Statement Dr: Dietrich Werner; Washington Conference; Session Humanitarian Assistance And Disaster Relief

Three preliminary remarks:

A( Bread for the World is the brand name for the protestant agency for diakonia and development services in Germany, which as a result of a complex merger of three predecessor organizations has found its headquarters in Berlin since 2012. National diakonical services of all protestant churches in Germany, all development related services including scholarships and advocacy as well as lobbying work are here combined with conceptual and theological work as well as the special agency DKH (Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe) which is engaged in global humanitarian aid and relief work.

b) DKH has a long history of some 60 years working in humanitarian aid and disaster relief. It is combining emergency relief, reconstruction and disaster prevention and support for local communities for disaster prevention in around 150 projects per year.

c) Like Bread for the World, the development oriented wing, DKH is working with local partners which are on the ground already as implementing partners. This is to support and enhance local involvement of strategic ecumenical partners in global contexts in The Syria refugee crisis which will be the major reference point of this presentation (accompanied by the powerpoint presentation on the website) key local partners on the ground are for instance The International Orthodox Christianity Charity (IOCC), the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria (GOPA) and in Iraq partners are the Rehabilitation, Education and Community’s Health Organization (REACH).

Some key observations should be shared with regard to the interaction of emergency and disaster relief and local faith actors:

1. Faith communities (and secular NGOs) play an important role in disaster relief and humanitarian aid, as in conflict and situations and catastrophies they are often the first on the ground and the key actors to identify most easily the most needy ones amongst those affected. Churches, mosques and natural gathering places of religious communities are natural gathering places for IDPs and refugees. But sadly also churches and mosques sometimes have become also easy targets of arbitrary fractional military violence by different parties in regional conflicts. Protection of local humanitarian staff and local FBO partners is central to all stages of the humanitarian intervention.
2. There is no principal contradiction between the fundamental principles of humanitarian work., i.e. impartiality, neutrality and unconditional provision of help with the core values of a Christian organization. We and our local partners are not proselytizing. Our assistance always is meant and accessible for all people in need disregarding their religious background and we cooperate with church-related, secular, Muslim and other religious partners if they follow key principles and quality standards of emergency relief.
3. Humanitarian aid needs to respond to the holistic needs of persons affected by sectarian violence or natural disasters. Our understanding of immediate needs has grown and developed more comprehensive approaches during the years. Reacting to holistic needs of people affected does not simply imply to provide shelter, food and basic health care although these have often first priority in getting engaged. But emergency relief also needs to take seriously the psychological and spiritual needs of people, the longing of people for hope, for dignity, for security and for coping rituals in post-traumatic situations. How to include pastoral counselling, spiritual needs and trauma healing into emergency relief is a mater of constant learning and debate, it is also a mater of proper training of those working with us as local partners. Here the ACT Principles of Community Psychological Support can be an inspiring and very helpful orientation framework. Another key area of need often is related to children’s education both for refugees in camps as well as for those living outside camps and with local populations, often in periods which last much longer then originally assumed.
4. Building and enhancing local partner’s capacities fore responsiveness to conflict and disasters has gained much more prominence for us in recent years. However it needs to start much prior to the actual involvement in emergency relief and what is at stake is long term capacity building with partners particularly affected from natural disasters and high risk areas related to the effects of climate change. Strengthening resilience and preparedness of local populations has become a major issue and strategic goal in recent years.
5. While there is a clear and meaningful distinction between long-term, development work and short-term immediate humanitarian intervention, there is also a growing need to relate efforts of emergency relief to post-conflict reconstruction goals, i.e. rebuilding community centres, schools, infrastructure and setting up a process to reconstruct basic civil society infrastructure particularly in situation of failing states or factional violence. Cooperating with different faith communities is a key to post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. Seen in this perspective a concrete proposals should be mentioned: It is an utter shame for the international community and governments around the world, that all efforts of UN, regional players and related NGOs to bring to a hold sectarian violence and disintegration of Syria has not got any relevant momentum yet. The international community of both governments and the humanitarian sector seem to give up in Syria which in popular minds is seen as a lost country for ever. We should stand up as a network of concerned partners both from political and religious background to counter this lack of determination and common political will: We should envision an international platform for the reconstruction of Syria bringing together all key partners in spring 2016 in order to envisage a road map for reconstruction of civil society in Syria. We need a clear signal to go out from this conference that some decisive measure need to be taken to counter the spirit of fatalism and passivity around the Syria issue – the biggest and most serious refugee crisis after the Second World War!
6. One crucial long-term need and area of collaboration between public and private actors, donors and FBOs is the whole area of capacity building, training and education of faith leaders in issues relating to resilience, disaster preparedness, ethics of interreligious collaboration and peace building as well as sustainable development. It is somewhat astonishing that despite the fact that the global pressure for qualifying emergency relief and participation of FBOs in humanitarian action ahs not lead yet to a central think tank and research institute for humanitarian work and disaster preparedness. We do not have an international academy of training faith leaders in issues of sustainable development, resilience and disaster prevention. Our declarations and public statements on enhancing and qualifying sustainable development and humanitarian intervention will remain mere lip-service if they lack implementation at the level of strategic planning for massive education and capacity building programs for faith leaders in these areas. Therefore it should be seriously explored whether an initiative for an International Academy for Training Faith Leaders for Sustainable Development, Peace-Building and Disaster Relief should be planned by some major actors who could develop some common interests in this regard.

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