

Asian Round Table Dialogue for Faith Based Organizations and Religious Leaders in Humanitarian Action

Observers:

UNOCHA and ADRRN

Sponsors:

Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center, Yakkum Emergency Unit, Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation, Soka Gakkai International, Chabad Japan, Ramakrishna Mission, World Vision Asia, Sarvodaya Sri Lanka, Ramakrishna Mission, Parmarth Niketa, Baha’I International Community, International Committee of the Red Cross, Charity Oriented Myanmar

Background

The establishment of the ADRRN as a voice for Civil Society Organizations saw a growing need for local response. In order to create a truly disaster-resilient society, CSOs in Asia should serve as the voice of the people. This can only be done through effective communication through sharing best practices, raising concerns and acting as a platform for exchanging information.

Communication must be done with adequate representation and Faith Based Organizations are at the locus of humanitarian activity. Faith Based Organizations are seen as the key actors in any response activity, with growing visibility in Asia. They are well aware of the situational and cultural concerns in the region and can deliver specific services to vulnerable populations such as women, children, the elderly and disabled. Faith Based Organizations are rooted deeply within the community and can be held accountable for psychosocial support, ritualistic conduct and resource allocation. Faith based buildings and institutions have often been used as shelters during disasters and local faith networks are key in providing immediate volunteer support in affected regions.

The only challenge now lies with this communication expanding to incorporate many more FBOs in the network that already exists and use it as an exchange of common practices and ideologies. FBO must connect foremost with other faiths, and use the ‘interfaith identity’ to connect with the larger system of humanitarianism. To this the FBO community turns to the World Humanitarian Summit to recognize the role of Faith Based Organizations and provide regional support at par with that given to other public sector organizations during emergencies.

Faith Based Practices- An introduction of participating organizations

A preliminary dialogue with faith based actors showed that humanitarian principles have arisen from the principles upheld by the faiths themselves. While religious ideologies may differ from faith to faith, it is seen that all faiths believe in the sake of working towards humanity. In this sense they serve a larger purpose, regardless of what faith they are attached to.

The following points were seen as key guiding factors in humanitarianism:

- a. Importance of the International Humanitarian Law in practice (ICRC)
- b. Involving local members and building engagement with local government. (SGI)

- c. Increasing need for impartiality towards communities. (Chabad).
- d. Importance of the spirit – “to be with” and lend out a helping hand (CARITAS Damayan)
- e. Need to improve our humanitarian action in an organized manner. (Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation)
- f. Ethical and moral way of working together (Baha’I International Association).
- g. Promoting “Love” Among Religions (Charity Oriented Myanmar)
- h. Faith meets the needs of the people at the most vital time (Rama Krishna Mission)
- i. Channeling “love” and positivity for humanitarian service (Parmath Niketan)
- j. Using freedom responsibly (Sarvodaya Sri Lanka)
- k. Regarding faith as important for long term recovery (World Vision).
- l. Importance of inter-faith forums in creating value at people level. (Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center)
- m. Learning to accept other religions. (Yakkum Emergency Unit)
- n. Creating Interfaith networks. (ActAlliance).

For the public sector to recognize this nature in keeping with the principles of humanitarianism, they must form interfaith alliances that are institutionalized for sharing common beliefs, practices and methods of approach. Such a system will be neutral and strong in delivering an effective response to the rest of the international community.

Session 1: Religious Ideologies and Humanitarian Principles

All humanitarian activities must be in keeping with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. For the successful and effective co-ordination of humanitarian affairs, organizations must be in keeping with these principles in both word and spirit.

Humanity: Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

Neutrality: Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Impartiality: Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.

Independence: Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

In addition to these four principles, two new ones are being talked about, namely accountability and subsidiarity.

During the dialogue in this session, participants were asked if there were any additional suggestions to these four principles and where they fitted in with their own ideologies. Although there were no concrete suggestions, all participants agreed that the concepts of universality, truthfulness, tolerance, love and positivity were common to all faiths. Above all, the principle of humanity was the driving force in all faith based response.

On the issue of neutrality, many faith based actors agreed that their work was not recognized or given priority because of popular perceptions among communities about the proselytizing nature of FBOs. Misconceptions on words, dress, presentation and use of symbols in relief material raised questions by local communities not associated with faith or of different faith than the FBOs.

The participants repeatedly mentioned the need to communicate these principles, both within their own organizations, including their workers, volunteers, and with the communities they work for. Participants representing the ICRC shared that it took a lot of time, in doing so within their organizations as well. Externally, they highlighted the need to start communicating with young minds, who hardly distinguish between faiths as well as those that are impressionable and susceptible to misconception.

With this in mind, one encountered the challenges with localization. When dealing with vulnerable population not only across borders, but also across faiths, one realizes that aid from FBOs is often seen with skepticism. The proposed solutions were to either change the method of local action, change the nature of FBOs or to create a neutral interfaith body of FBOs that could be seen in the eyes of beneficiaries as “aid for aid’s sake”.

Session 2: Fostering interfaith dialogue and building a culture of peace

The afternoon session of the dialogue highlighted a need to move from competition to cooperation among FBOs. Many members agreed that creating an alliance was the need of the hour, not for the sake of it, rather for discussion of real, ongoing issues. However, before moving into interfaith work, intra-faith work has to be promoted. Faiths need to be consistent with standards and principles across the board.

Through this network, it was suggested that one must create the concept of “human touch” to connect people across borders and faiths to the aid that they need and deserve. However, the real test for any such forum is in conflict situations.

While discussing the leaders and constitution of such interfaith forums, we found that it was useful to involve academics and CSO representatives. Also, Local faith leaders must be seen as uniquely different from faith based organizations. While faith based organizations have power in gathering institutional support, faith leaders have political and social influence on communities. In addition, technical guidance must be provided by organizations that are already established in the field such as UNOCHA and ADRRN. The network must be at par with global standards for humanitarianism such as HAP and SPHERE.

The importance of “connectedness” and ground rules must be brought forth through the alliance. It is essential to ensure all cultures are respected and represented with equal importance. A

democratic system of administration must be given priority. This highlights the importance of building trust within communities. In this sense, the forum would need to develop a strong faith perspective to humanitarian principles.

Above all, there is need to collect strong “evidence” of the work. Participants suggested documentation and communication through social media and technology as solutions to provide evidence. Local satisfaction surveys and accountability audits are also key in highlighting evidence. This will in turn help in building trust among all stakeholders. The forum can help FBOs adapt to changing landscape, making them more aware about developments in humanitarianism and the pressing need of the time.

Recommendations to the World Humanitarian Summit

1. *Asserts* that faith based organizations are key actors in humanitarian response.
2. *Establishes* that faith based organizations act in keeping with humanitarian principles of humanitarianism with special attention to humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence
3. *Recommends* that humanitarianism needs to be guided by faith based principles such as love, spirituality, morality and culture.
4. *Recognizes* that local and political dynamics are different in different context and a nuanced approach can improve regional co-operation in humanitarian response
5. *Observes* that there is a distinction between faith actors and faith leaders in mobilizing support and political action during emergencies
6. *Improves* accountability and evidence for action that is based on humanitarian standards.
7. *Calls upon* the international community to help establish an interfaith network that is accountable, neutral and effective in the Asian region.

ANNEX- A

1. Chabad Japan:

Chabad of Japan under the direction of Rabbi Binyamin Ederly has continuously sought to give aid and assistance to all of those in need in Japan, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. When the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdowns in Tohoku occurred Chabad Japan suspended normal programming, filled their van with food, water, and supplies and drove north from Tokyo to assist. From that day back in 11 March 2011 Chabad has been deeply committed to assisting displaced people, local victims of the disaster, and evacuees in whatever way possible.

2. Caritas Manila

Since 1953, Caritas Manila, a family oriented non-government organization, is the lead Catholic agency for social services and development of the Archdiocese of Manila. Its programs and services are directed towards the total human development of marginalized people and the promotion of social justice in the light of the Church's Catholic Social Teaching. It has been active in Disaster and Health Risk Reduction and Management, providing services from emergency relief to post disaster scholarship programs. The objective of the institution is to empower and increase the resilience of the community in dealing with disasters and develop sets of contingencies to mitigate damage to properties and/or minimize the lost of lives.

3. World Vision Asia

World Vision has offices in various countries in Asia that are involved in Disaster Relief and Conflict Resolution. World Vision has been active in Earthquake response in Nepal, Typhoon Response to Haiyan and Cyclone Response in Vanuatu. World Vision has also been part of an interfaith forum in Mindanao for peace building. World Vision seeks to work with the community, government and faith groups wherever feasible.

4. International Baha'i Community

The International Baha'i Community has served mainly in educational programs in Asia. They have promoted ideas such as mutual understating among human beings, justice, and equality. The Baha'i International Community advocates for the trust, solidarity and vision for human beings with particular attention to displaced and disadvantaged people. They base all their humanitarian work on Baha'i principles of ethical and moral effectiveness.

5. International Committee for the Red Cross, South East Asia

Zezen is from Indonesia and has worked for the ICRC for three years. He is an expert on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Islamic Law, as well as being published writer and Muslim intellectual. He has used his extensive civil society experience to support ICRC operations and engagement with religious scholars and organisations in Southeast Asia, including educational institutions and faith-based humanitarian organisations, for contextualized promotion of IHL and humanitarian principles. He works as Senior Program Officer for Humanitarian Affairs with a focus on Southeast Asia, based in Jakarta.

Valentina Bernasconi is from Italy and joined the ICRC in January 2002. She carried out a number of assignments as a field delegate in Myanmar, Colombia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Haiti and Central Africa Republic.

From 2011 to 2014, she was Deputy Head of ICRC operation for South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia and the Pacific at the ICRC's headquarters in Geneva.

Since July 2014, she has been posted in Thailand as Deputy Head of the ICRC's Regional Delegation in Bangkok.

6. Parmarth Niketan

Our organization is founded, leaded and inspired by HH Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji (Pujya Swamiji), President of Parmarth Niketan (Rishikesh), which is one of the largest spiritual institutions in India and is dedicated to the welfare of all, Co-Chair of Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, world's first ever initiative to bring interfaith leaders together from around the world and from every major faith for improved WASH. Pujya Swamiji's religion is unity. He has been the leader of numerous international, inter-faith summits and parliaments and has led frequent world peace pilgrimages across the world. He is the recipient of many prestigious awards for his humanitarian and religious leadership.

Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center

Work done in Disaster Relief and/or Conflict Resolution: I am a Vice Chair of MDMC, an agency within Muhammadiyah (FBO) which has 30 million members in all 34 provinces in Indonesia, 180 higher institutions, 18,000 schools and 456 hospital and clinics throughout Indonesia. These resources has been used for relief and response which extensively done since Tsunami Aceh 2004 where I was a program manager up to now. Currently, just returned as an LO of the Indonesian Mission for Nepal.

In a year MDMC respond to humanitarian crisis both conflict and natural disaster between 15-20 hazard events from Aceh to Papua as well as in other countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Nepal, and Palestine. MDMC works closely and was one of the founders of Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (a membership NGO that comprises from 13 Faith-Based Organization)

7. YAKKUM Emergency Unit (YEU)

Participant: Anastasia Maylinda

She has been working in humanitarian assistance since 2006 and has extensive experiences in emergency responses and disaster risk reduction initiatives in Indonesia through community-managed approach, including the assistance to Shiite community from Sampang who are displaced due to sectarian conflict.

In her current position as Information-Communication Manager she has the opportunity to manage extensive project reports, evaluations and humanitarian studies in the organisation as well as engage in various coordination and networking with different stakeholders, including her participation in 3rd World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR) in Sendai last March.

8. Soka Gakkai International (SGI)

The SGI and its members have been promoting a wide range of disaster risk reduction activities over the years, taking advantage of its unique strengths and capabilities as a faith-based organization (FBO). At times of disaster, local SGI community centers provide shelter for the displaced victims. Its strength lies also in building communities and empowering people to take action to help others, in addition to donations to partner organizations. At the post-disaster stage, the SGI often prioritizes support for the mental and psychological recovery of the survivors, which tend to be overlooked in the phase.

9. Sarvodaya Sri Lanka

Sarvodaya, founded in 1958 based on the Buddhist and Gandhian values and principles, is the broadest community-based organization network in Sri Lanka today. Its strength includes island wide district office network, and more than 5,600 community based organization network under its patronage. Its recent large-scale humanitarian efforts include 2004 Tsunami relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction work; and in-war and post-war, multi-sectoral humanitarian work for the Internally Displaced Persons of 26 years of Sri Lanka armed conflict. Its extensive peace building work in the times of conflict expands today with the implementation of the Sri Lanka Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission's (LLRC) recommendations.

10. Humanitarian Forum Indonesia

Humanitarian Forum Indonesia was established in 2008 with international and national support, HFI is a faith-based network of Indonesian humanitarian and development organizations including Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Centre, Yayasan Tanggul Bencana Indonesia, Yakkum Emergency Unit, Dompot Dhuafa, Karina-KWI, Wahana Visi Indonesia, Association of Community Empowerment, PKPU, Church World Services, Habitat for Humanity Indonesia, Rebana Indonesia Foundation, the DRR Unit of the Union of Churches in Indonesia, and Rumah Zakat. HFI is committed to building mutual understanding across different backgrounds, ethnic races, tribes and religion across the Indonesian archipelago. It supports vulnerable communities via its focus on DRR and disaster management. HFI is a member of the Asian Disaster Reduction & Response Network and is the only NGO that is a part of the Humanitarian Country Team. Earthquake in Padang, West Sumatera, 2009.

11. Charity Oriented Myanmar

Aung Min, a member of Charity Oriented Myanmar, formed Myanmar NGOs Network in 2008 and served as a Vice-President for Cyclone Nargis relief and resettlement program. He also initiated and urged to form MNGOs DRR Working Group and Myanmar Consortium for DRR. He organized and implemented Civil Society Forum on DRR in 2010. He also gave guidance and consultation to the chair of Myanmar NGOs Contingency Plan Working Group and is now helping two NGOs as senior and strategic advisor for DRR and Rural Development. For conflict mitigation, he brought together some religious leaders for the activity "Building Love among Religions" for World Peace. The religions that participate in the activity are Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Islam and Baha'i.

12. Ramakrishna Mission

Swami Shantatmananda is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and is well known as an able administrator and spiritual mentor. He presently heads the Delhi centre of the Ramakrishna Mission.

He is deeply committed to the spreading of value education amongst the youth, especially the school and college students. He has been closely associated with the development of a number of insightful programs on value education, all based on the man-making and character-building ideas of Swami Vivekananda. He has been a member of some of the high-powered committees of the Govt. of NCR Delhi, CBSE, etc. and has been invited to speak by various schools, colleges, Universities, Apex organizations, Corporates, Financial Institutions, Govt. bodies, PSU's, Religious and Cultural organizations, etc.

He is passionately involved in interfaith dialogue leading to closer understanding between different faiths and is deeply committed to peace initiatives all over the globe. Swami Shantatmananda has visited Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Russia, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Poland, South Africa, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, USA and Taiwan on lecture tours and international conferences. He has also been visiting many cities in India on invitation to give lectures on different spiritual topics.