POLICY BRIEF: FAITH ACTORS AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

- Faith actors are actively involved in responding to forced displacement, well-positioned to mobilize resources, and provide material and immaterial support to foster appropriate, tailored response.
- Faith actors' experience and role should be acknowledged and considered in the design and implementation of every stage of the humanitarian response to forced displacement.
- Faith can play an instrumental role in forced migrants' experiences. Stakeholders should work to more fully understand this aspect of displacement experiences and facilitate spiritual support across all stages and places of displacement.

INTRODUCTION

To maximize the significant opportunities presented by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the international community must recognize the experience and capabilities of faith actors (FAs) and break down existing barriers to partnerships to enable a more comprehensive, effective, and durable response. While the GCR does acknowledge that: "Faith-based actors could support the planning and delivery of arrangements to assist refugees and host communities, including in the areas of conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, as well as other relevant areas," the critical and comprehensive role that FAs play – as well as their potential for engagement for efficient service delivery – warrants a fuller and more nuanced examination.

This policy brief provides a set of recommendations based on evidence concerning the multiple roles that faith and faith actors[1] play across different stages and spaces of forced displacement. The brief is aligned with the GCR's sections on Arrangements for Burden- and Responsibility-sharing and its three Areas in Need of Support (Reception and Admission, Meeting Needs and Supporting Communities, and Solutions).

BURDEN- AND RESPONSIBILITY-SHARING

The international community is committed to the development of a **more equitable, effective, and predictable distribution** of efforts to receive and support forced migrants and host communities. FAs are crucial partners as they represent several aspects of the GCR's multi-stakeholder approach, including local, civil society, and faith-based representation, and recognizing the place of religious belief and practice for refugees and host communities.

Adbu Rahim (25) holds his sick 2-year-old son in Tombro makeshift camp, next to no-man's land by the Myanmar border. Abdul and his wife walked for 14 days fleeing from the brutal violence that the Myanmar Army has hit upon his and other Rohingya villages in their home country of Myanmar. Photo: Ruben Salgado Escudero/Islamic Relief 2017

Enhancing response. FAs around the world provide critical support to displaced people, ranging from meeting basic needs, such as food and shelter, to providing education, and tracking migration routes through transnational networks.

Coordination. FAs frequently coordinate both among themselves and with non-faith-based organizations to provide support to refugees and IDPs, often enhancing the efficiency of response.

Understanding concerns with FAs. Issues related to proselytization are at play with some faith-based actors, inhibiting compliance with the humanitarian standard of impartiality and posing challenges to cooperation with secular actors.[5] However, other FAs are working to mitigate threats to impartiality, e.g., through relationship-building processes and training. Evidence also shows that discussion of religious beliefs and practices between refugees and hosts can be better understood as deeply connected to the different actors' agendas, including refugees' own choices and agency.

Barriers to funding. Despite FAs' extensive experience in supporting displaced people, they often face barriers to international funding, as with poorly designed regulations related to anti-terrorist legislation that prevent Islamic FAs from accessing international donor funds. Such exclusions can impede FAs and subsequently hinder important components of response.

PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Enhancing response
• Islamic NGOs are providing comprehensive humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan through a variety of local faith-based or faith-influenced actors and relying on funding by Gulf donors.
• The Baptist Church utilizes its network to assist Chin-Burmese refugees along their migration route.[2]

Coordination
• The Bangkok Asylum Seekers and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) was established to coordinate faith and secular actors in engaging in humanitarian assistance to refugees in the city.[3]
• FAs including Caritas Nepal, Catholic Relief Service, JRS USA, and the Jesuit Conference for South Asia were among the major providers of services to Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.[4]

Understanding concerns with FAs
• Evangelical churches in Lebanon have received training to understand the need for impartial food assistance to Syrian refugees.[6]
• Islamic Relief, along with many FAs, has a long-standing commitment to proving its impartiality.[7]

Barriers to funding
• Muslim charities operating in the Middle East have particularly experienced difficulties in receiving funding due to "de-risking," or withholding resources from actors in regions associated with a high risk of funding terrorism.[8]

RECOMMENDATIONS ON BURDEN- AND RESPONSIBILITY-SHARING:

• Humanitarian actors and other institutions involved in forced migration responses must ensure that FAs' experience, as part of a multi-stakeholder approach, is taken into account in burden- and responsibility-sharing arrangements. FAs responding to displacement emergencies must be recognized for their ability and potential to make humanitarian assistance more effective, predictable, and sustainable.
• National and international actors including UN agencies and NGOs should expand their engagement with FAs, particularly local FAs, as partners in collaboration and coordination of assistance to refugees and IDPs, e.g., through engagement and consultations with local FAs in relevant decision-making fora.
• Humanitarian stakeholders – particularly donor agencies – should make a concerted effort to mitigate the risks of FAs' real and perceived lack of compliance with international humanitarian standards and support local FAs to build capacity so that compliance issues can be resolved.
• Financial barriers preventing FAs from receiving donations and funding should be removed in order to avoid discrimination between and among secular actors and FAs, and to facilitate more equally distributed burden-sharing arrangements.

I. RECEPTION AND ADMISSION

FAs play a critical role in ensuring immediate and appropriate reception arrangements and can be instrumental in referral and access to Refugee Status Determination (RSD).

Resource mobilization and tailored response. FAs have a long history of providing immediate assistance and reception arrangements at different stages of displacement, including through the use of religious buildings as sanctuaries. FAs also often address the needs of specific populations, such as women, children, and LGBTIQA+ persons, to ensure that the needs of all forced migrants are considered and met.

RSD processes. FAs often facilitate access to registration, refer particular cases, provide legal assistance, and even undertake prima facie RSD procedures. On the government side, a restricted understanding of the role of religion and/or faith-related prejudice can affect immigration officials' decision-making processes.

Spiritual support during RSD. FAs offer spiritual support to asylum seekers in registration and procedure centers. Additionally, faith motivates many volunteers taking part in visitations and other activities within immigrant detention and deportation centers,[13] and often plays an important role in migrants' experiences of detention.[14]

Dignity and awareness. FAs, including faith-motivated refugees, often engage in practices aimed at restoring the dignity of deceased or missing forced migrants, facilitating mourning, and raising awareness of the dangers of current national and international migration policies.[16]

PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Resource mobilization and tailored response.
• Muslim faith communities – differing from other state institutions and national faith organisations – welcomed refugees in transit in Kumanovo, Macedonia, in 2015.[9]
• The La72 shelter in southern Mexico, run by Franciscans, provides tailored responses for LGBTIQA+ people seeking protection.[10]

•RSD processes.
 FAs have facilitated RSD procedures for Canadian private sponsorship programmes.[11]
• RSD officials in the UK demonstrated preconceptions related to asylum seekers' religious affiliations.[12]

Spiritual support during RSD.
• A team of multicultural and multi-religious volunteers provide spiritual support for refugees at the Registration and Procedure Centre in Basel, Switzerland.[15]

Dignity and awareness.
• A formal burial ground for refugees is a key feature of the Baddawi refugee camp in Lebanon.[17]
• Identification attempts and mourning rituals are carried out by faith leaders as well as local faith communities in in Italy[18] and Spain.[19]

Response for Syrian refugees in Serbia. Photo credit: ADRA

RECOMMENDATIONS ON RECEPTION AND ADMISSION:

• FAs' practices of immediate and tailored response to displacement should be regarded as inspiration for affordable, effective, efficient, and innovative reception and admission activities.
• Collaboration between FAs and other stakeholders should be pursued to ensure referral for people with specific needs and facilitate access to registration and assistance, as well as to overcome faith-related prejudice and illiteracy in RSD procedures.
• Spiritual support should be implemented for refugees in stages of transit, detention, RSD, and for those at risk of deportation. Relevant and appropriate faith-motivated initiatives to support people in immigration centers should be supported
• Government authorities in charge of admission and arrival procedures must ensure that they adequately respond to forced migrants' deaths, and give them the dignity and visibility they deserve. FAs' and other stakeholders' efforts to restore dignity through identification, burial and mourning practices should be recognized and supported.

II. MEETING NEEDS AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

Host countries and communities need to provide services to the newly arrived, identify and respond to special needs, and foster good relationships between different groups. FAs are well-positioned and well-equipped to contribute to these efforts.

Positioned for support. With their community networks and a highly relational approach, FAs are effective providers of material and immaterial services. Furthermore, faith is central to the development of coping strategies and a sense of belonging in displacement and FAs are well-positioned to provide essential psychosocial and spiritual support, often crucial to refugees' and IDPs' wellbeing.[20] In fact, FAs are often the only actors in a position to engage with communities on sensitive issues.[21]

Spiritual support for vulnerable groups. FA initiatives often target specific groups such as children and adolescents or elderly refugees and IDPs and have proven beneficial. For example, numerous studies have shown the importance of faith and faith-related practices for children and adolescents' spiritual development[24] and resilience[25] in contexts of forced displacement.

PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Positioned for support.
• In Lebanon, MERATH, a national faith-based organization, operates as a mediator between international humanitarian actors and local faith communities – supporting the latter with training and administrative and logistical support – and fosters local networks.[22]
• FAs in Kenya were found to be the only actors able to provide trauma counselling to internally displaced Kikuyu victims of sexual assault.[23]

Spiritual support for vulnerable groups.
• Programmes like World Vision's Child Protection in Emergencies (CPiE) in Ugandan refugee camps include access to child-friendly spaces, spiritual support, peace education and conflict resolution activities.[26]
• Female and male refugees have been described as finding a source of strength in religion, for instance after resettlement to the United States.[27]

Addressing gender. The nexus between gender, forced migration, and faith is complex,[28] and analysis shows that FAs are no more or less likely to provide tailored services to LGBTIQA+ people than secular organizations. On the other hand, there is evidence that faith-illiterate interventions to promote gender equality may prove counterproductive if the dynamics of religious beliefs and practices are not taken into account.[29]

Livelihoods. Local FAs often mobilize their resources and networks in order to increase the likelihood of employment and resocialization in the country of settlement. However, issues related to conversion and its impact on the interpretation of past traumatic events are yet to be addressed.

Peaceful coexistence. FAs can foster good relations and peaceful coexistence in host societies through multi-religious initiatives. Activities in support of refugees also create possibilities for inter-faith awareness and enhanced visibility for religious minorities. Peacebuilding and reconciliation processes can also benefit from FAs' engagements, especially those that involve children and youth.

Influencing xenophobia. FAs often help combat xenophobia in the country of settlement through education projects and can protect refugees from xenophobic attacks. On the other hand, faith leaders and/or members of local faith communities can contribute to an anti-refugee environment by fueling sentiments of suspicion and even discrimination within and between religious communities.[35]

PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Addressing gender
• A digital storytelling project in Canada is designed to facilitate LGBTIQA+ refugees' inclusion in a queer Christian community.[30]

Livelihoods
• The Vaiz of Bursa helped create a network for refugees by facilitating their access to education, health services and the job market.[31]
• In Colombia, Pentecostal congregations have played an important role in the resocialisation of many displaced persons.[32]

Peaceful coexistence
• In addition to hosting various interfaith activities, the Sant'Egidio Community in Sicily also incentivizes exchanges between refugee youth and elderly and encourages participation in cultural activities to promote interaction with host communities and foster a peaceful coexistence.[33]
• Multi-religious programs in Germany, Sweden, the UK and Poland are connecting diverse communities and dismantling negative perceptions between hosts and migrants.[34]

Influencing xenophobia
• In Greece, Arigatou International's "Learning to Play Together" program promotes intercultural and interreligious learning through physical education classes.[36]
• Churches responded to the 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa by providing shelter and mobilizing resources including money, volunteers, and supplies. [37]

Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon has been hosting refugees from Syria since the outbreak of the conflict. Masjid al-Quds – in the background – is at the geographical and metaphorical core of the camp. Masjid al-Quds overlooks the cemetery, the camp's ultimate shared space in life and death for new and established refugees alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON MEETING NEEDS AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES:

• Humanitarian stakeholders, including donors, should endorse and support FAs' efforts to provide services, e.g., food distributions, education, and psychosocial and spiritual assistance, in particular where the FAs are contextually well-positioned to execute them.
• Spiritual support for displaced people with specific needs (e.g., children, youth and older people), must be put in place alongside secular psychosocial support.
• Stakeholders should consider faith and engage FAs when planning and implementing initiatives to promote gender justice and LGBTIQA+ rights.
• FAs' support for forced migrants' livelihoods and durable solutions should be acknowledged and enhanced through collaboration with other stakeholders.
• Multi-religious and interfaith initiatives (including peace-building and reconciliation) should be supported in order to foster peaceful coexistence in host societies as well as countries of origin/return.
• Government authorities and policy-makers must support and consult – as part of their engagement with civil society – FAs actively working and campaigning against the rise of xenophobia

III. SOLUTIONS

In the last few decades, complementary pathways to relocation such as private sponsorship programs have been developed alongside UNHCR's three primary long-term solutions to displacement: voluntary return to the country of origin, resettlement in a third country, and local integration. FAs are integral to these complementary pathways.

Faith in return and reintegration. Refugees' spiritual and religious beliefs are often intertwined with their relationships to their country of origin and can affect their perceptions of displacement and the possibility of voluntary return. In turn, faith-related experiences while in displacement, such as conversion, can have a strong impact on processes of reintegration.

Resettlement. FAs participate in resettlement programs by providing services and developing innovative strategies for resocialization in the host country. FAs are often confronted with issues of cultural and religious familiarity in resettlement programs, and with tensions and opportunities resulting from close collaboration with secular stakeholders including local and national authorities.

Complementary pathways of admission. FAs are major promoters of complementary pathways of admission to third countries. While these programs can present challenges in negotiating with national authorities,[40] they also clearly represent valuable models for expanding refugee protection through a multi-stakeholder approach which safeguards refugees' rights to life and safety.

Local integration. FAs can facilitate local integration, both by fostering the development of forced migrants' livelihoods through their community networks and by using the influence and moral authority they often enjoy in the host society to promote mutual understanding and social connections. FAs' long-term efforts towards local integration - such as providing support to find employment, youth activities, and advocating for the inclusion of refugees in civil registries for births and marriages, are often linked to religious values and traditions.[43] Additionally, faith itself can play an instrumental role in forced migrants' integration into host communities.

PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Faith in return and reintegration.
• Many of Sudan's "lost boys" who converted to Christianity during their displacement found new community structures as well as a new context through which to understand their experiences.[38]

Resettlement.
• The US Conference of Catholic Bishops/ Migration and Refugees Services' program "Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees" has galvanized 14,000 volunteers to provide support including legal work, medical services, food, companionship, and employment to more than 30,000 refugees.[39]

Complementary pathways of admission.
•Historically, the majority of agencies involved in Canada's long-standing private sponsorship program are faith-based.[41]
•Recent Humanitarian Corridors initiatives providing safe and legal routes to Europe are entirely funded and implemented by FAs, i.e., Christian organizations (the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Italian Federation of Evangelical Churches).[42]

Local integration.
• Volunteers from the Interfaith Council for New Americans Westchester work together to support and integrate refugee families resettling in New York.[44]
• In Ghana and Liberia, shared religious beliefs and group prayer have fostered relationships between refugees and host communities.[45]

RECOMMENDATIONS ON SOLUTIONS

• Faith-related experiences including the dynamics of conversion and cultural traditions connected to spirituality should be considered by non-faith actors when addressing processes of return and reintegration.
• FAs' significant contribution to and long-standing experience with resettlement programmes should be valued, and their initiatives supported by local and national stakeholders, in particular policy-makers.
• States adhering to the GCR must engage FAs to set up, implement, and expand complementary pathways for admission to third countries.
• The unique role FAs can play in catalysing local integration processes should be regarded as key in integration-related policies and networks.

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