

POLICY BRIEF

LOCAL FAITH GROUPS AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

EMERGING LESSONS ILLUSTRATED THROUGH A CASE STUDY IN IRBID, JORDAN

OVERVIEW

While aid provision for forced migrants has traditionally focused on food, shelter or health care, uprooted people have many other needs – including spiritual, psychological and social. In emergencies, they turn to and are accompanied by receiving communities, who are often faith-inspired. These communities play a central role in transforming access to basic services into the right to enjoy protection in safety and dignity.

There is increasing recognition of the importance that faith plays in the lives of conflict and disaster-affected communities as well as the role and influence of local faith communities in protecting affected populations. In spite of this, secular organizations ignore or do not fully appreciate faith and its potential for strengthening resilience, fostering peace and finding solutions before situations become protracted.



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Building on the understanding of the Joint Learning Initiative on Local and Faith Communities (JLI) of the challenges of engaging with local faith communities, researchers and practitioners conducted fieldwork in Jordan in the context of the Syria situation. The research undertaken by Columbia University focused on the current and potential engagement of an array of faith-based organizations and local faith communities in the broader humanitarian response. It explored barriers hindering partnerships and lessons learned from managing relationships between local faith communities and other actors, such as national and international organizations, both secular and faith-based.

This Policy Brief summarizes key findings contained in the report, “Local faith community and civil society engagement in humanitarian response with Syrian refugees in Irbid, Jordan,” and proposes recommendations to chart the way forward.

LOCAL FAITH GROUPS HAVE DIFFERENT FORMS AND STRUCTURES, AND THE WAYS IN WHICH THEY ENGAGE IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE REFLECT A HOST OF FAITH ORIENTATIONS

The report highlights the limitations of categorizing local organizations within the binary framework of “secular” versus “faith-based,” which is popular in the discourse surrounding faith and humanitarianism. In Jordan, as in many other countries, the centrality of faith in society and culture means that many organizations are demonstrably “faith-influenced,” even if they do not self-identify as such.

However, the extent to which faith influences the activities of different groups varies greatly, as does the scale and remit of different actors. In order to capture this complexity, the report developed a typology of faith-based groups and actors operating in Irbid, consisting of six categories: 1) international faith-based organizations; 2) national faith-influenced organizations; 3) local faith-influenced organizations; 4) faith networks; 5) informal local faith and worship communities; and 6) local faith figures.

While this typology was developed specifically with the Irbid context in mind, it may prove to be a useful analytical tool when considering faith-based groups in other contexts. In developing this typology, the report highlights the need to move beyond simplistic dichotomies often employed by practitioners and analysts when considering “faith-based” versus “secular” agencies; instead, it identifies the specific roles, services and resources employed by each type of faith group or actor, as well as the tensions between different types of faith groups. Examples of tensions between international faith-based organizations and local faith-influenced organizations are discussed in the latter section of the report.

LOCAL FAITH GROUPS PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL, HUMAN, MATERIAL AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES IN THE SUPPORT OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

The report gives a clear overview of the multiple assets and resources that faith groups are able to mobilize in times of crises, categorizing these resources into five groups: social capital, human capital, spiritual capital, material capital and financial capital.

The fact that faith groups are embedded in local communities affords them significant **social capital**. This enables them to assist vulnerable individuals in three key ways; firstly, as shapers of public opinion, faith leaders and groups play a critical role in fostering community cohesion, particularly when competition over scarce resources results in hostility between host and refugee communities. For example, Imams and priests

in Jordan delivered sermons and held masses encouraging hosting communities to extend their generosity and support to their “brothers and sisters.” Secondly, the intimate knowledge faith groups have of their local communities enables them to identify the most vulnerable refugees. Finally, the extensive network of faith groups, which is broadened through interfaith cooperation and alliances, allows for great scope and reach as well as improved coordination in humanitarian response.

With regards to **human capital**, local faith groups in Irbid proved to be at a particular advantage due to the large networks of volunteers that they are able to mobilize to help respond to the crisis. A strong culture of volunteerism in both local Christian and Muslim communities – demonstrated through the role of parish volunteers in conducting field visits to identify needs or the fundraising efforts of local zakat committee volunteers – means that faith groups have a wide outreach at minimal cost. Moreover, leaders of such faith groups commended the “genuinely passionate, reliable and honest” character of their volunteers. They felt their character was faith-inspired and thus unique to faith-based groups. The breadth of such faith-based volunteer networks also means that local faith groups have access to a diverse skill sets and expertise.

Local faith groups also enjoy significant **material resources**, often in the form of religious buildings, such as mosques, churches, hospitals and schools. Such physical spaces have proven vital in responding to the refugee crisis in Irbid, serving as distribution centers, shelters or venues for psychosocial workshops. In particular, the report highlighted the critical importance of the sanctity associated with religious spaces in providing security to vulnerable groups. For example, in one instance, Zaatari camp administrators asked local churches to host Christian or Druze Syrian refugees who face hostility from pro-opposition forces in the camp. The sanctity of religious spaces appears to be respected by both Muslim and Christian communities in Irbid.

Local faith groups also wield significant **financial capital**. This is partly due to the local perception that faith groups are more trustworthy because of their religious motivations and value-systems. Faith groups are well positioned to leverage religious charitable donations (e.g. zakat and sadaqa within the Islamic tradition or through the local, regional and national donations of church congregations). Finally, local faith groups, particularly Muslim groups, receive significant contributions from wealthy Gulf donors, who actively seek to channel their donations through groups with a faith label.

LOCAL FAITH GROUPS CONTRIBUTE UNIQUE SPIRITUAL RESOURCES TO PROMOTE RESILIENCE WITHIN DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

The report found that faith-based groups offer human, financial and material capital in an emergency setting but so do secular groups. A key difference between them is the **spiritual capital** – “a unique and intangible resource” – that underpins the humanitarian action of faith-based groups.



Photo credit: Majdy Jaradat

The report found that, in humanitarian response, spiritual capital manifests itself in two ways. Religious beliefs and value-systems propel members of local faith groups into social action, and the significant spiritual and emotional sustenance faith-based groups provide to affected communities. Beyond the delivery of materials goods, the research in Irbid shows that when faith actors cater to religious and cultural identities, affected populations benefit from a greater level of familiarity, respect and dignity. In one example, faith groups offered dates to beneficiaries to break their fast during Ramadan. They also gave new clothes to refugees to enable them to celebrate Eid ul Fitr. Such simple actions allow affected communities “a return to normality – even if temporary.”

Local faith groups are also well positioned to help beneficiaries cope with adversity and find meaning in crisis. In Irbid, local women held memorization of Quran sessions for affected populations to help foster “inner peace.” Similarly, by providing common prayer facilities for host communities, beneficiaries and staff, local faith groups showed solidarity with affected populations. They supported psychological resilience, especially among those affected by the trauma of having left everything behind.

Through their spiritual capital, faith-based groups offer beneficiaries a more culturally sensitive and localized service than larger humanitarian agencies. Nevertheless, the research in Irbid shows that spiritual capital needs to be further researched and discussed in other contexts.

LOCAL COORDINATION AND CONTRACTING MECHANISMS ENGAGE LOCAL FAITH GROUPS WEAKLY OR INEFFECTIVELY

Local and national civil society organizations, both formal and informal, have emerged over the course of the crisis as critical service providers. However, the international agencies coordinating the wider humanitarian response often fail to include local faith communities and civil society actors. The report found that more needs to be done by humanitarians to engage with all actors, including local faith communities, to overcome humanitarian challenges.

The most frequently observed model of partnership between humanitarian agencies and local groups is contractual, including ad hoc one-time alliances. Such alliances utilize the knowledge and access of local groups to carry out distributions and other activities but neglect to draw on their experience and develop their capacities. This model of partnership tends to be based on the assumption that, even from the viewpoint of faith-based organizations, “professionalism” is only associated with international organizations who adhere to the procedures and secular “script” of the international humanitarian system, while local faith-based groups were described by international agencies as “primitive,” because they produced poor reports and proposals and failed to justify their selection of beneficiaries. They were also seen as having “disputable” neutrality, because they did not separate religious from social and humanitarian work.

Other implications include the tying of funding to specific objectives that are determined centrally and not collaboratively, which undermines the ability of local faith groups to respond to the actual and particular needs of beneficiaries. Moreover, local groups expressed their frustration with the abrupt arrival and departure of international agencies. When alliances are short-lived, local faith groups are forced to turn away beneficiaries when funding is exhausted or priorities shift, causing them to lose the trust of the community. A respondent in Irbid explained that when an international organization ended a programme for Palestinian refugees in Irbid, the local community was placed under tremendous pressure to compensate for unmet needs and false expectations generated.

Faith actors also underscored the tendency of international organizations to mimic each other’s activities, which resulted in inefficiencies. One local faith group reported that, while refugees in one area of the city received the same non-food items on three separate occasions, others received none. Refugees then approached the local community to sell items that they had received but did not need. Most faith groups expressed their willingness to be included in the planning and development of interventions and called for a more participatory approach.



Photo credit: Majdy Jaradat

LACK OF RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND POOR AWARENESS OF THE DISTORTIONS CREATED BY A SECULAR FRAMING MARGINALIZES KEY ACTORS AND RESOURCES

Silence on matters of faith in humanitarian response precludes partnerships and alienates groups with faith orientations that constituted a substantial part of local capacity in Irbid. For example, while international and national Christian organizations interviewed maintained that they were committed to principles of non-discrimination and neutrality, a volunteer in a local church noted that removing religion from the delivery and distribution of assistance is an unreasonable expectation. Beneficiaries are free to ask questions on religion, and church volunteers respond by offering counselling and support through prayer.



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At the same time, local faith organizations, conscious of suspicions held by governments and international agencies relating to Islamism and terrorism, downplayed their faith identity and dismissed the influence of their faith in order to access funds through foreign organizations. Other groups reacted by amplifying their religious identity to draw a line between themselves and Western agencies. In doing so, they seek alternative sources of funding, particularly from Gulf donors. This further intensified competition and complicated coordination efforts. Most local groups reported not having participated in any coordination meetings or working groups. International agencies attributed the reported lack of participation to the multiplicity of groups involved in the response.

A mature understanding of humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality is needed to recognize that the undisputed neutrality of the international humanitarian sector reflects a particular ideology. Presumptions regarding the separation of religion from humanitarian work impose a Western secular framing in settings where religion is inseparable from the practice of civil society actors and organizations. To ignore faith matters, when its implications are vast and complex, exacerbates tensions and widens the gap between local faith-inspired groups and international organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Further develop the typology of faith-based organizations proposed in the report to include the full spectrum of faith to secular groups, and enable more nuanced discussions about the role faith plays in humanitarian response. Consider how this helps establish models of partnership. Greater importance should be attached to strategic and long-term investments in cooperation between secular organizations and local faith communities, emphasizing trust rather than a “paper culture” of accounting for expenses and reporting on results.
- 2** Recognize the breadth of social, human, material and financial capital that faith groups can leverage in emergencies, and study the ways in which faith groups, including inter-faith cooperation, affect spiritual wellbeing of affected populations and effect positive behavioral change in local communities.



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- 3** Emphasize local ownership and the meaningful inclusion of local faith-based groups across the project management cycle, as well as capacity-building, instead of contractual partnerships. As crises become more protracted and funding is expected to decline, local faith groups are likely to have a profound influence over the overall humanitarian response in the present and coming years, especially in the absence of a definite political solution.
- 4** Recognize the religious and spiritual concerns of affected populations and civil society organizations as integral to their identity and promote open dialogue with these groups. Religious literacy is needed to recognize the role faith and religion play in the programmes and interventions of local groups as well as to allay fears of proselytism and religious extremism.

KEY SOURCES

The 2015 report, “Local faith community and civil society engagement in humanitarian response with Syrian refugees in Irbid, Jordan,” was presented by Shatha El Nakib and Alastair Ager (Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University) to the Henry Luce Foundation. The Joint Learning Initiative’s Learning Hub on Resilience engages in research to address emerging issues and supports organizations wishing to pursue recommendations to transform the quality, effectiveness and impact of partnerships with faith groups.

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