

## Refugees and Forced Migration Hub

### Introduction

The Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) has recently launched the Refugees and Forced Migration Hub, dedicated to better understanding the role of religion and faith actors in responding to contemporary (both new and protracted, internal and international) processes of forced migration around the world. The Hub will bring together individuals and organisations from academic, policy and practitioner backgrounds, representing a variety of religious, spiritual and secular affiliations, with the aim of utilising both its networks and knowledge base to better inform and improve policy and praxis.

It is increasingly recognised that faith-based actors have historically played a fundamental role in welcoming and supporting forced migrants – whether in material terms, through financial support and providing shelter, or through the provision of spiritual support and invoking religious traditions of accompaniment. However, there remains a lack of substantial evidence to indicate the multiple roles that faith-based actors play in responding to the needs of forced migrants across different phases and spaces of displacement; what the strengths and

weaknesses of such support mechanisms are; the extent to which such mechanisms are integrated into international response systems; and how faith-based actors could be better supported in their work.

With an overburdened and underfunded humanitarian system in flux as the world faces the highest levels of displacement ever recorded - over 65 million people in 2015 - it is particularly urgent for the international community to consider the roles that different actors play in supporting refugees and other displaced people throughout different stages and spaces of their journeys. Now, more than ever, we need evidence to help policy-makers and practitioners better understand the roles that faith-based actors already play, and have the potential to play, in supporting refugees and forced migrants.

This Briefing summarises key evidence from existing academic and policy reports, and ends with 6 key questions that will be explored in the new Refugees and Forced Migration Hub.

To join the new Refugees and Forced Migration Hub, visit <http://refugee.jliflc.com>

### What we know

- **Local Faith Communities (LFCs) are often the first responders to refugees and IDPs due to their presence and reach within communities.** Burundian refugees in Tanzania were immediately supported by the local Lutheran non-governmental organisation (NGO), Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS), whilst international organisations took more time to arrive.<sup>1</sup>
- **The social capital of many LFCs enables them to mobilise human and financial resources relatively quickly from within displaced communities and from those that host them.** In Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East, aid for Syrian refugees – and before them, Iraqi and Palestinian refugees amongst others – has been channelled through zakat committees.<sup>2</sup>
- **Religious buildings are used to store and distribute aid, as information hubs, and for shelter and protection.** In the Central African Republic, Jesuit Refugee Services coordinated IDP response from a convent house. The sanctity of places of worship means they are “inviolable and protected spaces offering protection to vulnerable groups.”<sup>3</sup>

- **Engagement with LFCs may facilitate a more holistic understanding of need.** LFCs may be particularly well situated to recognise the extent to which ‘basic needs’ transcend secular organisations’ perceptions, as demonstrated in the case of Muslim women displaced by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, for whom headscarves were essential to maintain their dignity and a prerequisite to be able to access other services in public fora.<sup>4</sup>
- **LFCs can help to build cross-community and cross-border networks that ease integration (and re-integration) in contexts of displacement.** In many cases LFCs have strong links with affiliated LFCs from the same tradition in neighboring countries and further afield, which can provide an anchorage for displaced communities. UNHCR reports that in urban or non-camp settings, in Ghana and Liberia for example, refugees have established relationships with host communities through shared religious beliefs and praying together.<sup>5</sup>
- **Religious groups support refugees to claim their rights.** In many instances local faith networks are crucial operational partners assisting larger international agencies. In Myanmar and Malaysia, UNHCR relies on LFCs to provide information to

register asylum seekers and other forced migrants in order to help them attain individual and family-based temporary or permanent solutions to displacement.”<sup>6</sup>

- **Individuals hold beliefs that help them to recover from or manage adversity.** An established body of research documents how religious beliefs frequently operate to support resilience: values of positivity and ways of interpreting change equip individuals to withstand shock, including in processes of displacement. In the case of internal displacement from post-election violence in Kenya, IDPs often saw their faith as more useful for “their lives and morale than political programmes and promises,” as it is their prayers that give them hope to endure.<sup>7</sup>
- **LFCs are uniquely positioned to engage with “controversial” issues.** LFCs may have access to issues that are considered sensitive, taboo or stigmatised, and are well-placed to tackle harmful attitudes or practices. For instance, as part of its work to end the practice of female genital mutilation, UNFPA has shown how sensitively handled partnerships with local religious leaders have led to a fundamental shift “among religious leaders, many of whom have gone from endorsing the practice to actively condemning it” within their communities.<sup>8</sup>

## What we don’t know

- **How inclusive are religious buildings and LFCs in providing sanctuary for those of all faiths and none?** LFCs are playing an increasingly important role in hosting refugees and IDPs as displacement has become an increasingly urban phenomenon. These encounters can also be characterized by processes of exclusion and proselytization. Further research is essential both to understand the nature and prevalence of bad practice, and to examine best practice examples of multi-faith hosting, the inclusion of different groups of refugees, and respect of freedom of religion.



- **To what extent do religious identity, values and practice provide psychosocial support and promote resilience?** Psychosocial practices are embedded deeply in the practice of religious communities: rituals and rites define passage through phases of life, communities united by belief systems offer mutual

support, and respected leaders offer interpretations of life's challenges and advice on the means of surviving them. At the same time, pastoral support provided by faith leaders is often informal, unregulated and detached from formal psychosocial programmes. Research with refugees and IDPs, members of LFCs, and faith leaders alike will help us better understand the ways in which a faith can support or undermine refugees' and IDPs' agency, resilience and coping strategies.

- **How do faith leaders and religious norms provide support to refugees and IDPs?** Faith leaders can facilitate access to services, and also have the potential to influence community members' responses to refugees and IDPs.<sup>9</sup> Religious norms can lay the foundations for members of LFCs to offer hospitality to refugees and IDPs, but can also undermine the resilience of displaced people - particularly for women. Further research is needed to determine the ways that religion can be positively applied to empower different groups of refugees and IDPs.
- **What is the impact of faith leaders who intervene in public debates about refugees and IDPs?** Faith leaders often play a key role in public debates relating to refugees and IDPs. At times they can reinforce negative narratives about refugees and IDPs, and can mobilise local communities to exclude them. Alternatively, they often engage in local advocacy to encourage communities to support the welcoming

of refugees and IDPs; public advocacy to change negative narratives around refugees and IDPs; political advocacy to challenge negative legislation or uphold international humanitarian and human rights laws. More research is essential to understand the effects that faith leaders have in these and other spheres.

- **What is the role of gender in faith-based responses to refugees and IDPs?** Neither LFCs nor secular organisations are automatically 'conservative' or 'progressive' with regards to gender roles and relations: both religious organisations and secular organisations can carry gender-limiting beliefs and practices. Research with refugees and IDPs, members of LFCs and FBOs, and faith leaders is essential to better understand how refugees' and IDPs' access to services, faith leaders and religious spaces is gendered in nature.<sup>10</sup>
- **What role does faith play in the lives of refugees and IDPs in different stages of displacement?** Faith, spirituality and religious practices are a central feature of life for many refugees and displaced people around the world. It is important to better understand the extent to which refugees and IDPs may have spiritual needs, and to determine what types of support refugees and IDPs themselves wish to receive from different actors on local, national and international levels, including from faith leaders and local faith-based social networks.



Photo credit: Islamic Relief Worldwide

## What next?

The Refugee and Forced Migration Hub is dedicated to collating and communicating evidence on the role of faith actors in responding to refugee and IDP needs, with a view to influencing policy and praxis. Over the coming years, the Hub will:

- Conduct an in-depth Scoping Study to map existing best practice and challenges across a range of contexts
- Begin addressing the evidence gaps and questions raised by the Scoping Study through collaboration with research projects, and by commissioning its own research
- Widely disseminate evidence, learnings and recommendations to practitioners and policy makers for implementation

## Get involved

If you have a background in issues relating to faith and forced migration – including with refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs and/or stateless people – and are keen to share your learnings and shape the policy discourse on this issue with an international community of like-minded academics and practitioners, visit <http://refugee.jliflc.com> for information on how to join the Refugees & Forced Migration Hub.

Alternatively, contact the Co-Chairs of the Hub

- Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (University College London): [e.fiddian-qasmiyeh@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:e.fiddian-qasmiyeh@ucl.ac.uk)
- Sadia Kidwai (Islamic Relief Worldwide): [sadia.kidwai@irworldwide.org](mailto:sadia.kidwai@irworldwide.org)

## What is the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith & Local Communities?

Formed in 2012 by a broad collaboration of international development organizations, UN agencies, academic institutions, and religious bodies, the Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) is an international collaboration to gather and communicate evidence for faith groups' activities and contributions to community health and well-being.

### Our Vision:

Full and appropriate engagement of the capacities of faith-based groups in the achievement of the SDGs through effective partnerships with public sector and secular entities, as well as among religious groups themselves.

### Our Goals:

- Cross-sector, multi-religious, cross disciplinary, collaborative learning platforms
- Connect policy makers, practitioners, and academics with the knowledge, resources, and expertise, with particular responsiveness to their wants and needs, to understand the activity and contribution of faith communities
- Support broader global initiatives to catalyze the understanding the contribution & activity of faith groups

The JLI's current active Learning Hubs include Gender-Based Violence, Peace & Conflict and Refugees and Forced Migration. For more information about the JLI&LC, visit [www.jliflc.com](http://www.jliflc.com) or contact Stacy Nam, Knowledge Manager at [stacynam@jliflc.com](mailto:stacynam@jliflc.com)



Photo credit: Islamic Relief Worldwide

## References

- 1 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (2013) Local Faith Communities and the Promotion of Resilience in Humanitarian Situations: A Scoping Study, JLI/RSC Working Paper, p. 15.
- 2 El-Nakib, S. and Ager, A. (2015) Local Faith Community and Related Civil Society Engagement in Humanitarian Response with Syrian Refugees in Irbid, Jordan. Report to the Henry Luce Foundation, p. 7
- 3 El Nakib, S. and Ager, A. (see note 2) p 14.
- 4 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (see note 1), p. 29.
- 5 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (see note 1) p. 5.
- 6 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (see note 1), p. 38.
- 7 Parsitau, D. S. (2011). "The Role of Faith and Faith-Based Organizations among Internally Displaced Persons in Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(3): 493-512, at p. 509.
- 8 UN Population Fund (2015) Female genital mutilation (FGM) frequently asked questions: UNFPA Approach. Available at: [http://www.unfpa.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-frequently-asked-questions#unfpa\\_approach](http://www.unfpa.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-frequently-asked-questions#unfpa_approach)
- 9 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (Ed) (2016) Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees. UCL MRU Policy Brief.
- 10 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (see note 10).