Religion and Disaster Response

Faith-based organizations can – and do – play a critical role in disaster response, both in developed and in developing countries. But they, too, are affected by the environment in which they work and by the disaster itself; indeed, in some instances they can be part of the problem, as well as part of the solution.

There are two major categories of humanitarian disasters which we should address, each with its own unique characteristics and challenges for faith-based organizations to confront. Our panelists should keep these in mind and point out the different types of response required for each.

1. Natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes or hurricanes.
2. Complex disasters, usually due to civil conflict, and often involving ethnic or sectarian aspects.

In responding to these two different types of disasters, faith-based organizations have both unique capabilities and special challenges to face which other organizations may not have. Our panelists should highlight these challenges/capabilities which make faith-based organizations unique and discuss how they overcome the challenges and make best use of the capabilities.

Challenges:

* a perception of partiality or favoritism toward their own faith brothers/sisters (especially in the cases where it is a sectarian conflict involving their faith)
* a perception of a link to foreign influence (eg. Christians to the West)
* weak local capacity in disaster response/management
* relationships with other faiths, especially in sectarian conflict
* relationship with the government, especially where the religious establishment is seen as opposing the government

Strengths/capabilities:

* local knowledge and understanding
* credibility and legitimacy among the local population
* local networks and leaders through whom they can work
* ability and systems to do outreach
* connections with international organizations which can raise awareness and do fund-raising

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