

GLOBAL RELIGIOUS FORUM OF THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT

Report from Working Meeting: Tuesday, 17th November, 2015, at InterAction offices, Washington, DC

Overview

Representatives of faith-based organisations, religious institutions, secular NGOs, and the public sector met in Washington, DC in person (and via conference calling) to discuss opportunities and challenges for the Global Religious Forum (GRF) of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). Many of those present have been actively involved in WHS regional consultations and all have experience of humanitarian partnerships with religious leaders or local faith-based organisations.

Following brief presentations outlining the GRF concept note, participants broke into small groups to discuss the practical challenges and opportunities of working with local faith-based partners. From these experiences participants identified key issues for discussion at the WHS GRF, as well as highlighting challenges and risks for such an agenda. In particular, violent extremism emerged as a focus of conversation in light of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut, Baghdad, and other areas. This report provides a summary of that discussion, which will be used to guide the GRF Steering Committee as it works to refine the agenda for the GRF, alongside input from similar working meetings across Latin America, Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and the Middle East in the coming months.

Key issues, perspectives, & challenges raised by Washington DC participants:

- Religious actors are key links to local communities and should be engaged from the onset in humanitarian action. Despite their important role, religious communities can sometimes be excluded in the coordination of humanitarian action by multilaterals, bilaterals, donors, and the broader development community. The role of faith leaders in preventing the further spread of Ebola through safe burial practices was cited as an example.
- Local faith communities not only can provide technical assets and structural capabilities that are valuable to international and state humanitarian actors, but they also offer psychosocial support, acknowledgement of a belief system, dignity, and accompaniment to persons affected by conflict and disaster.
- The evidence base supporting the contribution of faith actors to humanitarian engagement is poorly communicated and understood by the wider development community. The Global Religious Forum has an opportunity to showcase the evidence base to its participants and the wider World Humanitarian Summit attendees.
- “Not all faith is good”: Realism is important to assess not only the opportunities and strengths of faith groups in humanitarian action but also the challenges and weaknesses they can bring. The GRF Dialogue should fully engage the complexity of the role of religion in humanitarian action.
- A balanced perspective of religion in humanitarian action should be taken; religion should be seen as neither objectively good nor bad, but with potential to both advance and hinder humanitarian action.
- Following acts of terrorism, religion is often assumed to be the problem’s source. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can challenge this assumption by showcasing how religious engagement can also a solution to extremism. When tackling extremism, the GRF

should be careful to examine religious extremism across all religions, and not just Islamic extremism.

- Muslim faith-based humanitarian organizations in particular have been negatively affected by extremism. State actors sometimes “close the space” on Muslim organizations that are delivering humanitarian aid.
- Humanitarian affairs and countering of violent extremism are often addressed as separate issues. However, the broader audience will likely expect outputs and messages from the Global Religious Forum of the WHS specifically addressing violent extremism. The GRF should consider how it will address violent extremism while still maintaining a balance among all the issues in religious engagement in humanitarian action.

Recommendations for WHS GRF agenda, format, and outputs

- GRF outcomes should connect to other international movements and processes in the development community, including the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The GRF should be closely linked to the WHS plenary session on religion. Outcomes and messages from the GRF should feed into the WHS plenary session.
- It was questioned whether a universal document for common goals, signed by leaders of religious communities and FBOs, would be the most effective output of the GRF. It was suggested that focus should also be directed on individual organizations and the messages they should share and actions they should take to influence their own constituencies.
- Participants discussed how a Declaration by Religious Leaders might be translated into action plans with specific timelines and appropriate buy-ins for stakeholders.
- Practical calls for actions were discussed, including a repository of information, resources, and key statements regarding successful partnerships between religious and secular groups that can be shared or downloaded
- Awareness and Advocacy campaigns to educate and engage stakeholders before the GRF and WHS, were viewed as useful and impactful tools.
- There was some discussion of possible invitation to governments, donors, secular and religious bodies to make commitments to action in advance of the GRF. Feasibility of this is to be further explored.
- The GRF and WHS could be used to as an advocacy platform for positive messaging and compassion in response to violent extremism and the backlash faced by Muslims and Muslim organizations in mainstream media
- It was suggested that the GRF especially highlight examples of successful interfaith partnerships. However, participants noted that it should be acknowledged that interfaith partnerships in unstable contexts may also carry risks.

Next Steps

Participants agreed to remain involved in the planning and execution of the GRF in the following ways:

- To complete the online survey with detailed comments <http://goo.gl/forms/HfEqcSL81R>;
- To submit nominations to the WHS GRF Advisory Council:
https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_faith
- To suggest names of local faith-based leaders and partners to attend the GRF;
- To identify relevant evidence and information on local faith-based humanitarian partnerships.

Annex 1

Meeting Participants

Bill O’Keefe	Catholic Relief Services
Joel Charny	InterAction
Jihad Williams	Islamic Relief USA
Josh Ayers	Food for the Hungry
Lucas Koach	Food for the Hungry
Peter Mandaville	US State Department
Michael Leavell	USAID
Sara Reef	World Bank Group
Adam Taylor	World Bank Group
Eleanor Nagy	World Vision
Dave Robinson	World Vision
Mark Smith	World Vision
Randy Tift	World Vision
Alastair Ager	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh; Columbia University
Jean Duff	Partnership for Faith & Development
Helen Stawski	Partnership for Faith & Development
Helena Manguerra	Partnership for Faith & Development

Annex 2

Agenda & small group questions

Agenda

11:00 – Opening Remarks	Joel Charny, InterAction, Vice President for Humanitarian Policy & Practice
11:10 – Introduction of Global Religious Forum of the World Humanitarian Summit	Jean Duff, Partnership for Faith & Development
11:20 – Evidence base for faith groups in humanitarian action	Alastair Ager, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh & Columbia University
11:30 – Framing the Discussion: How can the GRF advance full engagement of faith networks in humanitarian action?	Helen Stawski, Partnership for Faith & Development
11:35 - Small Group Discussion	
12:00 – Recommendations regarding WHS GRF	Moderator: Eleanor Nagy, World Vision
12:30 – Close	

Small Group Questions

1. Take a few minutes to each share an example of an operational partnership your organisation has had with a local or national faith-based organisation or religious leader or religious group. Please explain where FBOs added value, or presented challenges to partnership, due to their unique identity, values and practices.
2. Based on the examples shared which areas are most important for strengthening understanding and partnerships between faith-based/religiously-inspired humanitarian actors and the wider humanitarian sector (prioritising areas where FBOs add value due to their unique identity, values and practices?)
3. How can the proposed one day Global Religious Forum at the WHS best support these practical partnership goals?

Plenary discussion

1. Feedback on questions 2 & 3
2. What kinds of outputs would be useful? For example public declarations, capacity building resources, training.
3. How should the GRF's priority areas and objectives connect to the WHS's priority areas?
4. For those involved in the WHS regional consultations – in what ways was the issue of faith and religion discussed?
5. Which groups of stakeholders should be prioritised as invitees to the GRF at the WHS (local FBOs, religious leaders, international FBOs, secular agencies, academics, governments)?