

REFUGEES & LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITIES POLICY BRIEF

Local Faith Communities in Urban Displacement: Evidence on Urbanization and Localization

Key points

- Local faith actors should be recognized as legitimate “local,” “civil society” actors
- A greater familiarity with the structures of local faith actors is needed to breakdown barriers and biases and increase partnerships
- Research communication can help increase familiarity within the humanitarian sector of local faith actors
- Mediating organizations with knowledge of the local and national context can broker these interactions
- Coordination mechanisms for refugee response must work to include local faith actors so that they do not work in parallel
- Psychosocial approaches integrating secular psychology with spiritual support can be effective for refugees

The Evidence¹

THE ROLES LFAS PLAY IN RESPONSE TO DISPLACEMENT

- Provisions for universal needs, including shelter in religious buildings for displaced people. Examples are common and widespread. For example, as of a report from IRIN in August 2017, there were more than 10,000 people living in the compound of a Catholic Cathedral in Wau, South Sudan [4].
- Overlapping displacement or when refugees host refugees. In Baddawi camp in Lebanon, longer term residents collect donations (including through zakat) to prepare and distribute iftar food baskets for vulnerable families to break their fasting during Ramadan. These baskets are distributed irrespective of origin or amount of time in Baddawi. This includes long-term Baddawi residents, people displaced from Palestinian refugee camps, and ‘new’ refugees from Syria [5].
- Access to isolated refugee populations. In a story from the city of Triploi, Lebanon, the

position of a local priest as a member of the community allowed his truck of supplies for refugees to advance through a military checkpoint. The checkpoint commander allowed the truck through because he valued the priest’s motivation to help his community and knew where to find the priest in the community if there was a problem down the line [6].



PC: Islamic Relief Worldwide

¹ The evidence collected and identified for this report includes 21 key informant interviews and a review of 168 publications addressing refugees, IDPs, and religion. A focus on localization and urbanization was chosen to reflect key trends in the field. As such, this policy brief does not represent all aspects of local faith communities and refugee response, but only those topics relating to localization, urbanization, and local faith actors.

- **Registration and Refugee Status Determination (RSD).** Much attention has been given to the role of FBOs in resettling refugees to the global North, but the processes needed to secure resettlement take place while refugees are situated in the global South. Most refugees in urban settings in the global South neither apply for or secure refugee status. LFAs have played key roles both during and after RSD. For example, in Cairo, St Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) provides legal aid for refugees. There is also evidence that many people register with their local faith communities instead of UNHCR and IOM [7].
- **Peacebuilding in Contexts of Displacement.** The Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), a Jesuit center in Colombia, has implemented peacebuilding initiatives with displaced victims of violence, developing The Peace and Development Program, which works in partnership with Christian LFAs across the country to find economic opportunities for displaced communities [8].
- **Influencing Public and Political Opinion.** Religious actors have been active in both influencing for and against refugees. In an example of supportive practices, Ugandan Catholic Bishops have urged priests and congregants, in a statement released in July 2017, to "volunteer and provide pastoral care for people living in refugee camps" [9].
- **Transnational Religious Networks for South-South Refugee Movement and Integration.** These networks are rooted in Southern diasporas, offer humanitarian support of varying kinds to refugees, and include displaced communities as participants. Examples include the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a Nigerian Pentecostal movement operating in 110 countries with over five million followers, which provides social services, especially to displaced communities in the African diaspora, and other Pentecostal networks operating to support migrants on their journeys, as well as providing integration and assistance in transit and destination countries [10].

PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

- **Religious Community & Identity as Support.** The existence of local faith communities provides familiarity and immediate community following displacement. Research has shown that women in particular bring their religious identity into the new spaces that they make their homes, decorating and convening with other women to continue the practice of their religions [11].
- **Religious Interpretations of Displacement.** Religious writings provide examples of displacement that give meaning to the experience for modern day refugees. For example, research has shown that the identity of Muhajirin (the name for those who fled Mecca with Muhammad) conferred "a noble aura to the Iraqi plight" among male Iraqi refugees in the USA, who were otherwise struggling with their identity as refugees [12].
- **Religious Leaders as Psychosocial Support.** Evidence shows that people consistently turn to religious leaders for support. Evidence from Iraq and Kenya show religious leaders act as counsellors, but with great variances in their levels of training in counselling [13].
- **Religiosity and Trauma in Refugees.** Various attempts have been made to quantify the effects of religiosity on recovery from trauma among refugees. Results varied across studies [14]. It has been shown that refugees use a diversity of routes to recover from trauma, of which religious belief and practice is one element within a range that includes counselling and medication [15].



Baddawi camp cemetery, N. Lebanon. PC: Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017

INTEGRATED COUNSELLING APPROACHES

Humanitarian actors can hesitate to engage with LFAs on psychosocial support because the LFAs lack a knowledge of psychological practice and humanitarian standards. An example from Nepal demonstrates an integrated approach that made room for all.

The 2015 earthquake in Nepal internally displaced many, including Tibetan refugees. These Tibetan refugees experienced many levels of trauma and an integrated approach building **both from secular psychology and spirituality** was needed. In the Tibetan refugee community, Buddhism is so ingrained into everyday life that it could not have been separated from the assistance. Secular psychologists helped train spiritual leaders in order to give psychological help while also providing spiritual counselling.

This example demonstrates potentially complementary approaches for spiritual and secular psychosocial assistance with refugees in communities where support is often sought from religious actors [16].

THE STRUCTURES AND NORMS OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM AND LFAS

- Many faith groups are already "localized". Existing international religious networks mean that LFAs are already in sync with international partners. There are actors also working as mediating organizations, such as the Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development (LSESD). For their refugee response work, implementation happens through LFAs, with funding received from international sources, and LSESD helping with training the LFAs and ensuring compliance with international donors' standards [17].
- **Muslim LFAs.** Interviewees noted how they had not partnered with Muslim associations in the same way as Christian organizations, even though many of the countries in which they worked had significant or majority Muslim populations. Christian organizational structures allow for distributed response systems that give local congregations a role. In comparison, the structures of Muslim organizations are less familiar to international institutions and therefore they do not know how to access these actors, with the result that partnerships are less frequently created [18].

- **Parallel systems reduce efficiency.** Faith-based networks in various cities work to organize refugee response, but in parallel to secular, international humanitarian networks. Good examples such as the Bangkok Asylum Seekers and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) show how interfaith networks can expand to include diverse actors and partnerships [19].
- **Proselytizing & Partiality.** There is an underlying tension with LFAs in localization: these local actors may be acting effectively and efficiently in their provision of assistance, yet are not acceptable local partners because they include elements of proselytization or partiality in their work. The literature demonstrated that understanding complexity and context can allow for barriers to be overcome. Research shows that converting can have many more disadvantages for refugees than advantages [20] and the agency of beneficiaries to reject conversion efforts should not be underestimated. Notably, interviewees described how LFAs grew in their understanding of the humanitarian principle of impartiality with appropriate training [21].

Recommendations

- **Local faith actors must be counted within definitions of local actors and civil society actors.** As shown by the number of ways that local faith actors are involved in the provision of basic services, their presence cannot be ignored. Humanitarian localization best practice must recognize these groups as legitimate "local" actors.
- Barriers and biases around partnership with local faith actors, particularly Muslim actors, need to be broken down. A **greater familiarity with the structures of LFAs is needed.** Training humanitarian staff about the structures of LFAs in each context would begin a process of breaking down barriers around a lack of knowledge and familiarity and encourage them to engage with structures that may be outside their experience.
- Mediating organizations or actors with an understanding of both the international humanitarian system and local faith structures can be essential in increasing partnerships and breaking down barriers.

“Culture brokers” can provide necessary, institutional support to LFAs. The example of LSESD in Lebanon and StARS in Cairo as national FBOs with transnational ties and strong links in the local community, provide noteworthy examples of organizations that bridge divides from the international to the most local.

- Psychosocial assistance that integrates elements of secular psychology with the spiritual support of local faith communities is needed to provide culturally relevant and appropriate psychosocial support.

- Research translation and communication is needed to engage with decision makers and promote an awareness of and familiarity with LFA structures for refugee response. Awareness needs to be raised from the headquarters down to field representatives who make localized funding decisions.
- Humanitarian coordination, and particularly coordination lead organizations, must engage more deeply with local actors, including LFAs. This will need to include initial assessments that look more deeply into the full range of actors present in the location, funding for local actors to attend meetings and the support of select international organizations to stand alongside and accompany LFAs.

Citation: Wilkinson, O. and Ager, J. (2017) ‘Scoping Study on Local Faith Communities in Urban Displacement: Evidence on localisation and urbanisation.’ JLI Hub on Refugees and Forced Migration (London: UCL Migration Research Unit).

Online Access: <https://jliflc.com/resources/jli-scoping-lfc-urban-displacement/>

Join the JLI

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 or contact refugeehub@jliflc.com.

JLI REFUGEE HUB CO-CHAIRS

- Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London
- Atallah Fitzgibbon, Islamic Relief Worldwide

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) formed in 2012 by a broad collaboration of international development organizations, UN agencies, academic institutions, and religious bodies, JLI is an international collaboration to gather and communicate evidence for faith groups’ activities and contributions to community health and well-being.



REFERENCES

- [1] LFAs include local religious leaders, informal local faith and worship communities mobilizing in crisis to provide basic services, faith networks, such as zakat committees, or councils of churches, and formalized local and national faith-influenced organizations.
- [2] IASC: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/more-support-and-funding-tools-local-and-national-responders>.
- [3] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Refugee-Refugee Relations in Contexts of Overlapping Displacement,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2016. <http://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on-overview/spotlight-urban-refugeecrisis/refugee-refugee-relations-contexts-overlapping-displacement/>.
- [4] <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2017/08/15/cathedral-becomes-refuge-last-resort-south-sudan-s-displaced>
- [5] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh Case Study. See pages 24-25 of the report for the full case study.
- [6] See page 22 of the report for the full story.
- [7] Norwegian Church Aid, “The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq” (Oslo: Norwegian Church Aid: World Council of Churches, November 2016), 27. <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/about-nca/publications/publications/the-protection-needs-of-minorities-from-syria-and-iraq/>
- [8] Colombia: Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation, Berkeley Center Report, August 2013. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/colombia-religious-actors-inspiring-reconciliation>
- [9] <http://communications.amecea.org/index.php/2017/07/07/uganda-catholic-bishops-urge-priests-to-provide-pastoralcare-in-refugee-camps/>
- [10] Cherry, Stephen M. “Exploring the Contours of Transnational Religious Spaces and Networks.” In *Intersections of Religion and Migration*, edited by Jennifer B. Saunders, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Susanna Snyder, 195-224. (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016): 195-224.
- [11] Celia McMichael, “Everywhere Is Allah’s Place: Islam and the Everyday Life of Somali Women in Melbourne, Australia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 180.
- [12] Marwa Shoeb, Harvey M. Weinstein, and Jodi Halpern, “Living in Religious Time and Space: Iraqi Refugees in Dearborn, Michigan,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 3 (September 1, 2007).
- [13] Damaris Seleina Parsitau, “The Role of Faith and Faith-Based Organizations among Internally Displaced Persons in Kenya,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 493-512; Alison Strang and Oonagh O’Brien, “Who Can I Turn To? Mapping Social Connections, Trust and Problem-Solving among Conflict-Affected Populations” (Teddington: Edinburgh: Tearfund; Queen Margaret University).
- [14] Emily Sachs et al., “Entering Exile: Trauma, Mental Health, and Coping among Tibetan Refugees Arriving in Dharamsala, India,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 21, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 199; Wadih J. Naja et al., “Prevalence of Depression in Syrian Refugees and the Influence of Religiosity,” *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 68 (July 2016): 78.
- [15] McMichael.
- [16] See page 31 of the full report.
- [17] See page 41 of the full report.
- [18] See page 42-44 of the full report.
- [19] <https://basranbangkok.org/>
- [20] Fatiha Kaoues, “Réfugiés et migrants dans les églises protestantes évangéliques libanaises : Recompositions identitaires et enjeux sociaux,” *L’Année du Maghreb*, no. 11 (December 23, 2014): 5.
- [21] See page 50 of the full report.