

Worlds apart? Muslim donors and international humanitarianism

by Mohammed R Kroessin

The contribution of the Muslim World to relief and development is underestimated.

The principles of charitable giving and compassion enshrined in Islamic teaching through the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad still carry tremendous weight. The redistribution of wealth in the form of charitable giving is an obligation on every believer. The Islamic-based relief and development sector has a 1,400-year-old tradition of wealth redistribution in the form of *zakat* (obligatory charity), *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) and *waqf* (public endowment) that continues to the present day. In many countries state agencies collect *zakat* as part of the public taxation system and numerous NGOs thrive in the Muslim world. According to Saudi government figures, its aid to the developing world, both through unilateral and bilateral funds, places it among the largest donors in the world. With aid levels at \$4 billion a year, Saudi Arabia is the second-largest donor after the USA.

However this aid flow is predominantly to the Muslim world, organised through the Jeddah-based Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)¹ and its Islamic Development Bank², rather than through the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).³ In the West this goes largely unrecognised, because of a virtual parallel system in which Islamic donor agencies operate. Despite the amount of aid they provide, the oil-rich countries of the Gulf are not members of the OECD. Islamic donors lack representation and channels of communication to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the UN-convened forum which is the primary mechanism for global coordination of humanitarian assistance. As a result, public

opinion regards Western and Muslim commitments to humanitarianism as worlds apart. The parallel nature of the aid structures in the West and the Muslim world has created a system that does not serve the best interests of those affected by disasters, refugees and IDPs (most of whom are Muslim) or those plagued by poverty.

Concerns about an apparent Western monopoly of humanitarianism have been further compounded in the aftermath of 9/11 as civil society organisations in the Muslim world and to a lesser extent also in the West have been exposed to unprecedented levels of scrutiny, hampering their work and ultimately affecting their beneficiaries.⁴

In order to tackle some of the misconceptions about Muslim donor agencies a number of initiatives have been launched. The Humanitarian Forum⁵ was initiated by the British charity Islamic Relief in June 2004 to help foster partnerships and facilitate closer cooperation between donors and NGOs in the West and in the Muslim-majority world. By consulting a wide spectrum of humanitarian stakeholders, an eclectic mix of international non-governmental and governmental agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement has been brought together to help bridge the perceived gap between the West and the Muslim worlds.⁶

The Forum supports NGOs in the Muslim world with assistance in capacity building, advocacy for a legal framework for greater transparency, promotion of humanitarian principles and standards and improving communication and cooperation. As a first step, the Forum has set up Executive Committees in partnership with governments and civil society

in Yemen, Sudan, Indonesia, Pakistan and Kuwait. The cooperation of governmental aid agencies from the West and the Muslim world is a first for the international humanitarian community, which has thus far been separated along the OECD-OIC dividing line.

More needs to be done to bridge the real and imagined gap between the West and non-traditional donors. Questions need to be asked as to why we have a parallel international aid system. Fears about the politicisation of aid or proselytising need to be addressed and the debate about universal humanitarian values ought to be renewed. The Humanitarian Forum is a step in the right direction but more must be done to ensure all forms of official development assistance are recognised and coordinated. We need a broader humanitarian reform process than the one currently being discussed in order to help forge a more honest and open partnership between the West and the Muslim world.

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1. www.oic-oci.org

2. www.isdb.org

3. www.oecd.org/dac

4. See Kroessin, R 'Islamic charities and the 'War on Terror': dispelling the myths', Humanitarian Practice Network www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2890

5. www.humanitarianforum.org

6. Current members include: British Red Cross; UK Charity Commission; UK Department for International Development (DFID); International Islamic Charitable Organization (Kuwait); ICRC; IFRC; IHH (Turkey); Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation; EMDAD; Mercy Corps; Muhamadiyah Foundation (Indonesia); National Rural Support Programme, Pakistan; Near East Foundation; Oxfam GB; Qatar Charity; Qatar Red Crescent Society; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation; and World Assembly of Muslim Youth.