

Exploring the potential of strategic religious engagement

Pat Finlow looks at how international aid charities can partner with faith-based organisations around the world to increase their impact

FOR MANY years, faith organisations working in humanitarianism or development were considered little more than tribute bands to their secular counterparts, or as one writer eloquently put it, merely “Oxfam, with hymns”.

The perception was that at best they were well-meaning groups dabbling in good works, with a few prayers and spiritual sprinkles added to their publicity for the benefit of their faithful supporters.

How times have changed.

In recent months there have been numerous reports, conferences and webinars to explore strategic partnerships between international NGOs and faith organisations.

For example, at the World Economic Forum’s Sustainable Development Summit in 2020, an event entitled Leveraging Faith Actors in a Crisis was held because it recognised that: “Faith leaders and actors play a crucial role in response and recovery during crises and are essential partners in reaching and caring for the vulnerable.”

This was echoed by another summit in 2020, this time sponsored and co-hosted by USAID. The Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) brought together nearly 300 experts to “explore evidence on partnering with local religious communities and faith-based organisations in development, and the possible implications for USAID policy and practice”.

But how did this change come about? And while this is an encouraging pat on the back for faith organisations,

what relevance, if any, does it have for organisations that are not faith based?

PERCEPTION AND GLOBAL AFFAIRS

To answer these questions, I’d suggest that there have been two evolutionary processes happening in parallel: first an ongoing shift in perception about the role of faith organisations and local faith communities and, running alongside that, major shifts in the landscape of global affairs.

“NGOs are becoming open to new ways of working”

It is the intersection of these two processes that helps explain the relevance of faith partnerships to non-faith-based organisations as a triple whammy has hit the plans and finances of all NGOs working in the humanitarian and development sectors.

Firstly, the reduction in the government’s overseas aid contribution from 0.7% of gross national income to 0.5% has hit many budgets hard. Secondly, the war in Ukraine has meant a diversion of attention, and inevitably funding, from other emergencies. Thirdly, the long tail of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact charitable giving and the uncertainty of the cost-of-living crisis is also jeopardising voluntary income streams.

Finally, the new international development strategy (IDS) of the

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UK government heralds a shift in emphasis towards bilateral spending and investment, and the implications of this are yet to be felt.

These financial constraints and broader uncertainties come at a time of significant change as the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted many relief and development programmes, affecting – even reversing progress – towards the sustainable development goals.

All of these pressures pile on top of the grim situation that Sir Mark Lowcock, the recently retired head of the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, describes in his book *Relief Chief: A Manifesto for Saving Lives in Dire Times*. He notes that by 2021, “the number of people in need grew dramatically to never-before-seen-peaks”, causing the size and costs of operations to reach unprecedented levels.

While endorsing and affirming the work of humanitarian agencies, Sir Mark comes to the stark conclusion that: “The humanitarian sector is overwhelmed. Needs are growing faster than the capacity to handle them.”

While calling for much-needed and overdue reform of the sector, he is realistic and laments that humanitarian agencies “must continue to battle away”, doing more of the same.

This bleak assessment, combined with the effects of the triple whammy, means NGOs are becoming open to new ways of working to ensure that, more than ever, they maximise the impact of every penny spent.

Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, when the Secretary-General of the UN called for humanitarian action to be “as local as possible, as international as necessary”, the direction of travel in thinking and policy has been firmly towards local humanitarian leadership (LHL).

Sir Mark endorses this approach, first for pragmatic reasons as he notes that without properly consulting local communities, there is a tendency to “give people in need what international agencies and donors think is best, and what we have to offer rather than giving people what they themselves say they most need” which introduces waste and inefficiencies. But he also warns of the disempowering effect of not seeking the input of those most affected by disasters and crises.

A key consideration in LHL is that a significant number of local organisations in low and middle-income countries are faith-based, and this caused many agencies to rethink their previous reluctance to work with or through them. This was explained in an Oxfam blog in 2017: “If Oxfam and other humanitarian organisations are serious about promoting LHL, then we cannot continue to avoid an entire segment of those participants: local religious groups, which range from churches, mosques, and temples to faith-based local aid organisations.”

FROM TABOO TO DELIVEROO

While LHL shone a fresh light on the work and impact of local faith groups, there had already been a growing interest in their role in a wide range of sectors.

Since 2011, UNHCR has been promoting “dialogue and understanding” with faith organisations, LFAs and religious leaders in a “journey of mutual discovery”, seeking to understand how faith actors support and help refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people. Meanwhile, in 2016 UNFPA published a report, *Realizing the Faith Dividend*, which recognised and endorsed the role of faith communities, especially in health and education, and in 2012 Unicef published *Partnering with Religious Communities* noting that “faith communities continue to be an indispensable partner” in advancing children’s rights and wellbeing.

“ What if faith actors were welcomed to the policy table? ”

The World Economic Forum (WEF) published a report in 2013 entitled *The Future Role of Civil Society* which identified the role of faith as an influential trend in civil society, noting: “Individuals within government, business and civil society are exploring new ways to leverage the strengths of on-the-ground faith-based actors within the context of local community development, as well as in overseas aid and economic development.” This was followed in 2014 by two more reports, noting the potential of faith to promote positive social change.

But while faith had moved from being ignored and considered taboo

to being recognised, in many respects faith organisations and local faith actors (LFAs) were still only seen in an instrumental way: as convenient and helpful agents to deliver initiatives determined by others, regardless of their relevance to local communities. This might be seen as the Deliveroo stage of the “engaging with religion” process, where LFAs are handed policies or initiatives to deliver to their communities, much like a Deliveroo driver making deliveries of pizza.

But what if faith actors were welcomed to the policy development table, to be equal partners in devising strategies and plans and thereby making them more relevant and cost effective?

DELIVEROO TO STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

The potential of a more strategic approach to partnering with local actors was explored in research commissioned by ActionAid, Oxfam, Cafod, Christian Aid and Tearfund. The resulting report *Missed Opportunities: The case for Strengthening National and Local Partnership-based Humanitarian Responses* concluded that working with local actors “improves the relevance, appropriateness, effectiveness and connectedness of humanitarian response”.

Another innovative project, Bridge Builders, specifically explored the potential of strengthening the partnership between LFAs and International Humanitarian Actors (IHAs) and was developed by Tearfund, Islamic Relief, RedR UK, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) and the University of Leeds. Among its conclusions it noted that the responses they saw were “just a glimpse of what is possible when [LFAs] are equipped, trusted and empowered. A small investment of training and capacity-sharing reaped large rewards, and made possible partnerships that would not previously have been considered.”

PANDEMIC AS PORTAL?

Early in the Covid pandemic, author Arundhati Roy wrote a highly influential article in the *Financial Times* entitled *The Pandemic is a Portal*, observing: “Historically, pandemics have forced



humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

These words proved highly prescient as the crisis nature of the pandemic caused many organisations to rethink their relationship with faith actors. But the nature of the partnerships was beginning to subtly shift as the advice of faith actors was now being sought, exemplified by shifts in the practice of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

A paper published by BMJ Global Health, entitled Religion and the World Health Organisation: An Evolving Relationship, notes “a trend towards a closer association between the activities of WHO and religious actors” which was catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, WHO began to reach out proactively to religious actors to form communities of practice to consult on vaccine communications, research and training and a framework for future engagement.

International institutions like Unicef have long been championing the role of LFAs and faith leaders in addressing

not only the pandemic but also other hard-to-address issues. For example, at the WEF Sustainable Development Summit mentioned earlier, Henrietta Fore, then executive director of Unicef stated: “Whether in health, education, nutrition, water, sanitation, protection, mental health, faith-based partners are the ones who are the most important to us.” In concluding her remarks, Ms Fore made a plea to business leaders: “This is a growing area of synergy and help. So businesses, please come to help faith-based organisations, they are a massive asset for the world.”

“ This is a growing area of synergy and help ”

A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER?

To pull these various threads together, can working in partnership with faith organisations maximise the impact of aid spending for non-faith-based organisations?

The experience of an ever-growing number of agencies, global institutions and practitioners is a resounding “yes”. They observe that not only is strategic engagement with LFAs the right thing to do, as it respects the perspective and experience of local people, but it is also a more effective way of working.

Trying to put a number on efficiencies gained is a fool’s errand, as not everything that counts can be counted. It would be nigh on impossible to assess the financial savings gained by drawing on the insight of LFAs when developing plans, or of the increased access to hard-to-reach groups, or the benefits of moral, social and spiritual capital that are baked deeply into local faith communities.

A final word for any organisation pondering putting a toe in the water of strategic religious engagement, the key word here is “strategic”. Thankfully, ActAlliance, in conjunction with Caritas, Islamic Relief Worldwide and EU-CORD has produced a toolkit called Engaging with Local Faith Actors and Communities that will be indispensable for any organisation looking to benefit from these kinds of partnerships. ●

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