative reaction from some in the Christian community in the US while some in the Muslim community in the UK also reportedly voiced dissent. Much of this can be attributed to lack of awareness among the general public who give money to these two organisations about the nature of FBOs as professional relief and development organisations. This in turn led to fears that the partnership could dilute the Islamic identity of MA and the Christian identity of UMCOR – that the coming together of the two could produce a compromised organisation not at ease with itself. However, perhaps the greatest misconception at the senior level surrounded the question of funding. Many within both organisations viewed the partnership through a financial lens: a gateway to increased institutional funding. Almost immediately questions were being asked as to how to translate the partnership into hard cash.

Thus a clash of understandings was immediately apparent between the field and HQ understandings of the partnership. The former considered the partnership to be an innovative model of humanitarian relief and development, increasing NGO and community security, humanitarian access and general operational efficiency. The latter considered it as an investment with an expected financial return to fund projects. Both views had validity but the pressure to achieve the 'hardware' of joint institutional funding and projects did not allow the space to develop the 'software' – such as the intangibles of

personal relationships or inter-organisational knowledge – required to achieve them.

In addition, the problems of forming an inter-organisational relationship based on mutual trust and equality were exacerbated by perceived dynamics within the relationship. Each organisation viewed themselves as the stronger partner, with all the subconscious power dynamics that these perceptions bring.

Unfortunately, with much emphasis being placed on tangible 'results' at the grassroots level, not much effort and time were available to concentrate on building relationships at higher levels. In hindsight, the formal signing of the partnership was rushed through without ensuring that the main constituents, particularly from the governance side, were on board and that the 'personal' had sufficiently moved to the 'institutional'. Much more effort should have been made to show members of the governing boards the work on the ground and the potential for the partnership before it was decided to form it. Within this incubation period, both organisations should have experimented with different models of cooperation and experimentation in the field backed by academic investigation in order to ascertain the viability of the model and its practicality and relevance especially to grassroots communities. With this type of evidence in hand, it would have been easier to convince detractors of the model's viability and effectiveness.

### Relevance of the model

Despite the setbacks, as two of the key people behind the establishment of the partnership in Sri Lanka we still believe in its significance and the commonality of purpose. Many international agencies have taken an ever narrower sectoral and institutionally defined way of tackling vulnerability. Yet the shocks and stresses we are seeing in the world today have multiple, unpredictable effects and increasingly demand – but do not always trigger – diverse responses at the local level. Building resilience requires moving beyond narrow views of risk. We need a better, more inter-disciplinary understanding of

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vulnerability and with it a new paradigm to challenge people to accept diversity and create opportunities for diverse communities, ethnicities, traditions, cultures and faiths.

Faith in relief and development offers access to communities but has tended to be sidelined because of its potentially sensitive nature. The relief and development world promotes engagement with local institutions but invariably does not engage meaningfully with the oldest community institutions – those representing the faiths which often underpin community stability (and sometimes instability). Virtually all faiths, however different theologically, have a common purpose to serve humanity and aid the disadvantaged, and religious institutions and actors can offer cultural, social and political networks unsurpassed by any other.

One of the most surprising aspects of the partnership in Sri Lanka was that it was the first time the majority of people had witnessed different faiths working together in a practical sense. The idea of faiths operating together is not new<sup>3</sup> but has to date largely been limited to inter-faith dialogue and some cross-funding initiatives – the latter reflecting the current UMCOR-MA relationship.<sup>4</sup> In Sri Lanka the UMCOR-MA partnership demonstrated that there is huge untapped potential in engaging with faith. The cooperation cut across faith and theological differences to concentrate on the humanitarian objective of alleviating poverty and facilitating a dialogue for peace and understanding. The partnership served as an example that people can work together on a common cause of humanitarianism without compromising their individuality or beliefs.

It is a model of engagement with faith that involves starting from a basis of cooperation, mutual respect and understanding, and acceptance of a common agenda, which contributes to the ability not only to work together but also to eliminate competition over resources. It could have proven timely in situations like the Central African Republic, by providing humanitarian access to insecure environments.<sup>5</sup> The sight of two (or more)

FBOs of different faiths working together in the field and engaging local faith leaders can have a calming effect on many conflict-affected communities, thereby allowing them to work effectively in an insecure context.

Such a model that places an emphasis on organisations and people of different faiths putting theological differences aside (without compromising their individuality or beliefs) and working on common goals is sorely lacking. However, as the example of MA and UMCOR shows, a lot of work needs to be done behind the scenes with constituents. Certainly not every faith community is tuned to the same frequency and not every faith community has achieved harmony within itself. Organisations must work hard to contain opposition and to explain their policies with care to their supporters at all levels. Prior to formalisation of the UMCOR-MA partnership, a period of internal and external outreach should have taken place. This would have advocated the benefits and potential hazards of the new model represented by the partnership, and emphasised the responsibility that NGOs have to explore innovative ways of supporting disadvantaged people irrespective of financial returns. This could have led to the creation of new and innovative approaches and mechanisms, a deeper understanding of inter-faith working, and a wider and more efficient outreach to the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

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This article reflects the opinions of Amjad Saleem and Guy Hovey and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of either Muslim Aid or UMCOR.

1. [www.muslimaid.org](http://www.muslimaid.org)

2. <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/>

3. For example, the Geneva-based ACT Alliance [www.actalliance.org](http://www.actalliance.org)

4. UMCOR is currently funding 400 cash grants through Muslim Aid in Bannu, Pakistan.

5. See Mahoney article p42.