



PAPER 15

Faith in Action – the role of faith leaders in humanitarian action

1 Introduction

Since the dawn of history, faith has provided a foundation from which social norms develop - an estimated 83.6 per cent of the world's population considers itself affiliated with a faith.¹ This underscores the critical role that religious leaders can play in addressing humanitarian and development issues.

This is particularly relevant in Southeast Asian countries, which are highly disaster prone and also where faith plays a very important part in the daily lives of people. In India alone, e.g. almost 99.1% of the population identifies with a faith.² Gallup surveys in 114 countries in 2009 show that religion continues to play an important role in many people's lives worldwide. The global median proportion of adults who say religion is an important part of their daily lives is 84%, unchanged from what Gallup has found in other years. In 10 countries and areas, at least 98% say religion is important in their daily lives³.

There are two major roles that faith can play in this scenario- a) changing behaviours and mindsets and b) influencing policy and planning. Faith leaders not only enjoy a high level of influence amongst the general public, but usually also amongst policymakers and legislators. They often have a large following and their messages are actually listened and adhered too, often 'religiously', quite literally. Being community based, they are also amongst the 'first responders'. In addition, their spiritual messages also hold the strong power of healing in post-disaster trauma situations. Faith can thus be instrumental at all stages of humanitarian work- pre and post, as well as during the emergency.

It has also been debated that how religion also plays a limiting factor when it comes to development. Superstitions, communal strife and favouritism often lead to lopsided development practices. Case in point being recent developments in India for instance, where religion played an important role in politics and thus it has its effects on governance too. This kind of energy can be channelised to bring about positive changes in the behaviours and practices of people that will lend to better development.

2 The power of faith

2.1 The Actors

When we talk about faith, there are three main actors we are talking about:-

- a) **Faith Leaders:** Religious leaders of various religions, ideally with a large following and influence. Often in countries like India, faith leaders have a massive persona, with almost godlike following. Their word is the word of God and usually their sphere of influence also reaches out to other actors- like Government, celebrities etc. Nowadays, many of them also appear on television and have active social media presence, thereby, widening their reach.
- b) **Faith Based Organisations:** Organisations that work based on humanitarian values imbibed in religion. Good examples would be humanitarian agencies like Christian Aid, Caritas, Islamic Relief Worldwide etc. More often these organisations operate solely on humanitarian values, but are largely based on values as laid down in religion.

- c) **Local Faith Communities:** Often, local communities come together and form their own prayer communities. e.g. Church prayer groups, Mosque congregations etc. These groups can also form sub-groups or functional groups like first responders, or volunteers for relief and recovery etc. Usually, the solidarity based on religious affiliation helps them function well together.

2.2 Advantages

Faith based organisations, faith inspired organisations and local faith communities have the following advantages:

- Unquestionable Faith in the intentions and powers of their religion and leaders;
- Belief to provide relief, peace and tranquillity; this is particularly useful for post-disaster trauma
- Ability to mobilise people and resources;
- Access to amenities such as buildings, halls, shelter, funds etc.;
- Ability to provide leadership by leaning on to resources from others in the same faith in a wide network.

2.3 The power of faith

Faith leaders have a special connect with the people, especially with their followers. Their word is considered the 'word of God', and hence their messaging can often be very powerful, and long-lasting in the minds of the communities, compared to, say, celebrities and/or politicians. They also have a way with words, and with the right training and orientation, can be very powerful messengers.

Faith leaders can:

- Inspire and mobilise other faith leaders and stakeholders to act on humanitarian agendas.
- Advocate with governments to bring in/adopt policies that have the humanitarian agenda at their forefront.
- Act as community representatives and champion for their causes
- Orient communities through Social and Behavioural Change Communication (SBCC)⁴

There are cases where faith leaders enjoy a massive following amongst communities, as well as governance. They are key stakeholders who can influence behaviours on a mass scale and also decisions at policy levels.

A word of caution, though; in the highly politicized times we live in, faith leaders may also have certain political leanings, a phenomenon that cannot be avoided, but can be best used to gain advantage. Often, faith leaders have asked their congregations to vote for certain political parties and these things often become controversial. But this means that they can also influence governance. Meaning they can ask people to participate in government schemes and give a favourable view on policies that affect people.

3 Case Study – Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA)

An interesting example would be a unique partnership between UNICEF and the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) in India. GIWA is an association of some of the major religions of India with the objective to bring safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to all people. Started in 2014, GIWA has managed to reach out to over 400 faith leaders and millions of people through their faith based messaging carrying the theme of safe WASH practices. GIWA has also engaged in humanitarian relief and DRR work.

The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) is a pioneer initiative engaging the world's many faiths as allies in efforts to create a world where every human being has access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation and proper hygiene.

The concept of GIWA was initiated in March 2013 at Wings for Water, in The Hague, Netherlands. GIWA's co-founders, Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp and Swami Chidanand Saraswati, subsequently formed an alliance of different religious and faith based organisations from around the world. The alliance came to be known as the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, also known as GIWA. 

GIWA was formally launched on 25 September 2013 at the UNICEF World Headquarters in New York, during the UN General Assembly Meetings, under sponsorship of USAID and the Government of the Netherlands. [SEP]

Objectives

The main objectives of GIWA were set forth to work on three different levels:

- Creating synergy between FBOs, development agencies and community-based organisations (CBOs) working on WASH; [SEP]
- Engaging with different religions in advocacy work at different levels to ensure that governments guarantee the human rights to water and sanitation; [SEP]
- Engaging religions in concrete projects and activities aimed at enhancing public health, such as by teaching Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) while also providing improved WASH training and services. [SEP]

Key features of GIWA

- GIWA consists of over 25 leading national Faith Leaders from seven religions of India – Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism and Baha'ism.
- Massive reach across [SEP] various states of India, with over millions of followers combined (including Social Media)
- GIWA has capacity for training and implementation- it houses a World Toilet College with training facilities, excellent IEC facilities and media capability.
- Modern media capability including social media for visibility and outreach. The GIWA Secretariat has personnel to create messaging that can be relayed nationally.

Impact of GIWA

In the three years since its launch in 2014, GIWA India has been very instrumental in the following:

- **Creating a mass social movement for a *Swachh Bharat (Clean India), the *Swachhta Kranti (Cleanliness Revolution)**** This is an action based programme of the GIWA Secretariat and involves a multi-pronged campaign aimed at making India clean and healthy. It is in line with the Union Government's *Swachh Bharat* Mission (Clean India Mission) that was started in 2014. The program is designed to end Open Defecation across India and to has clean drinking water and hygiene as top priorities. GIWA is supporting the mission with its faith-based messaging.
- **Policy Advocacy:** GIWA members have met over 50 legislators and policymakers to advocate for WASH, including the Hon'ble Prime Minister, the President of India, State Chief Ministers, Union Ministers, Governors, and various other politicians and bureaucrats. e.g. The State Government of Bihar has requested GIWA to train its frontline workers and functionaries in Behaviour Change Communication.
- **Leader-to-Leader Advocacy:** Has reached out to over 400 renowned faith leaders across India, including some top names like HH The Dalai Lama, and many other spiritual leaders across India. As many as 60 faith leaders are part of the GIWA core members group, and regularly attend GIWA programmes.
- **Documentation:** GIWA has brought out numerous white papers and publications like WASH-in-Faith handbooks for Buddhism and Sikhism (Hinduism and Islam being drafted) that will help faith leaders draw faith based learning for developmental issues, mainly WASH.
- **Field Projects** such as WASH-on-WHEELS, Women-in- WASH, WASH-in-Schools, World Toilet College, Emergency relief operations etc.

UNICEF India supports GIWA in various platforms for engagement and advocacy with leaders and people of diverse faith traditions towards commitment and participation for achievement of WASH goals. UNICEF provides technical assistance on WASH issues and supports building a knowledge base for faith leaders and communities to use and disseminate.

GIWA works towards developing, motivating and equipping a strong network of India's faith leaders, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to inspire enhanced access to improved WASH for all. ^[1]_[SEP]

Approach

In my experience of working with faith leaders, we have realised that often they just need a little orientation with technical inputs. A very useful methodology was to use SBCC training and orientation for them. Conducted very recently with a small group of faith leaders, the result was a series of action plans that the faith leaders themselves prepared and vowed to act on. This was a major breakthrough in three years of advocacy with them. The action plans outline their ideas for engaging with followers, dissemination of the message of WASH within their communities and how to become influencers in their respective spheres.

Some pointers that can help humanitarian professionals leverage the role of faith in their line of work

- **Mapping:** A good starting point would be to map out Faith Leaders and Faith-based Organisations down to the smallest geographical area. An atlas of leaders and organisations with their contacts, reach and areas of influence can be created with some background research. This classification is also necessary to understand the social dynamics in particular regions or areas. From time to time, also need to ensure that various actors are interacting and networking for better coordination. A suggested way of working together would be to constitute an interfaith platform or association of faith leaders/organisations of different religions working together in humanitarian causes.
- **Engagement:** Faith Leaders and FBOs need to be part of planning for humanitarian action. It has been realised that in fact humanitarian work is the secondary nature of many faith leaders and that they themselves or through their organisations do a lot of charitable work. This can be channelised towards more 'professional' service delivery, as sometimes even the best intentions do not yield the best actions.
- **Non-partisan approach:** Care must be taken that the approach remains non-partisan and non-sectarian, with no vested interests for a particular community. Efforts must be humanitarian. Faith based groups may tend to have an affinity towards their own communities and vice versa. Thus, we have found that interfaith groups actually work better in these contexts. In India too, in many areas, interfaith groups of faith leaders have actively worked in promoting communal harmony and other such initiatives.
- **Capacity Building:** Training and sensitization of faith leaders and faith-based organisations for humanitarian work, with a faith-based angle. One example given above was in SBCC. Although faith leaders don't need much instruction in communications, they could use a little help in the form of technical inputs in humanitarian work. This could simply mean even basic knowledge of emergencies and disasters, know-how of relief and rescue, understanding the humanitarian system and so on.

The resources of faith based organisations, faith inspired organisations, and local faith communities can be mobilised during normal times for capacity building for building multi-hazard resilience, creating greater public awareness on multi-hazard risk, vulnerability and exposure, and for conducting mock exercises for strengthening emergency response in disaster-prone areas. In the event of disasters, these organisations and groups can guide joint assessment and programming.

Precautions

While working with faith leaders and faith-based organisations, some things have also to be kept in mind to best avoid any negative outcomes:

- i) **Inclusive approach:** Naturally, faith leaders and organisations will tend to first serve their own, meaning people of their kind, their faith and following. This is not in line with the humanitarian agenda, which is all-inclusive. These kind of values need to be imbibed in the actors we are working with. This issue often

does not arise with faith based humanitarian organisations, as they have systems and checks in place, and run a non-partisan inclusive agenda, following international codes of conduct like the Red Cross Code of Conduct etc.

- ii) **Financial probity:** Faith leaders and their organisations are renowned for raising a lot of funds from their followers.

E.g. The Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, managed by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), is considered as the world's richest temple with approximately Rs. 3 crore (US\$ 480,000) daily donations and Rs1,100 crore annual donations in the form of cash, jewellery, gold, silver, property deeds and demat share transfers.⁵

This is both an opportunity and area of precaution. As they say, they are only 'answerable to God', and often do not have financial systems and nor do they appreciate probity. This may always not be true, and many organisations like the one mentioned above are rather large trusts and maintain proper accounts, often smaller organisations have poor or no systems. Working with faith organisations where funds are involved and/or in-kind goods are being dealt with, will need the initiative of the donor to make sure they have systems in place to account for these.

- iii) **Best interests of communities and modalities:** As stated earlier, faith based actors need to act in the best interest of the communities. Sometimes, religious beliefs and/or practices are in conflict with good practice.

In the past, Muslim communities have rejected Polio vaccines in countries like India, Pakistan and Nigeria, due to poor knowledge and negative campaigning by ill-informed and agenda-driven clerics. The myth that they propagated was that these vaccines were meant to sterilise Muslims and wipe out their population. They were seen as a 'Western conspiracy'. Rumours also floated that they were made in the US of pig fat. Anyhow, it was once again the clerics that came to the rescue. UNICEF and other agencies got together clerics to dispel these myths and propagate the right message.⁶

Thus, faith leaders can play both a negative and a positive role when it comes to development practices. And it would be smart to involve them in planning processes for development interventions. Whilst they can be detrimental to development efforts, they are the ones that can also come to its rescue. Faith can thus be a major force to reckon with.

4 Summary and Conclusion

Adopting a 'management-led KM' approach will assist humanitarian organisations to empower response teams who, in turn, can empower local actors and the people affected by the emergency. This will improve outcomes, accountability, and the effective use of resources.

From times immemorial, communities affected by natural disasters used to believe that the calamities were the curse of God for their sins. Some became so fatalistic that they believed that they are destined to go through this cycle of pain and suffering. Even though with the advent of science and technology, these phenomena are not seen as acts of God anymore, it has been observed that faith continues to be a unifying force for people. Loudspeakers in mosques and bells in temples acted as warning systems and to help disseminate messages to people.

During the period of the Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA) 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters and during the several global, regional and national events for creating awareness on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015-230, efforts were made at various levels to take advantage of the unifying powers of faith by exhorting to religious leaders from all religions to impress upon their followers to create greater awareness on mobilizing community participation for the achievement of the objectives of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Climate Change Adaptation (CCA), and Sustainable Development Goals at the local, provincial, national, regional and global levels.

References

- 1 Concept note on 'Workshop on role of faith inspired organisations in Disaster Management, Caritas India.
- 2 A Promise renewed and the critical role of FBOs; Pamela Wyville-Staples Center for Faith-based and community initiatives, USAID.

Endnotes

- 1 Pew Research Centre
- 2 Census of India, 2011
- 3 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>
- 4 **Behavior change communication** (BCC) is an interactive process of any intervention with individuals, communities and/or societies (as integrated with an overall program) to develop **communication** strategies to promote positive behaviors which are appropriate to their settings. The shift in terminology from **Behavior Change Communication** (BCC) to **Social** and **Behavior Change Communication** (SBCC) is a recent milestone in health **communication**.
- 5 <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/richest-hindu-temple-tirupati-balaji-earn-rs-2600-crore-revenue-this-year-683190>
- 6 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/nov/04/polio-vaccination-pakistan>