

## **Perspectives on the World Humanitarian Summit, Istanbul 2016**

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I had the privilege of representing the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities at the World Humanitarian Summit, joining 9,000 participants from 173 countries with 55 heads of state among them—an event of unprecedented scale for the UN in its 70 year history.

Over 130 million people are today affected by disaster, war, climate change, political instability, and sectarian violence—the highest prevalence since World War II. These refugees, displaced people, and migrants are men and women just like us, fleeing from danger, desperate for a better life for their children and themselves. Their suffering is immense, their needs immediate, and the global humanitarian response system is overwhelmed and underfunded.

The Summit's focus was on the innovative and transformative changes that are needed to address the magnitude of this humanitarian challenge.

Many high-level leaders, with Angela Merkel, Recep Erdogan, and Irish President, Michael D Higgins among them, made announcements and expressed commitments to reinvigorating the international relief system during the two densely packed days. Michael D. gave several magnificent 'rallying call' speeches, among them to a session on Hunger where he received a sustained standing ovation. It was a shame that G7 countries, including the US, were not represented by leaders of equivalent status!

In response to Ban Ki Moon's Call to Action, announcements of hundreds (if not thousands—the meeting so incomprehensibly grand and diffuse) of commitments to the Agenda for Action disseminated. The Commitments Report will publish such declarations at the end of June.

"Preventing and resolving conflicts would be the biggest difference leaders could make to reduce overwhelming humanitarian needs," according to the [Chair's Summary](#). Courageous political will and united action is needed. Commitments were made around each of the 5 key themes of the Summit including: protection of civilians: upholding human rights law: protecting the 1 in 3 women who are raped and violently abused. I'll say it again—"one in three".

For the relief and support of the more than 60 million refugees, new commitments were made to their safety and dignity, while affirming shared responsibility for displaced people. An "Education Cannot Wait" Fund launched with an initial \$90m for schooling in emergencies. Strategies to strengthen refugees' and affected communities' self-reliance and local capacities were also announced.

With regard to financing for humanitarian response, new commitments included increased resources. The Central Emergency Response Fund grew to \$1b. Agreements on a **Grand Bargain** promised to realize over \$1b in savings through efficiencies, and to increase resources channeled directly to local and national responders to 25% by 2020.

One of the most promising developments was the call to **“localization” of response**. Jan Eliasson, Deputy UN Secretary General spoke about the “need to work horizontally rather than top down”. Over 100 national and global organizations endorsed a [Charter4Change](#)—an initiative to practically implement changes to the way the humanitarian system operates to enable more locally-led response. The launch of a new [network of Global South NGOs](#)—financed by Gates and Rockefeller—provides a platform to support such a shift to local and national leadership. However I heard many participants express skepticism about whether the current hierarchical humanitarian structure would really shift the locus of control, and would they do it on the systematic scale needed to meet the target of 25% of humanitarian resources direct to local and national partners (a long way to travel from the current .2% of resources to local entities!)

**Religious and faith-based networks** already serve as first responders and trusted and sustained providers for physical and spiritual needs, and are of course ideally positioned to more fully engage as local partners in humanitarian response! Scaling up rapidly to work horizontally with local communities can be achieved in part by creatively ramping up engagement with local faith networks. In the often secular world of the UN, incorporating the religious perspective can be a challenge, and the Summit was no exception! Thanks to the persistence of diverse religious and faith-based leaders, and to the encouragement and facilitation provided by the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development (UNIATF), some space for religious voices at the Summit did open up. (Sadly though no mention in the SG’s Chair’s Summary)

As part of the formal Summit program, the UNIATF supported by an Advisory Committee of diverse religious and FBOs, organized a [Special Session on Religious Engagement](#) chaired by Azza Karam, at which 16 high level religious and faith based leaders—including Patriarch Bartholomew of Istanbul and Cardinal Tagle of the Philippines—as well as public sector leaders such as Gerd Müller German Minister Economic Cooperation and Development--committed themselves to fuller engagement of their networks in the relief of humanitarian need and suffering. The *outcome document* from the meeting is attached to this note.

JLIF&LC, Soka Gakkai, Asian Disaster Relief and Reduction Network, Islamic Relief Malteser, International, World Evangelical Alliance, World Vision co-organized a well attended *side event* on [“Evidence for Religious Groups’ contributions to Humanitarian Response”](#), at which [5 evidence briefs](#) developed under the leadership of Alastair Ager, were presented, and a panel of leaders brought the research to life with case studies from local community-based experience ([see also case studies from PaRD](#)), after which senior policy makers and leaders of faith-based NGOs made recommendations for action.

A pre-Summit meeting of Religious and faith-based leaders hosted by UNFPA, served as a hospitable preparation for the Summit, and was a great chance to meet colleagues, be oriented to tools and resources developed to support religious engagement in the Summit and to build community.

Religious and Faith-based organizations announced many commitments—the full breadth of them will be seen in the Commitments to Action platform and report when available in a few weeks.

At the JLIF&LC-Soka Gakkai event, 4 *specific action steps* were announced:

*Under the auspices of the JLI F&LC:*

- 1) Widely disseminate the 5 evidence briefs to humanitarian policy makers and practitioners to further engagement of religious networks
- 2) Organize and launch a new JLIF&LC Learning Hub on Refugees and Migrants

*Under the Auspices of the Moral Imperative:*

- 3) Host a working meeting of religious and faith-based networks to report on progress on the [Faith-based Action Framework](#) in support of the SDGS, launched September 2015; with a special session on Religious and Faith-based contributions to Refugees and Migrants to complement the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants

*Under the auspices of diverse religious and faith-based co-organizers*

- 4) Host, by mid-2017, a Global Religious Forum. This evidence-based working meeting will focus on mechanisms, methodologies and case studies of effective partnership between local faith networks and humanitarian response agencies, with a view to facilitate the localization agenda promoted at the Summit

One of the highlights of the Summit for me was meeting Rana Sayah. Rana's resilience and her hope touched me deeply. She is a young Syrian woman, who had fled in Syria from home to shelter, only to have to flee again to Turkey. She lost home, and country, but not hope. She's now a relief worker in Turkey with a food program for recent refugees from Syria. Her story and her strong spirit really brought home to me the wisdom and necessity of equipping *and paying* people affected by crisis to be effective responders themselves.

After all the preparation, and speeches, and promises, the Summit will be evaluated in the end on whether it makes a difference to real people like Rana and her family—at the scale that the challenge demands. Advocates including the faith community and others will be monitoring progress and holding each other to account in Rana's name, and in the name of our common humanity and our shared responsibility.

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