World Bank Conference 7-9 July 2015
On Religion and Sustainable Development.

Topic – How Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) Can Eliminate Extreme Poverty.

By Rishiwant Singh

Asia Pacific Humanitarian Relief Director of UNITED SIKHS

FBOs have the longest standing institutions which are their places of worship and they potentially have the largest pool of human resources and volunteers.

FBOs have the most time-tested mechanisms of raising funds which are donation boxes and tithes, and in some countries recognized religions gets grants from the state. As an example, there are more Sikh gurdwaras, mosques and churches than there are  embassies and Red Cross offices in the world. And the former have no existing overheads.

Therefore, with no existing overheads, a religious institution like a church or Sikh Gurdwara which during non-disaster relief times are carrying life on as usual can quickly become disaster management centers without the extra overheads incurred by an institution such as the Red Cross.

Similarly, the congregants who attend the FBO once a week, or even daily for prayer have a spontaneous way of getting together and responding to a disaster. For example, you can only have so many Red Cross officers in a small town and one of the major investments for any organization is capital investment for building offices and recruiting manpower.

So with this legacy, endowed within these faith groups, the questions become; what do they need? and what more can they give?

Let’s talk first about what they can give. We’ve discussed how they can be the most economical way of giving goods and services for disaster relief. But economics aside, they provide a response which is personalized.  In the work that we have done in UNITED SIKHS, we were in Baticaloa, Sri Lanka where many feared to set up their base camp because of the civil war between the government and the Tamil Tigers in 2004. We were approached by a community from a little island called Navaladdy who were afraid to return to that island after the tsunami to do their prayers. We did not belong to their faith, but they asked us to pray for them. It did not matter to them who we were. And, indeed we responded in the way they wanted. Not doing our prayer, or their prayer but a common prayer. The example of how compassion is an ingredient of Faith Based Organizations. In fact, every big NGO that came after us was asked by the UN to talk to us because of our close ties with the people affected.

In Kashmir, which is predominantly Muslim, when the floods hit Srinagar in 2014, the Sikh Gurdwaras let thousands of people sleep in the Gurdwara’s prayer hall. The Muslims were heard saying that they would never have dreamt that they would be allowed to step in let alone sleep in the prayer hall. A medical center was also set up on the Sikh Gurdwara premises.

UNITED SIKHS was a member of NYDIS (New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS) as was a Haitian church. They heard we were sending a sea cargo that included our large cooking pots used to prepare langgar (a community hot meal usually prepared at Gurdwaras) . The church group was able to send their aid through us, because we were part of an existing interfaith collaboration.

President Obama mentioned UNITED SIKHS’ work in Haiti in his National Prayer Breakfast meeting in Washington, D.C. in 2010.

Super Storm Sandy in NY – The Gurdwaras prepared langgar in their community kitchen to serve all races and religions in shelters.

There are two principles in the Sikh religion which work hand-in-hand with humanitarian relief work: Chardikala and Tiar Bertiar. And these are two qualities of a disaster relief volunteer.