Engaging with Faith Organizations and Communities

in Development and Humanitarian Work

Opening remarks

Mr. Shelly Pitterman

 UNHCR

Multi/Bi-Laterals Panel

First, having a better understanding of what a ‘faith-based organization’ is will bring a more nuanced appreciation of the benefits that cooperation would bring and in the interest of a more targeted and strategic approach to partnership. Individual faith leaders, other influential members of faith communities, or community leaders may have specific value for UN advocacy or other activities. There is a need for better mapping of these important ‘entry points’ in the communities and potential interlocutors and partners that are best placed for the form of cooperation desired.

Given their secular mind-set and orientation, UN agencies are often ill-equipped to engage in inter-faith dialogues. But individual faith leaders and recognized faith experts can ‘mediate’ between the technocratic language of the UN (e.g. ‘rights-based approaches’) and holy precepts and teachings, thereby re-packaging messages in ways that are credible and acceptable for the population they serve. Rights-based approaches are not antithetical to faith-based approaches and common ground can be found but needs to be worked at and the relationship nurtured. There is need for a more strategic approach to joint advocacy.

Many policy issues have an ‘inter-faith’ dimension. The UN can serve as the entity lending legitimacy or weight to inter-religious partnerships (for example in advocacy/awareness-raising surrounding sexual and reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence, humanitarian access, etc.). Demonstrably working together across faiths in partnership with the UN lends credibility to cooperation and can yield higher impact, particularly in advocacy, and have better chances of success with target communities. The recent agreement between Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Islamic Relief Worldwide to work together is an example of such interfaith humanitarian partnership.

There are concerns when it comes to operations: for example, where a local faith-inspired community supports only those in need who share their religion. While it may not be a bad thing for individual religions to tend to its members, humanitarian service provision by local faith groups should be blind to the faith of those in need. In this sense, an inter-faith element may not be required in all cases, after all.

Proselytism and accountability are key concerns. As a matter of humanitarian principles, provision of assistance should not be made subject to conditionality of any sort. The emergence of new donors, such as Gulf States, has also raised questions about whether they are as committed to transparency and other industry-wide standards in the humanitarian sector. More generally, stakeholder analyses should take into account the inherent strengths (as well as weaknesses) of faith-based partners and recognize the need to ‘invest’ in the relationship, in the interest of building capacity that can be tapped for both development and humanitarian interventions in the medium and long-term, not just the emergency phase.

Another important operational concern relates to dialogue or cooperation with faith-inspired individuals and faith-based organizations that bear arms or have been black-listed from working with the UN. Even if dialogue can happen under the radar, there are risky trade-offs.

The specific role and value that faith-based organizations add to meeting the needs of disaster- and conflict-affected communities and to international relief efforts more broadly could be the subject for reflection among influencers. Individual colleagues need to be ‘brought on board’ to change mind-sets and overcome the reticence to engage that seems to be the prevailing mind-set in many organizations.

A closer look at the term ‘partnership’ is also in order. This is a term most often used by the UN. But traditionally the UN has cooperated with faith-based organizations in an opportunistic manner, instead of forging long-term engagements. Dialogue has often been erratic because of changes in staff and priorities, and also more fundamentally because of different vocabularies and mind-sets. Is there room for an alternative to the culture of accounting for expenses and reporting on results, rather than trust’ and softer aspects of partnership?

The UN and faith-based organizations are becoming more ‘literate’ about each other’s mind-sets, vocabulary and ways of working. Without better knowing and understanding each other, closer cooperation to achieve shared objectives will remain an elusive goal. UNHCR is committed to a purposeful effort to consult with faith leaders, faith-based organizations, local faith communities and other faith-inspired actors to assess what is ‘good’ practice and reflect on lessons learned from our cooperation.