

PaRD

International Partnership on
Religion and Sustainable Development



Religious Engagement in Humanitarian Crises

Good Practice Collection

PaRD

International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) brings together **bilateral donors and multilateral development partners who seek to most effectively engage religious and related organizations to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.**

Religious values and religious leaders influence the thoughts and actions of billions of people around the world. Religious actors are local providers of essential services such as health care and education. They advocate for proper governance and accountability. Religiously affiliated organizations have been long time implementing partners with the wide array of government, multilateral development and humanitarian institutions.

A **close collaboration with civil society** is key to PaRD. Therefore, religious organizations, faith-based and community initiatives, foundations, academia and other networks can become **partners**.*

By building on existing initiatives and networks, PaRD contributes towards a more coherent and effective international agenda on religion and development.

PaRD has a strong **focus on results** and implements concrete activities in the following areas of cooperation

- Knowledge Sharing/Learning Exchange
- Networking/Dialogue
- Capacity Building
- Policy Advice

Regular meetings among the members and partners observe the progress of the annual **working program**.

PaRD is supported by an **international secretariat** located at GIZ in Bonn and Berlin, Germany. The secretariat provides analytical competency for policy formulation and dialogue around issues of religion and development and coordinates the implementation of the agreed upon activities.

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* A religious or faith based organization (RO/FBO) is understood as a unregistered non-profit organisation or initiative, whose mission and activities in the field of development and/or humanitarian assistance are explicitly inspired by religion and a peaceful and impartial approach with regards to the target groups.

Religiously inspired response to humanitarian crises

More than 125 Million people worldwide are affected by war and natural disasters, which create an overwhelming need for humanitarian assistance. 60 million refugees and displaced people have left their homes in search of better living conditions, which means that one person in every 122 has been forced to flee. This acute demand of relief after natural and man-made disasters requires a reconsideration and restructuring of the global community if we want to be more successful than in recent decades.

Religion plays a significant role in the daily lives of people around the world. 80% of people worldwide belong to a religion. Yet religion tends to be overlooked in global politics and in development agencies. During consultations in July 2015 in Washington DC and New York, a group of development partners addressed this gap. They came to the conclusion that religion and religious actors create purpose and provide orientation. Religion also matters in developmental work as well as in the field of humanitarian assistance. Based on subsequent meetings, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) was established during the Berlin Conference “Partners for change – Religions and the 2030 Agenda” in February 2016. PaRD brings together bilateral donors and multilateral development partners who seek to most effectively engage religious and related organizations to achieve the SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. A close collaboration with civil society is key to PaRD. Therefore, religious organizations, religious, faith-based and community initiatives, foundations, academia and other networks are invited to become partners.

Currently, PaRD consists of five bilateral members, including BMZ, DFID, NORAD, SIDA, and USAID as well as seven multilateral members, including the UN family – UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNWOMEN, OGPRTOP –, and the World Bank. PaRD is actively seeking to engage with more governmental and non-governmental agencies especially from the Global South. In order to assume its aspired role as a facilitator between secular actors and religious communities, PaRD is in the process of formalizing its networks with civil society as well as religious and faith-based organisations (RO/FBO) around the globe. Several NGOs

and religious organisations will join the partnership in the coming months.

“May the forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit not fail to be centred on the human person and his or her dignity, and to come up with policies capable of assisting and protecting the victims of conflicts and other emergencies, especially those who are most vulnerable and all those persecuted for ethnic and religious reasons.”

Pope Francis, Easter Message 2016

On the occasion of the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in Istanbul, PaRD presents a collection of responses from religious communities to humanitarian crises, comprising of good practices. The publication vividly demonstrates that religion matters in humanitarian work. Religion is a crucial motivation for many volunteers and professionals all over the world. It is also a source for resilience for people affected by man-made and natural disasters. The examples in this brochure from Haiti, Philippines, Guinea, Syria, Nepal and other regions illustrate that the work of religious actors is characterised by the ability to mobilise volunteers quickly, who are motivated by virtues and spiritual commitment. Religious actors maintain unique local and global networks. Through their enduring presence, they get access to people and regions beyond the scope of state actors and engage with local people through their religious communities.

These examples demonstrate that religious communities are important partners for successful humanitarian assistance. PaRD encourages all partners and actors involved in humanitarian services and development to strengthen cooperation between each other and to overcome existing boundaries. Considering the potential of religious communities and connecting secular and non-secular actors in a more systematic way will enhance future responses to humanitarian crises and will also play a crucial role in achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Buddhist Global Relief: Emergency aid and sustainable support – Haiti after the earthquake



Feeding the children was one of the urgent needs after the earthquake in Haiti. Photo: 'What If? Foundation'

Buddhism has about 488 million followers worldwide, making it the fourth largest religion in the world¹. Buddhist Global Relief (BGR) is a non-profit organisation founded in May 2008 and based in New York, USA. There are currently around 20 Board members² and a fluctuating number of volunteer staff and donors. It is an inter-denominational community of Buddhists and friends of Buddhism who address the plight of people afflicted by poverty, natural disaster, and societal neglect. Taking a Buddhist perspective, BGR gives priority to discreet assistance on the local level in order to yield the most effective outcomes.

"I like coming to Lamanjay, because they give me a big plate of food, so I am not hungry. And I get to play. And they teach me songs and other things. I am safe at the food program. Really safe."

Rolande, 7-year-old girl

BGR focusses its efforts on grassroots projects that address the causes of hunger and poverty. Yet being a 'small' organisation, alone in 2015 BGR committed to allocate the amount of 336,600 \$ for all its current projects reaching about 15,288 people. The organisation typically awards grants between \$2000 and \$10,000 to fund projects such as emergency food aid as well as

long-term strategies to increase food production and to strengthen local capacities for long-term sustainability. The all-volunteer organization generally works through partnerships with respected and experienced organizations functioning on the ground in the countries and communities where the projects are implemented³.

BGR typically provides its disaster relief by partnering with local organisations: For example, the organisation provided emergency grants for victims of famine at the Horn of Africa, assisted refugees in Syria and Southeast Asia, supported people affected by typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and Vietnam, and was involved in the relief efforts following the earthquake in Nepal in 2015.

The way BGR provides aid in emergency situations can be exemplified through its activities following the disastrous earthquake in Haiti in 2010. Already working in Haiti before the disaster, BGR partnered with a locally based organisation, the 'What If? Foundation', which



A few days after the earthquake the cooking team set up a temporary kitchen. Photo: 'What If? Foundation'

seeks to increase community resilience by engaging in disaster risk reduction initiatives and providing hot lunches through its program named “Lamanjay”. Through this program, displaced children in Ti Plas Kazo, one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince, have access to hot and healthy meals on a daily basis. The food program was serving up to 1,500 meals each day, when on January 12, 2010 the catastrophic earthquake struck and the demand for food aid became even more acute. Only a few days after the earthquake, the ‘What If? Foundation’ prepared and served thousands of meals each weekday totalling at over 750,000 meals in 2010 alone.

Like most of BGR’s partners around the world, “What If?” was deeply rooted in the local community. Its local network ensured a fast and suitable response to the devastating effects of the earthquake: Within days, the cooking team set up a temporary kitchen and created a system for serving, allowing the preparation of meals until a new kitchen and cafeteria were built. It has been crucial that the programs are run by members of the local community, for this prove to be the key to the program’s effectiveness in providing so many children with support and nourishment.

“The earthquake has affected me a lot. []. But the food program has helped me a lot. Sometimes we don’t have anything at home to cook. When we come here, they feed my children. It is a good program.”

Jestell, mother

Additionally, BGR assisted people in areas with the worst damage through a donation of \$20,000. This amount has been divided evenly between four organizations already working in the field – CARE, Oxfam, Tzuchi Foundation, and Direct Relief International – and was quickly materialized into food, shelter, medical help, and social services. With the post-earthquake rehabilitation continuing up until today, BGR’s partnership with the ‘What If? Foundation’ continued throughout the following years after the earthquake. In 2013, the partnership expanded, into supporting the education of its beneficiaries. Since then, BGR not only is involved with Lamanjay’s food program, but also provides scholarships for children in need..

In April 2016, the World Food Programme announced that Haiti is encountering the worst food crisis in 15 years due to a three-year drought⁶. According to WFP,



‘What if? Foundation’, the local partner of Buddhist Global Relief, serves meals to needy children. Photo: ‘What If? Foundation’

about 3.6 million Haitians or one third of the population face food insecurity with 1.5 million being considered severely insecure in terms of nutrition. Roughly double in size to the Haitian government’s own assessment of severe food insecurity, this figure is extremely alarming and underlines the urgency of the issue. Haiti’s north-west, southeast and some areas on the border with the Dominican Republic have been hit hard amid a long drought that has been worsened by a strong El Niño weather pattern. This is one reason for BGR continuing the Lamanjay feeding program with a further grant of \$20,000⁷ in 2016. Based on current prices, this grant would provide more than 30,000 meals for hungry and malnourished children. ■

- 1 Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development, p. 25
- 2 <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/active/leadership.html>
- 3 www.buddhistglobalrelief.org
- 4 <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/active/newsletters.html>
- 5 <http://whatiffoundation.org/the-history-of-the-food-program/>
- 6 <http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-will-assist-1-million-hungry-haitians-hit-three-year-drought>
- 7 http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/documents/FinancialDocuments/BGR_990_FYE_2010-06-30.pdf

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Muslim Aid worldwide and in the Philippines



Distribution of roofing materials. Photo: Muslim Aid

Various humanitarian crises in Africa in 1985 triggered the establishment of Muslim Aid (MA)¹ based in Britain. In the following years MA expanded its emergency relief operations and grew to an international relief and development agency allocating £28.9 million in 2014 on charitable objectives around the world².

Over the years the scope of the agency's work expanded from emergency relief to the implementation of long-term development programmes. Muslim Aid is operating in a world-wide network of local and international humanitarian partner organisations. Through these partners or their field offices, MA enhances the resilience and develops capacities of people in need of assistance. Today, MA works in over 70 countries³ and in 2015 it reached more than 3.5 Million people, of which more than 1.5 Million were beneficiaries in MA's humanitarian assistance programmes⁴.

"We want you to know that you've given us not just material things, the houses you have built for us symbolize hope, love and protection."

Letter of 'The Beneficiaries'

Over the last years, MA has worked in diverse contexts such as Bosnia after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Indonesia following the 2004 Tsunami, Pakistan after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake as well as Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. Additionally, MA continuously works in a

variety of contexts such as the Palestinian territories, Darfur, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Lebanon, India and Bangladesh.

In 2013, MA supported the relief efforts following typhoon Haiyan – or Yolanda, as it is locally known – in the Philippines. When Haiyan swept across the region, it caused widespread devastation through floods and landslides, which resulted in a humanitarian emergency. This left families even more vulnerable than before and caused more than 10,000 deaths and the loss of over 20,000 homes.

Muslim Aid was one of the first to provide help. More than 2,000 families on the devastated Bantayan Island and in Leyte province received food, drinking water, kitchen utensils and were aided in shelters and sanitation facilities.

"[...] even if the devastation in our land was already more than a year ago, you still chose to be with us, rebuilding our houses into homes, giving us a beautiful place that we could call our own."

Letter of 'The Beneficiaries'

Among the assistance given by MA were nine villages funded by the UK Islamic Mission and built in close coordination with local governments to shelter those, who had lost their homes. One of the benefiting households in these villages was a five-person family, which had lost their grandparents to Haiyan. During the emergency response



Muslim Aid supports the construction of shelter. Photo: Muslim Aid

they received cash from other NGOs as well as kitchen wares and a solar lamp. But the homeless family had to stay in a makeshift house for 22 months, as they were not able to afford the reconstruction of their home. Since there were no economic opportunities in the damaged region, their income was too low to provide for all the daily needs of the family, especially those of their new born child.

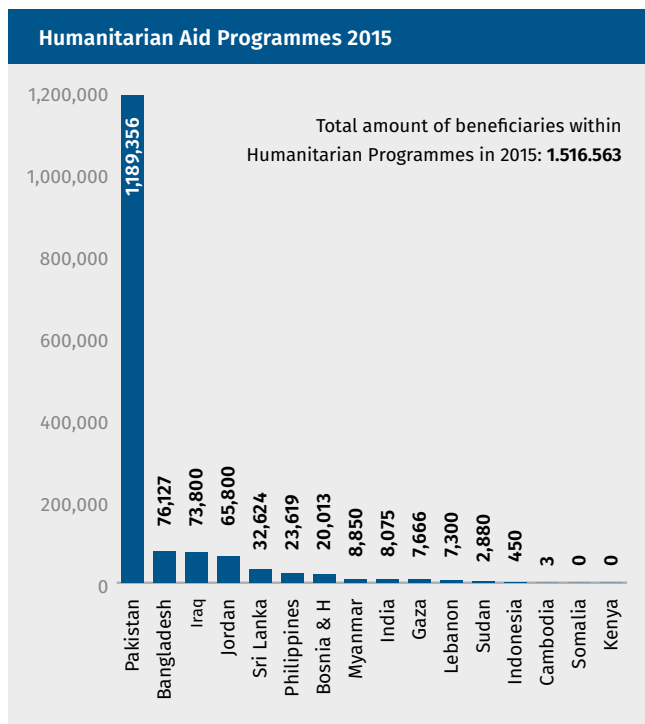
In May 2015 Muslim Aid came into their community promising decent housing for the family. However, the agency requires its beneficiaries to help: transporting the building materials to the construction site, assisting artisans and labourers during the construction and providing a land area where the shelter is built all are among the activities MA requires its beneficiaries to take part in. After finishing the building, the family's father stated: "I want to improve the shelter as well as use techniques I learned from assisting

*"Again, not only the need to provide food and medicine to those in need but also the protection and restoration of human dignity were the motivations for humanitarian work."*⁶

Rex RB Reyes, Jr. General Secretary VII

In total, MA assisted in constructing 18 villages consisting of durable shelters. At the same time, the skills of their inhabitants to make their own home were enhanced, thus giving people the chance to withstand future natural disasters. In addition, programmes were launched by MA to strengthen people's resilience by implementing programmes on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), disaster risk reduction, climate change adaption and emergency response. Knowing how to anticipate disasters and their outcomes proactively as well as being able to prepare wisely and react confidently is of great importance in the Philippines: The country frequently experiences more than 20 storms per year and is prone to to landslides, flooding and droughts.

In 2016, another emergency struck the Philippines and MA provided support: This time, assistance is given to the drought victims in Mindanao. Due to the impact of El Niño, this province among others in the Philippines is struggling to secure its water supplies. The country is in urgent need to prepare for this challenge and other consequences of climate change. However, its inhabitants are not alone: MA remains at their side.



According to the information of Muslim Aid Regional Programme Middle East and Africa, London.

the artisans during the construction the building.” This expression clearly highlights the of empowerment and self-determination, which MA values as crucial to the mobilization of disaster preparedness.

“We can't give you anything in return, but surely, you, the Muslim Aid and the other organizations will always be in our prayers.”

Letter of 'The Beneficiaries'

- <https://www.muslimaid.org/about-us/the-history-of-muslim-aid/?&p=3>
- MUSLIM AID, TRUSTEES' REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR 2014 <https://www.muslimaid.org/about-us/finance/>
- <https://www.muslimaid.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>
- Number of beneficiaries Muslim Aid 2015
- <http://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-mindanao-impact-el-ni-o-january-2016>
- Rex RB Reyes, Jr. General Secretary VII, NCC Philippines at the Forum on Faith-Based Organizations and the World Humanitarian Summit: PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTER, April 27, 2016, Quezon City

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Combatting Ebola – the power of religion to end the crisis



Meeting of faith leaders in Sierra Leone.
© CAFOD/Louise Norton

Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea belong to the world's poorest nations and are most affected by wars as well as political and economic crises. Their health systems reflect this weakness and were anything but prepared for a large-scale epidemic such as the recent outbreak of Ebola, which caused more than 11,000 deaths as of January 2016¹.

Since the first infection in Guinea in December 2013, daily life in the country's forest region was affected by the deadly disease. Soon Ebola spread across national borders to the neighbouring states Liberia and Sierra Leone – without any public notice at the time. Only in August 2014 did the World Health Organization (WHO) recognize a public health emergency of international concern due to the drastically increased number of patients.

“When they started participating in the revised burial practices, people knew they could trust it and resistance ended. The participation of religious leaders was a game changer.”²

UN staff member in Sierra Leone

Public health specialists had already focused on traditional practices as one contributing factor to the scale of Ebola outbreaks prior to this recent example. For example, mourners touching or washing the highly infectious bodies had been identified as a significant contributing factor in

the past. This and similar practices, which increase the risk of infection, also play an important role in all three countries despite their quite diverse religious composition: While Liberia has a majoritarian Christian population with significant Muslim communities as well as a widespread practice of traditional religions, Muslims make up the majority of both Sierra Leone and Guinea³.

Both governmental and non-governmental organisations accordingly advised communities regarding such unsafe traditional practices. However, few communities changed their attitude and kept on practicing their religious and cultural traditions, since they shared little affiliations with governments, NGOs and public health services. Hence it became clear, that the issue of community trust and engagement was existential to combatting the Ebola outbreak. To inform people about risks and to offer alternatives, the dissemina-

“Faith Leaders have reach into every part of the country and they are highly trusted by community members.”⁴

Government coordination staff member, Bo district, Sierra Leone

tor of change had to be a trusted and rooted member of the villages and communities. As international and national humanitarian agencies and organisations recognized this need for a new approach, they established and reinforced links to the communities through local faith-leaders in order to advocate alternatives and motivate behavioural change towards safe, yet religiously and culturally accepted practices. Soon imams, pastors, nuns and priests found passages in the Quran and the Bible giving a religious context to the new, safe burial practices, showing that they were acceptable and not at all less personal or spiritual⁵.

Subsequently, religious leaders became more and more engaged with the crisis and spread relevant information through prayers and congregations, including interreligious prayers. They ensured dignified burials, consoled and counselled mourners, initiated acceptance for survivors and showed how to prevent and control the spread of the virus. Several faith communities used SMS messages to disseminate health messages and to check on those in quarantine. Equally, radio stations were used to reach the

public due to the high trust they enjoy: In Liberia, it was found that the “most trusted individuals in society were family members, radio talk show hosts, religious leaders, and international NGOs”.⁶ This joint effort in informing the public contributed significantly not only to slowing down the rate of new infections, but also helped to rectify stigmas about those suffering from Ebola.⁷

“Lofa County had been a hot-bed of Ebola-denial and it was difficult to get health staff in to assist. The Imam and the local chief worked together using messages from the Quran and the Bible to discuss behaviour change with the communities. This paved the way for health staff to get access to the County.”⁸

Senior UN staff member, Monrovia, Liberia

As proven by WHO data and shown in the joint report ‘Keeping the Faith’ of Christian Aid, Cafod, Tearfund and Islamic Relief Worldwide, the efforts to slow down the epidemic were successful within a few months. At the end of January 2015, the WHO stated a new phase in the crisis “from slowing transmission to ending the epidemic”⁹.

Interreligious cooperation in particular prove to be a significant factor in this process. The message to change attitudes and behaviours to successfully combat the disease was even more powerful, because it was promoted by both Christian and Muslim leaders collaborating in churches and mosques. A Christian leader in Bo District, Sierra Leone stated: “The voice of a sheikh in the church was more powerful than the host reverend. This was an interesting lesson for me.”¹⁰



Children were also struck down by the disease.
© Photo: World Vision/Bundu

In the case of this Ebola outbreak, religion inspired people to adapt and promoted live-saving practices. A common focus initiated Christians and Muslims to speak with one voice and helped the response to this crisis in a significant way. Therefore, this example shows religious communities and inter-faith networks to offer a powerful potential for emergency responses. Integrating local faith-leaders into disaster responses should in particular be considered, whenever traditional practices need to be altered in order to respond effectively to an emergency. ■

- 1 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28755033>
- 2 Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide: Keeping the Faith. The Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response. July 2015, p. 8
- 3 Corman, Crystal, Lindsay Horikoshi, and Spencer Crawford. “Response to Ebola: Mapping Religious Networks and FIOs.” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. February 10, 2015.
- 4 Katherine Marshall, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs Georgetown University, World Faiths Development Dialogue: Responding to the Ebola Epidemic in West Africa: What role does religion play? Teaching Note for Case Study. March 2016.
- 5 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/15/churches-and-mosques-educate-on-ebola.html>
- 6 Mukpo, Ashoka: SURVIVING EBOLA. Public Perceptions of Governance and the Outbreak Response in Liberia. International Alert. 2015. http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Liberia_SurvivingEbola_EN_2015.pdf
- 7 Christian Aid, et al., p. 36
- 8 Christian Aid, et al., p. 28
- 9 World Health Organization: Ebola Situation Report. January 28, 2015. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/150249/1/roadmapsitre28Jan15_eng.pdf?ua=1&ua=1&ua=1
- 10 Christian Aid, et al., p. 33

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Providing basic needs in times of civil war – Caritas Internationalis in Syria



A Caritas centre for children with special needs in Syria's coastal area. Caritas provides basic aid items and a safe learning space. Photo: Caritas Syria

Since March 2011 Syria suffers from a brutal civil war which does not seem to end in the near future. Until now, over 470,000 people died. More than ten million people have been forced to flee. More than six million people have been internally displaced. Three million people searched refuge in the neighbouring states Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Almost 11 million people in Syria are in urgent need for humanitarian assistance.¹

Despite the violence in Syria, Caritas Internationalis (CI) is providing support for local people affected by the war. CI is a global confederation of more than 165 independent national organisations, networking together in nearly all countries all over the world and as a part of the humanitarian and development mission of the Catholic Church. In total, more than 1 million people, including many volunteers, work for CI. They originate from different national, ethnic and religious backgrounds.²

In Syria, 110 employees and 40 volunteers of Caritas Syria are currently working in the regions of Damascus, Aleppo, the Coastal region, in Homs, Lattakia, Hassake and Qamishli, Horan and Hama. They are collaborating with religious communities, such as the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and also work with Shia, Sunni and Orthodox humanitarian organisations in order to reach the maximum number of people in need. In Damascus, Caritas Syria maintains several centres that look

after displaced people and distribute food, and provide urgent medical and preventive healthcare services. In Aleppo, several centres have been set up thanks to the committed support of volunteers of the local community.

CI distributes food, blankets, clothing and other urgently needed items. Since the war has deprived many Syrians of all sources of income, CI offers shelters and rental assistance. Additionally, educational services and psychological support is offered. In 2015, Caritas spent \$84 million in Syria and the neighbouring countries, helping around 1.3 million people³.

Enduring the hardships of the war torn country, CI runs several programmes to support young people. CI supports pupils and students enrolled in public and private schools and educational institutions by paying their tuition fees and transport costs. Volunteers also offer recreational activities. Since only few places are left in Damascus that are appropriate for young people, Caritas identified safe spaces in cooperation with local authorities and takes care of youngsters during their leisure time.⁴

“We approached Caritas and explained our situation and that we have no one to support us. They gave us food vouchers. It was very helpful. No other charity is supporting us in this way.”

Father of a Syrian family in Damascus that was formerly living in Maaloula

Listening to a typical fate of a Syrian family means to learn about Syria's terrible reality: Already suffering from the loss of two sons-in-law who were killed in the civil war, a family's only son was hit by a sniper while he was crossing a street after a curfew. The bullet destroyed the spinal vertebrae of the son who wants to stay anonymous. The incident left him paralysed and in need of permanent medical services and instruments like a catheter that are nearly impossible to procure in times of war. The son, who does not feel anything from his abdomen to his toes, says devoutly: “Thank God, my hands are still working.”

Together with his extended family, the paralysed son shifted to new places several times. Eventually the family

moved from its hometown Irbin to Damascus, where Caritas has several centres. In the capital city the living conditions for families are also difficult. The family now lives in an overcrowded warehouse together with eight grandchildren. Caritas provided food, clothing and blankets for the family. The mother confirms with the highest conviction: “We can’t survive on our own. We need charity – also from other countries.”

“Caritas offered us moral support. We saw their beautiful smiling faces before anything else. They didn’t make us feel like we were taking a donation.”

Mother of a Syrian family living in Adra who wants to stay anonymous

Many people in Syria say that as long as organisations such as CI offer support in Syria, they will not give up hope. They also highlight that the only solution for the Syrian people and its future generations is ending the war immediately. Therefore Caritas is launching a global campaign for peace in the destabilised country. The aim is to remind the world



Caritas provides vouchers for fuel, rent, food and other aid items to Syrians in the coastal area. Photo: Caritas Syria

community of its responsibility to engage for peace and solidarity – also with the many refugees that the war has produced.



Jina Deeb, a Syrian social worker from Caritas on a home visit at a displaced family in Damascus. The family received rental support and a hygiene kit. Photo: Nicholson/Caritas

- 1 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured>; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Annual Report 2015, p.17. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2015/201509-corp-IDMC-annual-report-en.pdf> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)
- 2 <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/march-april-2015/caritas-internationalis-service-and-advocacy> by: Monsignor Robert Vitillo
- 3 Handout for Side event - 16march 2016. And telephone interview with Susanna Tkalec, Caritas Internationalis humanitarian director, April 28, 2016.
- 4 <http://www.caritas.org/where-we-are/middle-east-north-africa/syria/>

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Religion inspires Sikhs to provide welfare services and emergency assistance worldwide



UNITED SIKHS providing emergency aid after the severe typhoons of 2013/14 in the Philippines. Photo: iMKIRAN, UNITED SIKHS

UNITED SIKHS began in 1999 when a group of Sikhs from the New York metropolitan area banded together to assist in the socio-economic development of immigrant communities in Queens, New York. Today, UNITED SIKHS is a grass-roots organisation with chapters in America, Asia, Africa and Europe that pursue projects for the spiritual, social and economic empowerment of underprivileged and minority communities¹.

“Our volunteers know that any misconduct in this area would cause us to lose all our credibility among our supporters and in the eyes of the Creator, as well as discrediting our religion.”

Mejindarpal Kaur, Director at UNITED SIKHS

“Acknowledge our common spiritual origin. Trust in the wisdom of the Creator. Seek spiritual enlightenment. Live virtuously, modestly and in harmony with nature. Promote unity, justice and human wellbeing.” These are insights from the Sikh Religion, which formed a religious community in northern India in the 15th century. It is a world religion with nearly 25 million followers. At the heart of Sikhi (Sikhism) is a series of written, spiritual insights (Gurbani) of a timeless nature. They inspire Sikhs around the world to adopt a holistic lifestyle characterised by voluntary and selfless dedication (Seva). British Sikhs donate £125 million to charity every year. According to British Sikh Report 2016, the community spends over 65 million hours each year on voluntary activities.

Today Several organisations such as UNITED SIKHS, EcoSikhs and Khalsa Aid, as well as other initiatives that are not formally registered, are providing emergency aid, education, environmental conservation and human rights services at both local and international levels. The UN-affiliated organisation UNITED SIKHS is active in the fields of emergency aid and human rights. It is registered in ten countries as a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and has over 1,000 registered volunteers around the world, who carry out 90 per cent of its emergency aid work. The main coordination centres are in the United States, Canada, India and the United Kingdom.”².

“I’m not only a professional doctor but also a volunteer – sevadar. I give the best in terms of medical relief.”⁵

Dr. Amarjeet Singh, Nepal relief team member

Social media and smartphone Apps play a key role in the organisation’s internal communications activities, fund-raising campaigns, volunteer recruitment and media work. The first port of call in any country where a disaster has taken place is usually the local Sikh community centre (Gurdwara), which acts as a free base camp for volunteers, a place to store donated materials and a gateway to the local population, administration and political leaders.

The range of activities in which the NGO is involved is diverse. Together with the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, UNITED SIKHS has provided emergency aid in the wake of natural disasters in Banda Aceh, Myanmar, the Philippines, Japan and the United States. It has distributed food in Kenya and Somalia, helped flood victims in Malaysia and Kashmir and supported internally displaced people in Pakistan and impoverished farming families in northern India whose farmers had committed suicide as a result of utter financial ruin due to crop failure or floods. The NGO is helping Sikh families suffering discrimination in Afghanistan to apply for asylum in Canada. The work of Sikhs has been appreciated not only by beneficiaries but also by politicians like US President Barack Obama³.

“The aid we provide has to be credible, free of any missionary agenda and must be delivered to all those who are suffering regardless of their religion.”

Hardial Singh, Director at United Sikhs

The emergency aid following the Nepalese earthquake in April 2015 provides one example of the organisation’s work. Immediately after the earthquake, Sikh volunteers collected medicine, food and clothing, and organised the transport and distribution of relief items. Within only one week after the earthquake, four medical camps were set up by the relief team and over a thousand people have been provided with medical assistance⁴. Ramesh Tamang from Rasuwa was one of those victims. “Our houses were destroyed. The Sikh volunteers looked after us. They supplied medicine and metal sheets to make temporary shelters. They gave us a ray of hope.”

Mejindarpal Kaur, one of UNITED SIKHS’ directors, describes their work as follows: “We can mobilise a lot of volunteers quickly. These volunteers are motivated by their religion and not by salaries or careers. Their



Within one week the UNITED SIKHS Nepal Relief Team provided emergency assistance after the devastating earthquake in Nepal April 2015. Photo: UNITED SIKHS



Volunteers supporting flood victims in Kashmir. Photo: UNITED SIKHS

actions are based on empathy and altruism. That allows us to keep our administrative costs very low. On the downside, the funds at our disposal are relatively small, and we face a challenge in capacity building, which requires investment.”

Kaur sees accountability as a given: “Our project management teams are responsible for ensuring that donations are used in a transparent way. For this job we only select experienced people with a record of altruistic work. If we don’t deliver on our commitments, donations will simply dry up. Our volunteers know that any misconduct in this area would cause us to lose all our credibility among our supporters and in the eyes of God, as well as discrediting our religion. The aid we provide has to be credible, free of any missionary agenda and impartial in the sense that it must be delivered to all those who are suffering regardless of their religion. This approach promotes respect, understanding and cohesion.”

1 <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/about.php>

2 <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/community/uk-sikhs-donate-125-m-to-charity-every-year/214376.html>

3 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>

4 <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/Nepal-Relief-Effort/>

5 <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/Nepal-Relief-Effort/>

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Religious Engagement in Humanitarian Crises – improving capacities of coordination and cooperation between FBOs, Governments and local religious communities

As highlighted throughout this brochure, local religious communities are deeply rooted in their respective societies. Thus, it is religious communities who are there before, during and after a given crisis. They often are the first ones responding to a disaster: Mosques, churches, temples and Gurdwara for example offer basic shelter for refugees and frequently are turned into hospitals and kitchens. This knowledge of local circumstances and its use in emergency response are of particular value for any effective relief effort. Cooperating with them, listening to their unique approach and using their proposed coping mechanisms may be a crucial success factor in emergency response mechanisms. Moreover, religious communities and their respective leaders are the ones offering spiritual assistance in order to cope with the extreme stress caused by emergency situations. Furthermore, religious communities and their role as intermediaries between global processes and local action are needed in the near and distant future alike in order to enhance a smooth transition from emergency assistance and early recovery mechanisms to midterm and sustainable development. The good practices shown in this brochure – knowing there are many more! – emphasize these aspects and leave no doubt of the enormous potential religiously motivated individuals and organizations offer to cope with humanitarian crises.

Considering the Agenda 2030 slogan “leave no one behind” it is of utmost importance to serve those directly affected by humanitarian emergencies. To that end, it is necessary to identify and close the gaps between global response mechanisms and local needs. One particular need is to improve communication and coordination between those providing relief and their intended beneficiaries. Religious actors may offer solutions in this regard through their global reach and their own local networks, which allow them to act as mediators between the global discourse and local implementation. Thus, they may be significant forces in shaping a better functioning humanitarian system by connecting local communities and their needs with large international actors such as governments, multi-lateral organizations and FBOs.

To assume such a role, local religious actors need effective recognition and support from inside the global humanitarian system. Therefore, PaRD proposes to take these actors into consideration within the global humanitarian discourse and strengthen their role. However, this demands a high degree of exchange and mutual understanding between religious actors, politicians, officials and representatives of humanitarian organizations alike.

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Cover photo

Greeting of Sri Lankan muslim on the eastern part of the island.
Only seven percent of Sri Lanka's population consists of muslims.
Credit: Walter Keller/third-eye-photography.de

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