



# Effective Faith Partnerships during COVID-19: Lessons Learned from Development Practitioners

## *Policy & Practice Note*

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### Abstract

COVID-19 heightened interest in faith partnerships as governments and international agencies sought rapid behavior change to reduce the spread of the pandemic. It illuminated the unique capacity of local faith groups to reach people quickly, effectively, and relevantly. To increase resilience to future crises, the qualities of effective, ethical partnerships must be identified and developed.

To support this effort, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities facilitated a learning process that explored key success factors and barriers to effective partnerships for eight faith actors (national and international organizations and networks) who responded to COVID-19, 2020–2021. Four themes recurred. Firstly, there were mixed views about the quality of partnerships with international agencies, some feeling instrumentalized in times of crisis. Secondly, where colonial exploitation has left mistrust of Western “experts,” effective programming with faith communities to counter misinformation requires either skilled, long-term investment in relationships or supporting faith groups already trusted by local communities. Thirdly, many of the most effective responses to COVID-19 emerged when local faith groups took the initiative and responded using their own assets. Finally, although technology facilitated connection, it also excluded, mediating the kinds of partnerships that were possible.

The participating faith actors identified the need to build and sustain trusted relationships with local faith groups, increasing resilience by equipping them with asset-based approaches to take the initiative in their own context. They call on international agencies to value their complementary capacities and develop long-term structures for cross-sectoral engagement, supported by flexible funding.

## Keywords

humanitarian assistance – COVID-19 – practice – policy networks – international agencies – Non-Government Organisations – technology – faith

## 1 Introduction

The intense pressures of COVID-19 strengthened existing partnerships, forged new connections, and revealed hidden flaws. For faith-based organizations and networks responding to the crisis, two key groups of partners were national governments and international agencies (such as the World Health Organization or other United Nations agencies) with vital expertise, resources, and coordinating power and local faith groups and their leaders, often influential and deeply embedded within communities. The need to influence behavior change at scale strengthened governments' and international agencies' commitment to faith partnerships; however, many missed their full potential, using them as short-term channels for communication but not exploring deeper and more equitable partnerships. The same need illuminated the unique capacity of local faith groups to reach people rapidly and effectively in their context, accentuating approaches to faith engagement that were working well and exposing important gaps.

To support better preparedness and increase resilience to future crises, the qualities of effective, ethical partnerships must be identified and developed, both with local faith groups and with international agencies and governments. The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), an international collaboration to develop and communicate evidence on faith actors' roles and contributions to development and humanitarian action, partnered with eight faith-based organizations and networks (hereafter "participating faith actors") to learn together what worked well in partnerships and what challenges were exposed in the response to COVID-19.

## 2 Background

Appreciation has recently grown for the importance of faith partnerships in development and human rights, an issue that long suffered "systematic neglect" (as cited in James 2011, 110). UN initiatives to engage faith leaders have

proliferated<sup>1</sup> and various governments have researched how to partner more effectively with faith groups (see le Roux and Bertelink 2017; USAID 2020). COVID-19 accelerated interest as many governments and international agencies including WHO and UNICEF turned to faith actors, seeking rapid, effective partnerships that could support their response to the crisis (see WHO n.d.; Brown 2021).

Significant evidence has been generated about the role played by faith actors, both positive and negative, in responding to COVID-19. In March 2020, the JLI, the Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and World Faiths Development Dialogue launched a project to gather and share religious responses to the pandemic, now with over 1,000 resources (Cooney 2022). Studies highlight the positive role many faith actors played, such as encouraging their members to follow government guidelines (Yoosefi Lebni et al. 2021; Wijesinghe et al. 2021), providing services (Rachmawati et al. 2022), and tackling the indirect impacts of COVID-19, including gender-based violence.

The negative impact of faith leaders has also been well documented, further underlining the need for effective partnerships. Studies highlight the role that faith leaders played in spreading misinformation (Yoosefi Lebni et al. 2021), including telling followers that they must rely on God alone to protect them (Lee et al. 2021), or framing the pandemic as divine punishment (Rivera and Paulo 2020). Mahmood et al. (2021) found evidence of the crisis being manipulated for political ends. However, Łowicki et al. (2022) caution against sweeping generalizations about faith groups and conspiracy theories, finding correlation only among certain “fundamentalist” groups and misinformation, and not with those who hold faith as central generally. Likewise, Sibanda et al. (2022) find that, while some religious leaders have blocked public health messaging, more supported effective responses.

Despite their key role in responding to the pandemic and the diverse partnerships that were formed (Santibañez 2022; El-Majzoub 2021), there is little analysis on the quality of these partnerships or how to make them most effective. In recent years, concerns have been raised that initiatives often instrumentalize faith leaders “to achieve a predefined end without engaging them as equal partners on their own terms” (Le Roux, Bartelink, and Levinga 2017, 4). In a working paper, Marshall and Wilkinson affirm a “concern during the pandemic that public authorities simply instrumentalize or use religious leaders to achieve their goals, without meaningful exchange and participation”

1 For example, the Global Forum on Strengthening Partnerships with Faith-Based Actors; Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development; “Faith for Rights” framework.

(Marshall and Wilkinson 2022, 4). The gap in evidence around what makes an effective faith partnership is vital to fill.

### 3 Learning Process: Objectives and Approach

Notwithstanding this body of evidence, JLI was aware that many lessons were not being documented in the speed of the response, particularly around more intangible questions like partnership qualities. This learning review aimed to help fill that gap through facilitating a collaborative learning process for eight faith actors (faith organizations and networks, national and international). It sought to understand their experiences of partnerships, create space for inter-faith learning exchange, and consolidate findings to share with external partners to strengthen faith engagement in the COVID-19 response and beyond.

The learning process began with a document review (internal and published on websites) and semi-structured interviews with 30 key informants affiliated with the eight participating faith actors, some at global level and some from local partners and national teams: Islamic Relief Worldwide, Soka Gakkai International, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, Anglican Alliance, and Corus International with the Africa Christian Health Associations Platform. Emerging patterns were identified using qualitative data software (Atlas.ti) to code documentation and interview transcripts, and quantitative analysis was carried out using the average frequency across organizations with which each code was mentioned, adjusted to account for differing amounts of documentation.

JLI facilitated participatory feedback sessions with each faith actor in September 2021, creating space for them to reflect on key themes emerging and to identify areas of interest. Representatives from all eight faith actors and some of their partners came together virtually in December 2021 to share learning, explore new ideas, and cocreate recommendations for external audiences. Finally, in March 2022, JLI hosted a webinar to share the findings and recommendations with current or potential external partners at regional and international levels and facilitate dialogue between representatives of participating faith actors and external partners.

### 4 Findings

Four of the strongest themes across the eight participating faith actors connected to partnerships. Some of these themes related to partnerships with

international agencies, governments, and other potential donors, some related to partnerships with local faith groups, some to partnerships within the faith-based organization (FBO) or network, and some to all three. These themes initially emerged with high frequency in data coding and were then developed in the participatory feedback sessions as areas of key interest across the participating organizations. These four themes were:

- Shared goals and mutual respect: challenges and good practices in secular-religious partnerships
- Tackling misinformation: effective approaches to engaging local faith communities
- Balancing power and localization: resilience, the locus of decision-making control, and value of local solutions
- Technology and inclusion: the influence of technology on shifting power dynamics

While shared learning emerged across the four themes, it was enriched by faith actors' differing contexts and experiences and the diverse solutions they found to common issues.

COVID-19 made partnership indispensable. According to a national FBO staff member, “[the] situation is so bad ... we need everyone's help to be able to go into the communities.” Partnerships roughly fell into four categories – other faith actors, international development agencies, governments, and the private sector – with most of the participating faith actors connected to some partners within each, although to different extents. The scale of need and shared purpose brought opportunities for beginning new partnerships and for strengthening existing ones. Many interviewees commented that preexisting, trusted partnerships enabled faster, more effective responses – both with local faith groups and international agencies and governments. One staff member in a global role commented on the challenges engaging national faith actors: “Trust isn't something you can easily build during the crisis.”

#### 4.1 *Shared Goals and Mutual Respect: Challenges and Good Practices in Secular Partnerships*

While some participating faith actors welcomed the increased opportunities for partnerships with non-faith international agencies, others remained skeptical. Several interviewees perceived secular agencies' desire to engage them as rooted in pragmatism, rather than appreciation of their full potential as equal partners who could bring their values, capacities, and unique ways of working to the table. As one national FBO expressed: “Donors [have] not really that much appetite to work on the faith-based COVID response. But they see that we have a strong network, we have many resources ...” Some faith actors saw improvement through the pandemic, one global staff member of an

international FBO stating that “early on ... faith leaders [were used] as channels distributing UNICEF and WHO expertise ... [We are now] beginning to see faith groups as partners and co-developers.” However, another interviewee (now in a global role, but from and with many years’ experience in a majority-world country) identified little improvement: “There’s a lot of instrumentalization of us ... we are doing something for them without really that feeling of cooperation, partnership, and respect.” This greater cynicism often reflected more years of experience with these agencies’ waxing and waning interests in cycles of stability and disaster. Without deliberate change, they felt the increased engagement would be restricted to the crisis context and not lead to sustained partnerships.

New avenues for government partnership were also viewed as pragmatism. One interviewee in a regional role pointed out that “with COVID continuing to become a challenging intervention for governments, they started to include faith.” For many participating faith actors, the lack of a pre-pandemic partnership created significant challenges with coordination, including wasted resources and duplication of efforts. Although some national task forces created space for shared planning, others did not. One national faith network felt that their “biggest challenge is working with the Ministry of Health ... we don’t get what they will be doing.”

Challenges with funding reflected similar themes of donor priorities over mutual decision-making. Although most participating faith actors found new funding opportunities during COVID-19, these were mostly inadequate to the scale of the need. Additionally, important funding for other areas of work decreased as local priorities were subsumed by the international focus on COVID-19. Much institutional funding had tight restrictions and was tied to tangible COVID-specific outcomes. According to one national FBO staff member, “[donors] want very tangible outcomes ... not how we can help the community for a very long time.” For flexibility to respond to the needs they saw, faith actors often relied on funding from within faith groups, supplemented with the private sector – pre-existing donations could be more easily moved around, and individuals and institutions responded generously to the crisis.

#### 4.2 *Tackling Misinformation: Effective Approaches to Engaging Local Faith Communities*

A shared challenge for participating faith actors was partnering with local faith communities to tackle misinformation. Interviewees noted how colonial exploitation has left deep mistrust of Western “experts” in many contexts, meaning that health messaging from the WHO and others are often not taken as authoritative. Participants did not discuss the extent to which their organizations (if based in ex-colonist countries) were included within this mistrust,

but it could be an important area for future study. Instead, discussions focused on local faith groups' unique position to counter misinformation with their influence and authority. A national staff member commented: "[The] Islamic community ... will hear religious leaders if they talk about COVID-19 ... [and] follow the ideas." Approaches varied, but faith actors agreed that effective programming with faith communities to counter misinformation requires either ongoing investment from skilled staff to build close relationships before a crisis or supporting actors already trusted by local groups (often of another faith), rather than engaging them directly. As one interviewee from a national faith network pointed out, "these communities ... don't accept a lot of outsiders ..." Otherwise, where relationships with faith leaders did not exist, countering misinformation was challenging. Although they shared the same faith, another interviewee from an international FBO noted there was "no compulsion amongst faith leaders to automatically pick up our messages" as "we do not have any theological or religious authority." As an organization, not a faith leader or institution, trust had to grow through relationships, not religious authority.

To overcome residual mistrust from faith leaders and the challenges of distinguishing misinformation, one faith actor created guidance material that equipped faith communities to find accurate sources for themselves by establishing objective standards for trustworthy information. Two other faith actors recognized the role that faith could play in improving individual decision-making. One noted that spiritual reflection can redirect anxiety into positive activity and focused on encouraging people to act. The other recognized how misinformation flourishes in fear. An interviewee described how "people are scared so they tend to listen to whatever ... [faith brings] that sense of peace ... They can hear this information and not get overly worried, actually be able to analyze and to understand which information is correct ... " They found that spiritual support calmed people so that they were able to use health information to make sensible decisions and increase their resilience to misinformation.

#### 4.3 *Balancing Power and Localization*

To respond quickly and relevantly in a crisis, every organization experienced the importance of the balance of power in partnerships. COVID-19 enforced localization and shifted decision-making control for each faith actor, although to different extents and in different ways – the localization of international FBOs looked very different from decentralized chapter-based organizations. For some, localization was limited to greater input from national staff and partners due to restrictions preventing head office staff from traveling or the need for contextualized solutions. One international faith actor chose to disband

their initial nine-person expert team in favor of regional hubs to share learning: “No longer experts, everybody’s in this mess together.” Others set up global task forces to influence strategies, instead of concentrating decision-making in a headquarters. Another international FBO saw significant shifts within their own organizational decision-making. According to a global staff member, “[We] rapidly had to develop the capacity of our colleagues in-country. Some of them already had that, they were now just being afforded the opportunity.” However, other faith actors saw little or no change or were unsure about the practicalities of further shifting decision-making control. Existing systems were often linked, with the same interviewee noting how the control of funding remained “very much centralized,” meaning “where we would get a grant, we would be the ones held accountable.” While positive about localization in theory, some felt it impossible within their current structures. Moreover, although COVID-19 often accelerated the localization of decision-making, other factors were also key, such as pre-existing strategies and relationships that COVID launched into the foreground.

The experiences of the faith actors most committed to localization suggest that national-level localization is not enough and that decision-making control needs to shift to local faith groups. They reported that many local faith communities felt a disconnect between global north “expertise” and their realities, one interviewee describing how “lockdowns and social distancing [were] out of touch with the way of life within those impoverished communities.” This underlined the importance of holistic, contextualized approaches that support communities to reflect on their own context and find their own solutions, instead of them being imposed from outside. One regional staff member explained how they “received emails from people [asking] ‘how do we “save” Africa?’” They described their frustration that “people think that they have the solutions for us.” Conversely, where local faith groups felt able to take the initiative, responses were quick and relevant. An interviewee witnessed how “communities ... didn’t have to wait for manna from above. They just went into action.” This was especially true where faith groups were trained and already engaging communities in asset-based approaches that broke mindsets of dependency and enabled them to recognize the resources that they had.

#### 4.4 *Technology and Inclusion: the Influence of Technology on Shifting Power Dynamics*

Technology played an important role in increasing connection and facilitating wider partnerships, but it also mediated the kinds of partnerships that were possible, excluding some. It facilitated the shift to shared or decentralized decision-making. Several faith actors found that it equalized their internal relationships, allowing more frequent meetings which people from around the



world could join. One global staff member in an FBO felt it was “very equalizing for us as an organization – we all meet and none of us are in a hub.” There was also the potential for widened external interactions, although there were concerns about maintaining work-life balance in the expectations to be involved in as many forums as possible.

Where faith actors set up structured channels to connect and spiritually support members when in-person meetings could not happen, technology also supported mental health. This was not limited to group meetings but included one-to-one interactions – for example, encouragement to contact at least one person by message and calling every day. Hotlines enabled a greater level of support where required and helped to reach more isolated areas. An international FBO staff member explained how emotional support even occurred through global meetings if they were “relational as well as functional” and allowed people around the world to “discuss stories ... [and] draw strength from each other.”

However, while technology increased the accessibility of information and connection for many, faith actors were concerned about further marginalization through digital inequality. While anyone could theoretically come to the table, internet access and engrained power imbalances shut many out of global conversations. In the words of one interviewee with a global role in an international FBO: “[We] can’t take things for granted: connectivity, internet ... the smallest voice can come to these tables, [but] who actually comes?” Disabilities create a further barrier if specific efforts of inclusion are not made. According to one interviewee, “members ... who can’t hear are now struggling with having online meetings – they need ... sign language interpreters.” Many also noted a generational divide, with older members finding it hard to connect.

To increase digital accessibility, participating faith actors came up with a variety of ideas, including sending money for airtime, setting up WhatsApp groups to share ideas and audio recordings (less bandwidth than Zoom), or creating hubs where people could join meetings from the same laptop. One faith actor taught elderly people to use the internet, through in-person classes where possible or newspapers and phone calls where not. Nonetheless, greater innovation and proactive effort is needed to reach the most vulnerable and to prevent technology continuing to divide.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 created space for reflection, forced prioritization, and raised existential questions. It has opened windows for change in approaches to faith partnership, if those involved have the courage to act. As one interviewee from

an international FBO expressed: “We want profoundly to be shaped by this experience ... we do not want to go back to normal ... It would be a tragedy if everyone just got on with that.”

Very similar qualities emerged in defining effective partnerships, whether participating faith actors were considering their relationship with international agencies where they felt they did not have power, or their relationships with local faith groups, where the imbalance was skewed the other way. Firstly, a partnership cannot be short-term, issue-based, and limited to times of crisis. To build trust, it must be long-term, founded on mutual respect, and working on shared priorities. Secondly, decision-making needs to move to those who have most knowledge of their context and are trusted by communities: from global to national offices, and then to local faith groups. Finally, capacity needs to be developed and resilience built during times of stability so that local faith actors can respond in their own contexts with their own resources. Many of the most effective faith actor responses to COVID-19 emerged when local faith actors felt able to take the initiative using asset-based approaches.

In terms of internal changes to their structures and processes, faith actors identified the need to develop the capacity of their national staff to work with local faith actors on complex social and theological issues, establish trusted relationships and work together on long-term shared goals, and local faith communities to respond to issues using the assets that they have. They want to listen more deeply to marginalized voices through supporting local advocacy fora, valuing the skills of the young, establishing hubs in areas without internet, and specifically accounting for those with disabilities.

For international agencies and national governments who want to build effective faith partnerships, faith actors emphasized the need to set up long-term structures for cross-sectoral faith engagement, not just ad hoc partnerships at times of crisis. Moreover, to build in resilience, funding mechanisms need to give flexibility for local faith actors to invest in relationships, develop local capacity, and fully mobilize local resources. Finally, secular agencies and faith actors need to uncover complementary capacities through open dialogue and work together to build equitable relationships.

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