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To the Representatives of the
European Union institutions
and the EU Member States

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Dear European Union and EU Member States Representatives,

Faith Actors and Faith Groups in Humanitarian Action

I am writing to you as Director of EU-CORD, a network of European Christian Relief and Development NGOs. We are made up of member organisations that work alongside over 1,000 implementing partners worldwide.

As a network representing Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), we are keen to call to your attention ahead of the upcoming World Humanitarian Summit:

- the importance of faith in the lives of the people affected by every humanitarian crisis;
- the significant role that FBOs of all religions have played in recent years in humanitarian response;
- the greater role that FBOs could have in the future of humanitarian response and delivery, if their potential was unlocked.

For the purposes of this letter when we refer to FBOs we are referring to all international NGOs, local and national NGOs and civil society groups with a faith mandate serving in humanitarian responses.

Faith cannot be ignored in humanitarian responses, because most affected communities are communities of faith. Its importance for human dignity, good governance and poverty reduction was also underlined in the joint statement of the World Bank and faith leaders on ending poverty, "[Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative](#)" released on 9 April 2015. This statement called for an end to the "scandal of extreme poverty", in which they pledged to use their "voices to compel and challenge others to join us in this urgent cause inspired by our deepest spiritual values", adding that they would commit to hold "all levels of leadership accountable – public and private, domestic and international."

FBOs operate through a powerful combination of faith leaders and their relevant institutions at local, national and global level reaching the most marginalised and vulnerable people. This web of relationships is well placed to mobilise a holistic integrated approach to disasters. This same set of relationships can also play a vital role in the World Humanitarian Summits development of a “humanitarian ecosystem¹”, bringing to the forefront the need to “localise aid²” targeting those most in need. Centred around the ability of local faith institutions to have an extensive reach and modify behaviour, it can address both root causes of risk as well as the impact of a disaster.

Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for “the voice of faith” to be marginalised in decision-making and coordination activities. The secular framing of humanitarianism, of humanitarian discourse, of humanitarian policies and programme implementation can and does act as a significant barrier to any meaningful understanding of the role of faith and religious belief in the religious communities and cultures that are being assisted. While the majority of international humanitarian actors are secular and based in secular societies, they are predominantly serving and empowering individuals in locations where faith is a central frame of reference for life and values. Without understanding this context, it is impossible to deliver effective and relevant assistance that saves lives and protects the dignity and rights of the individual.

As a Christian network we see day-to-day that local faith actors have strong sub-groups and connections which can be used to raise awareness of risks and coordinate with others to reduce their impacts. They have the ability to address root causes - for example by being a vehicle to introduce climate-sensitive agricultural practices, through to changed behaviour by addressing trauma and speaking out against sexual and gender-based violence. In many contexts, churches and other faith institutions also have a role as broker and advocate, bringing reconciliation and peace-making by helping to address issues of resentment, forgiveness, exclusion and alienation.

Due to the established relationships held by FBOs at both the international and national level combined with its knowledge of the community context at a local level, they often occupy a rare position of influence and trust.

The importance of these relationships and the role of faith leaders in working for community behaviour change is demonstrated inter alia by the research report “Keeping the Faith: *The role of Faith leaders in the Ebola Response*” commissioned by EU-CORD Member Tearfund together with other Christian and Muslim NGOs. The report found that “faith leaders play an important role in people’s lives in Liberia and Sierra Leone where the majority of the people are practising believers and faith leaders enjoy significant trust and respect.³” The report found that there was a significant delay in engaging faith leaders at the start of the outbreak. This led to mistrust of humanitarian

¹ *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*. Report of the United Nations Secretary General for the WHS

² *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*. Report of the United Nations Secretary General for the WHS

³ *Keeping the Faith: The Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response*, Commissioned by Tearfund, CAFOD, Christian Aid and Islamic Relief, written by Andy Featherstone, July 2015

actors and the continuation of practices that perpetuated the outbreak.

“The participation of religious leaders was a game changer” due to their ability to affect behaviour change, disseminate trusted information and preach acceptance to combat stigmatisation.

In the research “Missed Opportunities⁴” it is quite clear that “Appropriateness, Effectiveness, Connectedness and Coverage” could be increased if international organisations and governments worked more effectively with local partners in response. For EU-CORD, local FBOs including the church are both a vital local partner and a cornerstone of communities vital in delivering the localisation agenda.

A number of EU-CORD members support the work of Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is led by European Union's Sakharov Prize winner Dr Denis Mukwege. Panzi Hospital is known worldwide for its treatment of survivors of sexual violence; a form of medical assistance desperately needed due to the decades of violent conflict experienced in this country. Dr Mukwege believes that the potential of faith institutions in his country has just started to be unfolded, and he refers to the relevance of partnerships with and training of faith leaders. He says “We wish the Church would be more present. 15 years ago, the violated women were rejected by their communities. Today, the situation has changed, because we have educated the religious leaders⁵”.

FBOs are not without flaws. EU-CORD recognises that faith organisations often must face into its own prejudices and stigmas so that it can become even more effective and this is work that we are starting to undertake.

EU-CORD desires to support, empower and maximise the potential of local faith actors globally so that communities can be transformed to own their own humanitarian responses and, when necessary, work effectively alongside professional humanitarian organisations. This is a part of our commitment to the Agenda for Humanity.

Conclusions:

In the last decade, inter-religious collaboration has been on the increase with initiatives like the Joint Learning Initiative⁶ and many others bringing religious leaders, FBOs and academia together. This has led to greater collection of evidence on the value of FBOs and improving best practice within the field. However, there is still a need for more research and evidence collection to be conducted.

⁴ Ramalingham, Ben. *Missed Opportunities*, commissioned by Action Aid, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Tearfund, p27

⁵ Portejoie, Emmanuelle. *Un Martin Luther King africain*, RÉFORME NO 3651, 31 MARS 2016, p3 (translated)

⁶ <http://www.jliflc.com/en/>

As we approach the World Humanitarian Summit we look forward to seeing international leaders and civil society committing to actions that will improve the humanitarian system. It is our hope that these will dovetail with the key frameworks delivered in 2015 (Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Financing for Development, Sustainable Development Goals and the Climate Change Agreement).

Greater recognition must also be given to the role of Faith-Based Organisations in humanitarian response - all the way from communities and grassroots leaders to local, national and international NGOs. Whilst we are pleased that there will be a **Special Session on Religious Engagement and Humanitarian Response at the World Humanitarian Summit**, concerns remain about what this will deliver, and it is important that this is not isolated from the other discussions at the summit. It is our desire that FBOs should not be seen as a separate part of the humanitarian system, but rather a key component of it.

Whether FBOs take the form of international NGOs, local or national NGOs, they face many of the same challenges as their secular counterparts. It is our experience that there needs to be a greater linkage between humanitarian funding which operates on a short-term basis and development funding which utilises longer-term programming. This combined with heavily-earmarked inflexible funding and the lack of multi-year funds undermine the ability to deal with the root causes. When these issues are addressed at the WHS it is important that all humanitarian actors are considered within any agreed future humanitarian funding plans.

Despite the challenges they face FBOs and their networks have a long tradition of being amongst the first responders to humanitarian disasters and are usually the last to leave. However, their potential is still not fully realised. Increased support and early engagement from governments, UN agencies and donors with international, national and local FBOs would improve the reach, relevance, sensitivity and access of future humanitarian responses. Most importantly, this would serve to recognise the central value of faith in the lives of those we assist and the central role of faith-based actors in promoting accountability, justice and reconciliation.

Recommendations:

We therefore urge the European Union and its Member States to:

- Reflect the significant contribution that FBOs have made and will continue to make in humanitarian response in the Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on the World Humanitarian that are scheduled for May;
- Attend the WHS Special Session on Religious Engagement and Humanitarian Response with high level representatives, engage in the discussions and announce their commitments on unfolding the unused potential of FBOs;
- Encourage donors and UN agencies to increase their support and improve early engagement with international, national and local FBOs, better utilising their unique

networks and abilities to improve humanitarian response,
promote good governance and reduce vulnerability;

- Ensure that at the WHS where commitments are made towards localisation of humanitarian aid FBOs are considered as part of local and national CSO and NGOs;
- Increase investment in research on the role of faith actors in humanitarian response and the socio-cultural context of faith communities in response.

In order to continue to advance this discussion, representative of the EU-CORD network would be happy to meet with you to further discuss the points raised.

Yours sincerely



Ruth Faber, Director, EU-CORD