

PaRD MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: STRENGTHENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDING COVID-19 RESPONSES

A conversation between funding partners, implementing partners and analysts

The objective of this virtual roundtable, which was held on September 3, 2020, was to facilitate an honest exchange between stakeholders i.e. governmental entities, intergovernmental organisations, academia and faith-based organisations/ faith inspired organisations (FBOs/FIOs) on funding needs/gaps and invisibility of FBOs/FIOs, especially of local faith actors (LFA) and grassroots organisations as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, PaRD Co-chair/KAICIID moderated the roundtable, aiming to answer how we could be more responsive and supportive to LFAs working on the ground.



Dr. Kenneth Staley, Executive Director of the USAID COVID-19 Task Force opened the discussion by reiterating the US government's commitment to support global health. He stressed that the US recognizes the important role of faith actors in making a difference in communities around the world.

Dr. Staley is the coordinator of the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative for USAID. The program has operations in 27 countries and has been able to cut the death rate from malaria by 50% since 2005. This was achieved by working with host governments, INGO like The Global Fund, and especially people on the ground. "The only way change happens, is at the individual level" highlights Dr. Staley. For example, change happened when people decided to sleep under mosquito nets and seek treatment. USAID relies on religious leaders and local organisations to reach out to people and encourage them in seeking help. Using this strategy, change occurs over time.

USA is at the forefront of sponsoring efforts to improve health around the globe. It has contributed 140 billion USD to global health since 2000. Since COVID-19 has become an all engulfing crisis, the US government has committed more than 1.6 billion USD assistance in fighting the pandemic around the world. The funding is going to traditional health programmes e.g. wash, internally displaced people, humanitarian aid, food aids, funding human rights efforts etc.

Many major development organisations and aid providers have evacuated their working location due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has highlighted the critical role of faith actors and faith-based organisation that have swiftly build up their networks to develop response systems, a swiftness that could also be seen during Ebola and Zika pandemic. They have long standing connections with local leaders, institutions but also communities and families. They are the go-to resource not only for information and basic needs but also for emotional and spiritual support.

In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, USAID has been partnering with FBOs. They are for example closely working with Doctors with Africa CUAMM (Collegio Universitario Aspiranti Medici Missionari) to improve regional and local governance and strengthening community relations and their initiatives in response to COVID-19. Actions include, fostering dialogue, supporting groups, provision of social assistance and protection of marginalised groups. USAID is also partnering with World Vision International (WVI). WVI, who is a PaRD member, is again partnering with local communities to prevent exposure to COVID-19 and address the secondary impact of pandemic on food security, violence against children etc. Many FBOs have shown such commitments to services by also admitting their funds into the response to COVID-19. WVI for example has committed 350 million USD of its own resources to strengthening networks and responses by local faith leaders. Another example of working with FBOs is the Luke Commission in Eswatini, an organisation, delivering comprehensive health care to marginalised communities that is combatting HIV and the spread of COVID-19.

“The US governments commitment to global health remains unparalleled”, Dr. Staley closes his remarks.

Summary:

- Achieving global health by work with organisations like FBOs/FIOs that understand the local context and are able to utilise their own networks for change.
- Change needs to be pursued on an individual level

Q&A

When posed the question on how USAID chooses FBOs, Ms. Kirsten Evans, Director of the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives of USAID replied on his behalf. USAID tries to engage with small and middle—sized FBOs in accessing USAID as a funding partner by working with smaller projects and smaller funds. Another option is making use of mentorship programs of other FBOs, thereby broadening the network of organisations that USAID could engage in on the one hand and diversifying the partner base on the other.

Ms. Mercy Niwe, Lead of the Global Faith Engagement of the World Bank Group (WBG) discusses WBG’s strategies for engagement with LFAs and FBOs and addresses the issue of strengthening funding systems. Countries most affected by the COVID-19 crisis are poor, fragile and conflict-ridden. The economic recovery of the countries will bind more financial resources than any spending since World War II. The crisis will, therefore, over-proportionately affect the poorest countries by increasing debt, infectious diseases, and push 71-100 million people into extreme poverty.



Taking these factors into consideration, it is necessary to “build-back better” and invest in sustainable and inclusive financing systems. The WBG will provide 160 billion USD in financing within the next 15 months that will be tailored towards strengthening health systems, disease surveillance, public health interventions, and helping the private sector continue to operate and

sustain jobs. The funds will also be directed towards issues such as food security, social protection, livelihoods and debt relief. This support will reach over 100 countries that make up 70% of the affected population.

Accessing these funds continues to work through governments. Yet WBG sees the role of FBOs as crucial for the effective implementation of strategies to reduce the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and to increase the impacts of provided funds.

To further the effectiveness, the Global Faith Engagement team has been mapping the response of FBOs and LFAs in regard to COVID-19 to find opportunities for collaboration. Over 140 FBOs submitted information on their respective organisation's response and WBG is in the process of facilitating country level collaboration with FBOs.

Three challenges can be identified that FBOs face when trying to access these funds:

Lack of capacity – There is limited knowledge among FBOs around accessing the Bank's funds and understanding Bank Operations. There is also a limited understanding from multi-lateral organisations and bi-lateral donor agencies on the role of faith and faith actors in development.

Lack of coordination – It is imperative that the coordination between the FBOs and the country-level officers of WBG and other donor agencies are tightly in synchronization in order to elevate the efforts organically to a global scale.

Lack of proof of concept and quantitative data – There is an insufficient amount of data and evidence available on the part of FBOs, making it hard for the Bank to evaluate their effectiveness in line with the SDGs. This, in turn, makes it difficult to identify projects with an effective implementation plan for the Bank to collaborate on.

To engage this challenge, Ms. Niwe concludes and emphasizes the necessity for mutual capacity building in order to engage the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. To achieve this, WBG is building a body of evidence around the role of faith in development in order to not only tackle the issue of *what* role faith plays in development, but also, *how* it does so.

Mercy Niwe closes her remarks with a quote by George Soros.

"It's much easier to put existing resources, to better use, than to develop resources where they do not exist."

Summary:

- The effects of COVID-19 can be lessened by combatting poverty through funds directed at debt-relief and social protection, and policy-based funding channelled through governments.
- It is imperative for FBOs to build their capacities and proof of concept, as well as gain a better understanding of Bank operations, to be able to access Bank funds and be considered for partnerships on development projects.

Q&A

When questioned if local WBG delegations are prepared for the engagement with FBOs and the cooperation towards facilitating funding, also in regard to corruption, Ms. Niwe replied, that the WBG encourages FBOs to join consultations on the country-partnership. These sessions communicate how programmes for the respective country are financed and which aspects

potential applicants need to take into consideration. Additionally, the WBG tries to reach out to FBOs during their country mappings. Nevertheless, Ms. Niwe encourages local FBOs to reach out to country delegations themselves.



Sheikh Nuruddeen Lemu, Director of Research and Training at the Daw'a Institute highlights the emphasis put on challenges by Dr. Staley and Ms. Niwe. Additional challenges unfold during COVID-19 in the form of reduced networking options as face-to-face meetings cannot be replaced by virtual format conference calls: "It is very difficult for strangers to build strong alliances through the digital platforms", Sheikh Lemu claims. Nevertheless, he highlights the positive aspects of digitalizing meetings such as enabling FBOs and LFAs in partaking in high-level discussions and thereby getting in contact with international actors and organisations.

Another problem concerns digital literacy, especially at the grassroots level. Many LFAs and local leaders don't have the digital literacy due to missing digital devices and infrastructure, in order to efficiently work with communities. These circumstances include so called "lone-ranger organisations", which are strong organisations that have the skills and the know-how of preparing proposals and monitoring and evaluating results. Too often, the majority of organisations lacks this knowledge. This leads, on the one hand, to an increase in skills of few organisations, such as the mentioned "lone-ranger organisations" due to their expertise in processing knowledge. On the other hand, those organisations become ineffective in terms of output due to the broad number of topics they need to cover. Sheikh Lemu sees a solution for solving this challenge by enhancing capacity building and incubation of new specialised NGOs.

Last, he explained that, too often, risks in the fields of money laundering and financial scams exist as NGOs might also function as channels for misdirected funds. Mitigating these risks may be achieved by having donor organisations converse with central banks and the governments to filter and engage with trustworthy partners.

Sheikh Lemu closes his remarks by pointing out another option of circumventing the above-mentioned risks, namely by building and transforming digital infrastructure and literacy within small NGOs and finding innovative solutions for direct funding.

Summary:

- Having FBOs get directly in touch with donor organisations has become increasingly difficult due to COVID-19.
- To give local FBOs a fair chance of applying for funds, knowledge of the processes through digital literacy and digital infrastructure need to be created.
- The incubation of specialised NGOs can bring change to this drawback.

Q&A

When asked on the role of Human Rights during COVID-19 Sheikh Lemu, explained that Human Rights issues have been most problematic in the sector where violent extremism can

be observed. LFBOs and LFAs that were very active in countering extremism sometimes partnered with donor organizations, that needed to stay unnoticed in order not to lose credibility of the population. During COVID-19 these LFBOs and LFAs were best suited for handling human rights issues and humanitarian aid issues. Yet difficulties sometimes arose in building trust between LFBOs/ LFAs and donor organisations.

To circumvent any risks in that regard, Sheikh Lemu gave food for thought on NGO competence or integrity rating tools that could be established in order to build trust between organisations, especially in regard to the difficulties that COVID-19 poses on face-to-face meetings.

Dr. Thorsten Göbel, Head of Programmes at ACT Alliance, emphasizes the importance of the topic of Strengthening Opportunities for Funding COVID-19 responses as ACT Alliance is actively engaged in a COVID-19 response. The organisation consists of 135 churches and church-based organisations that are working on humanitarian development and advocacy. 75% are national organisations that are working closely with local actors.



Dr. Göbel highlights two main points:

1. LFAs are making a central contribution under COVID-19 circumstances. They may have access to communities that trust and rely more on local faith leaders than they do on governmental structures or UN-organizations. This is true in terms of health services, food security, nurturing resilience and inclusivity to those at risk of isolation and marginalisation.
2. At the same time, donor interests are often not geared towards LFAs, which is again exacerbated by COVID-19. Thorsten Göbel sees two reasons for this divergence, one being culturally rooted, the second one institutional. The cultural reason can be explained by insufficient understanding in regard to objectives, expectations, language, approaches, systems and structures between the respective donor organisations and FBOs. This is especially true for grassroots FBOs. The institutional reason stems from, first of all, a lack of funding in home institutions, due to COVID-19 and, therefore, a reduction of possible funding for LFAs. Secondly, some donor organisations have no interest in reallocating their funds towards new partners and prefer existing cooperation. Additionally, some donor organisations find it easier to finance big funds of other FBOs and their projects than to search for medium sized local FBOs and support single projects.

Dr. Göbel closes by suggesting that a possible solution to this stagnant situation may be the forming of coalitions of FBOs to increase their capacities, become more visible for donor organizations and additionally be capable of deploying greater sums of money for the implementation of projects.

Summary:

- The lack of financial capacities in donor organisations and the collaboration experience with FBOs and LFAs keeps donor organisations from searching for new partners.
- The lack of knowledge capacities in regard to processes, objectives, language, and structures keeps donor organisations and FBOs and LFAs from engaging one another.
- Building coalitions can bring greater knowledge capacities and fund projects more efficiently.

Q&A

When the question posed on how FBOs and LFAs may access funds easier, Dr. Göbel pointed out to engage with various entities on a global level such as OCHA, UNHCR, UNDP in order to anchor the understanding of LFAs in COVID-19 response. This approach needed to be complemented with an engagement on a country-level in donor countries but as well in countries where the implementing partners were working on a COVID-19 response.



Prof. Katherine Marshall, Director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue Center (WFDD) of the Berkley University points out that the topic of the panel may be summarized in a framework consisting of three interrelated issues.

The first issue Prof. Marshall names is “Faith at the table”. This revolves around the perspective of religion, their voice and wisdom, in policy making circles. For example, during the Ebola and AIDS crisis, FBOs and LFAs were an important knowledge hub for policy makers. In regard to COVID-19 it is, therefore, important to have religious positions at upcoming conferences such as the meeting of

The World Bank, IMF, G20 Interfaith Forum, etc. As these policy tables will also include topics such as debt relief, that has been ongoing field of consideration, it is necessary to have religious networks present during the conferences with coherent and specific demands on issues discussed. “The policies are at least as important as the money, in terms of making a difference in people’s lives”, Prof. Marshall explains.

The second issue relates to global versus local organisations and the tensions between those organisations. Prof. Marshall underlines the necessity, pointed out by Dr. Göbel, for religious organisations to build coalitions. This is necessary for acting in unity towards challenges such as the rise of domestic violence due to COVID-19. A platform for interfaith and intrafaith engagement could not only benefit religious organisations but also donor organisations in building capacities in the fields of faith literacy and policy literacy for both types of organisations to cooperate.

The third issue refers to finances and the effect that COVID-19 has on all levels of development cooperation. Not only has COVID-19 influenced the field of health but as a matter of fact, all

SDGs. To tackle the diffusing effects of COVID-19 the largest financial aid in development cooperation history was mobilized. Thus, it is even more crucial to have FBOs join the discussion on how to effectively allocate these funds. Country based strategic knowledge of the faith landscape is therefore absolutely critical, says Prof. Marshall.

Prof. Marshall closes her remarks with a promising solution that lies in community driven initiatives, organized on a country level, where different communities may apply towards what she names a “good things fund”. If these were open to all communities, financial funds could be allocated much more efficiently.

Summary:

- FBOs need to be present during conferences set for policy making, to increase their visibility and share their perspective and expertise.
- Forming a platform for inter- and intrafaith engagement could bring together FBOs and donor organisations and increase knowledge capacities.
- Country-based strategic knowledge of the faith landscape is a necessity for effective implementation of development cooperation with FBOs

Q&A

When asked on the reduction options of corruption, Prof. Marshall pointed out that religious organisations need to have a secure background when it comes to concerns of corruption. Therefore, it was necessary for FBOs to also join conferences and meetings on anti-corruption to bring in their perspective, yet few to none were represented and present in global conferences.

An additional focus should be put on contextual understanding of the country and the faith landscape as PaRD and WFDD have provided in cooperative publications.

In her speech, **Dr. Olivia Wilkinson**, Director of Research of the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities focuses on examples of LFAs in regard to financing and their work on COVID-19.

A short survey was conducted of 52 LFAs and FBOs in order to understand primary challenges these organisations face. Around 90% of the participants made a point in seeing financing as their primary obstacle. Another strain put on the organisations concerns COVID-19, as initiatives to tackle the pandemic bind resources for routine programmes, that organisations would normally engage in. The surveyed organisations responded to the crisis in terms of community-based education of local leaders and LFAs on health messaging. An impact that COVID-19 also has on FBOs around the world concerns the cutting of expenditure for education related projects and health-care services.



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A research before COVID-19 with local actors and LFAs in South Sudan showed that short-term funding and competition for funding put organisations in overburdened situations as they also need to navigate complex financial structures in excess to the work they already provide.

Dr. Wilkinson closes her remarks by stressing the importance of strengthening opportunities for funding COVID-19 responses and highlighting that an option for more effective cooperation with LFAs and FBOs may be achieved by multi-year funding.

Summary:

- 90% of 52 surveyed LFAs and FBOs saw financing as their primary obstacle.
- COVID-19 additionally burdens FBOs and LFAs by binding resources usually intended for routine programmes.

Q&A

When questioned about how human rights issues should be addressed, Dr. Wilkinson pointed to LFAs. There is a wide diversity of types of LFAs and, therefore, LFAs can be engaged on questions such as human rights issues, corruption and other topics subject to the discussion during the roundtable. An important topic subject to future engagement revolves around vaccine hesitancy and uptake. This will pose a challenge in working with religious communities in sensitization and countering misinformation. Work on such upcoming topics may already be taken into consideration now.

For more information on the response of faith actors to the COVID-19 pandemic, kindly see [here](#).