

**PaRD**

International Partnership on  
Religion and Sustainable Development



# Religious Engagement in Humanitarian Crises

Good Practice Collection

**PaRD**

## International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) brings together **bilateral donors and multilateral development partners who seek to engage religious and related organisations as effectively as possible in efforts to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.**

Religious values and religious leaders influence the thoughts and actions of billions of people around the world. Religious actors are local providers of essential services such as healthcare and education. They advocate proper governance and accountability. Religiously affiliated organisations have a long track record as implementing partners to a wide array of government, multilateral development and humanitarian institutions.

Reflecting the **importance of its links with civil society**, PaRD encourages religious organisations, faith-based and community initiatives, foundations, academic institutions and other networks to join it as **partners**.\*

By building on existing initiatives and networks, PaRD contributes towards a more coherent and effective international agenda on religion and development.

PaRD has a strong **focus on results** and implements concrete activities in the following areas of cooperation:

- Knowledge sharing/learning exchange
- Networking/dialogue
- Capacity building
- Policy advice

PaRD's members and partners hold **regular meetings** to monitor the progress of the annual **working programme**.

PaRD is supported by an **international secretariat** located at GIZ's offices in Bonn and Berlin, Germany. The secretariat provides the analytical expertise required when formulating policies and promoting dialogue on issues of religion and development. It also coordinates action to implement the agreed activities.

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\* A religious or faith-based organisation (RO/FBO) is understood as a registered non-profit organisation or initiative whose mission and activities in the field of development and/or humanitarian assistance are explicitly inspired by religion and a peaceful and impartial approach towards the target groups.

## Religiously inspired responses to humanitarian crises

More than 125 million people worldwide are affected by wars and natural disasters that create an overwhelming need for humanitarian assistance. Around 60 million people have left their homes and are forced to migrate in search of better living conditions – roughly one person in every 122 of the world's population. Faced with this acute demand for relief in the wake of natural and man-made disasters, the global community needs to rethink and restructure its response if it wishes to be more successful than in recent decades.

Religion plays a significant role in the daily lives of people around the world. 80% of the world's population belong to a religion. Governments, multilateral and private-sector institutions and civil society organisations are exploring ways in which collaboration with religious organisations, religious leaders and related groups can increase the effectiveness of humanitarian responses. During consultations in July 2015 in Washington DC and New York, a group of development partners addressed the current deficit in this area. They concluded that religion and religious actors create purpose and provide orientation for a meaningful life. Religion matters in development work as well as in the field of humanitarian assistance. After further meetings, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) was established in February 2016 during the Berlin Conference "Partners for change – Religions and the 2030 Agenda". PaRD brings together bilateral donors and multilateral development partners who seek to engage religious and related organisations as effectively as possible in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) laid out in the 2030 Agenda. Reflecting the importance of its links with civil society, PaRD encourages religious organisations, faith-based and community initiatives, foundations, academic institutions and other networks to join it as partners.

Currently, PaRD consists of five bilateral members (BMZ, DFID, NORAD, SIDA, USAID) and seven multilateral members including the UN family (UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNWOMEN, OGPRtoP) and the World Bank. PaRD is actively seeking to engage with more governmental and non-governmental agencies, especially from the Global South. It aspires to act as a **facilitator between secular actors and religious communities, and to this end it is in**

the process of formalising its networks with civil society and religious/faith-based organisations (RO/FBO) around the globe. Several NGOs and religious organisations will join the partnership in the coming months.

*"May the forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit not fail to be centred on the human person and his or her dignity, and to come up with policies capable of assisting and protecting the victims of conflicts and other emergencies, especially those who are most vulnerable and all those persecuted for ethnic and religious reasons."*

*Pope Francis, Easter Message 2016*

To mark the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, PaRD has compiled a series of accounts that highlight good practice in the way religious communities respond to humanitarian crises. The publication vividly demonstrates that religion matters in humanitarian work. Religion is a crucial source of motivation for many volunteers and professionals all over the world. It is also a source of resilience for people affected by man-made and natural disasters. The examples in this brochure – from Haiti, the Philippines, Guinea, Syria, Nepal and other regions – illustrate that the work of religious actors is characterised by the ability to rapidly mobilise volunteers who are motivated to engage in virtuous work by their spiritual commitment. Religious actors maintain unique local and global networks. Through their enduring presence, they can access people and regions beyond the scope of state actors and engage with local people through their religious communities.

These examples demonstrate that religious communities have an important role as partners in ensuring the success of humanitarian assistance. PaRD encourages all partners and actors involved in humanitarian services and development to strengthen cooperation between each other and to overcome existing boundaries. By harnessing the potential of religious communities and bringing together secular and non-secular actors in a more systematic way, we can improve future responses to humanitarian crises and through this help to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

## Buddhist Global Relief: Emergency aid and sustainable support – Haiti after the earthquake



Feeding the children was one of the urgent needs after the earthquake in Haiti. Photo: 'What If? Foundation'

Buddhism has about 488 million followers worldwide, making it the fourth largest religion in the world.<sup>1</sup> Buddhist Global Relief (BGR) is a non-profit organisation founded in May 2008 and based in New York, USA. It currently has around 20 board members<sup>2</sup> and a fluctuating number of volunteer staff and donors. It is an inter-denominational community of Buddhists and friends of Buddhism who address the plight of people afflicted by poverty, natural disasters and societal neglect. Taking a Buddhist perspective, BGR gives priority to discreet assistance at local level in order to yield the most effective outcomes.

*"I like coming to Lamanjay, because they give me a big plate of food, so I am not hungry. And I get to play. And they teach me songs and other things. I am safe at the food programme. Really safe."*

Rolande, 7-year-old girl

BGR focuses its efforts on grassroots projects that address the causes of hunger and poverty. Despite being a "small" organisation, in 2015 alone BGR distributed USD 336,600 across all its current projects, reaching about 15,000 people. The organisation usually awards grants of between USD 2,000 and USD 10,000 to fund projects. Typically, these might involve arranging emergency

food aid or devising long-term strategies to increase food production, strengthen local capacity and promote long-term sustainability.

BGR is staffed entirely by volunteers and generally works through partnerships with respected and experienced organisations on the ground in the countries and communities where the projects are implemented.<sup>3</sup> It has offered emergency grants to victims of famine in the Horn of Africa, assisted refugees in Syria and South-East Asia, supported people affected by typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and Viet Nam, and was involved in the relief efforts following the earthquake in Nepal in 2015.

The specific way in which BGR provides aid in emergency situations can be exemplified through its activities following the disastrous earthquake in Haiti in 2010. Already working in Haiti before the disaster, BGR partnered with a locally based organisation, the



A few days after the earthquake the cooking team set up a temporary kitchen. Photo: 'What If? Foundation'

'What If? Foundation', which seeks to increase community resilience. It does so by organising disaster risk reduction initiatives and providing free and healthy meals through its "Lamanjay" programme on a daily basis for displaced children in Ti Plas Kazo, one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Port-au-Prince. The food programme was already serving up to 1,500 meals each day when the catastrophic earthquake struck on January 12, 2010 and the need for food aid immediately became even more acute. Within just a few days, the 'What If? Foundation' had scaled up its operation and was preparing and serving over 2,000 meals every day of the week, totalling over 750,000 meals in 2010 alone.<sup>4</sup>

Like most of BGR's partners around the world, 'What If?' is deeply rooted in the local community. Its local network ensured a fast and appropriate response to the devastating effects of the earthquake. Within days, the cooking team had set up a temporary kitchen and created a system for preparing and serving meals until a new kitchen and cafeteria could be built. The programmes are run by members of the local community, which was crucial to their effectiveness in providing so many children with support and nourishment.

*"The earthquake has affected me a lot. [ ]. But the food programme has helped me a lot. Sometimes we don't have anything at home to cook. When we come here, they feed my children. It is a good programme."*

Jestell, mother

BGR also assisted people in some of the worst-damaged areas through a donation of USD 20,000, which was divided evenly between four organisations already working in the field – CARE, Oxfam, Tzuchi Foundation and Direct Relief International – and quickly transformed into food, shelter, medical help and social services. The process of rehabilitation that followed the earthquake continues to this day, and throughout this period BGR has maintained its links to the 'What If? Foundation'. In 2013 the partnership expanded to support the education of its beneficiaries. Since then, alongside its involvement with the Lamanjay food programme, BGR has helped to fund scholarships for children in need.

In April 2016 the World Food Programme announced that Haiti is facing its worst food crisis in 15 years due to a three-year drought.<sup>5</sup> According to WFP, about 3.6 million Haitians – one third of the population – are experiencing food insecurity, and 1.5 million are



'What if? Foundation', the local partner of Buddhist Global Relief, serves meals to needy children. Photo: 'What If? Foundation'

considered severely insecure in terms of nutrition. This figure – roughly double the Haitian government's own assessment of severe food insecurity – is extremely alarming and underlines the urgency of the issue. Haiti's north-western and south-eastern fringes and some areas on the border with the Dominican Republic have been hit by a prolonged drought exacerbated by a strong El Niño weather pattern. That is one of the reasons why BGR decided to continue funding the Lamanjay programme with a further grant of USD 20,000 in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Based on current prices, this grant will provide more than 30,000 meals for hungry and malnourished children.

- 1 Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development, p. 25
- 2 <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/active/leadership.html>
- 3 [www.buddhistglobalrelief.org](http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org)
- 4 <http://whatiffoundation.org/the-history-of-the-food-program/>
- 5 <http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-will-assist-1-million-hungry-haitians-hit-three-year-drought>
- 6 [http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/documents/FinancialDocuments/BGR\\_990\\_FYE\\_2010-06-30.pdf](http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/documents/FinancialDocuments/BGR_990_FYE_2010-06-30.pdf)

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# Muslim Aid worldwide and in the Philippines



Distribution of roofing materials. Photo: Muslim Aid

In 1985 a series of humanitarian crises in Africa led to the founding of Muslim Aid in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In the following years, Muslim Aid expanded its emergency relief operations and grew into an international relief and development agency. In 2014 it spent GBP 28.9 million in pursuit of charitable objectives around the world.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, the scope of the agency's work has widened from providing emergency relief to implementing long-term development programmes. Muslim Aid operates through a worldwide network of local and international humanitarian partner organisations in order to increase resilience and develop the capacity of people to help themselves in emergency situations. Today, Muslim Aid works in over 70 countries,<sup>3</sup> and in 2015 it reached more than 3.5 million people, including more than 1.5 million beneficiaries of Muslim Aid's humanitarian assistance programmes.<sup>4</sup>

*"We want you to know that you've given us not just material things. The houses you have built for us symbolize hope, love and protection."*

*Letter from 'The Beneficiaries'*

Over recent years, MA has worked in a variety of contexts. These include Bosnia after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami, Pakistan after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake and Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. It also maintains an ongoing presence

in other diverse locations such as the Palestinian territories, Darfur, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Lebanon, India and Bangladesh.

In 2013, MA supported relief efforts in the wake of typhoon Haiyan (known locally as Yolanda) in the Philippines. When Haiyan swept across the region, it caused widespread devastation through floods and landslides, creating a humanitarian emergency that left families even more vulnerable than before and causing more than 10,000 deaths and the loss of over 20,000 homes.

Muslim Aid was one of the first organisations to provide help. More than 2,000 families on the devastated Bantayan Island and in Leyte province received food, drinking water and cooking utensils and were given access to shelters and sanitation facilities.

*"[...] even if the devastation in our land took place more than a year ago, you still chose to be with us, rebuilding our houses into homes, giving us a beautiful place that we could call our own."*

*Letter from 'The Beneficiaries'*

As part of a project funded by the organisation UK Islamic Mission, MA was involved in the construction of nine villages to shelter those who had lost their homes. The building work was carried out in close coordination with municipal governments. One of the households affected



Muslim Aid supports the construction of shelter. Photo: Muslim Aid

was a five-person family whose grandparents had perished in the typhoon. During the emergency response the family received cash from other NGOs as well as cooking equipment and a solar lamp. Even so, the homeless family had to live in a makeshift shelter for 22 months, as they were unable to pay for their house to be rebuilt. Since there were no economic opportunities in the devastated region, their income was too low to provide for all the daily needs of the family, especially those of their new-born child.

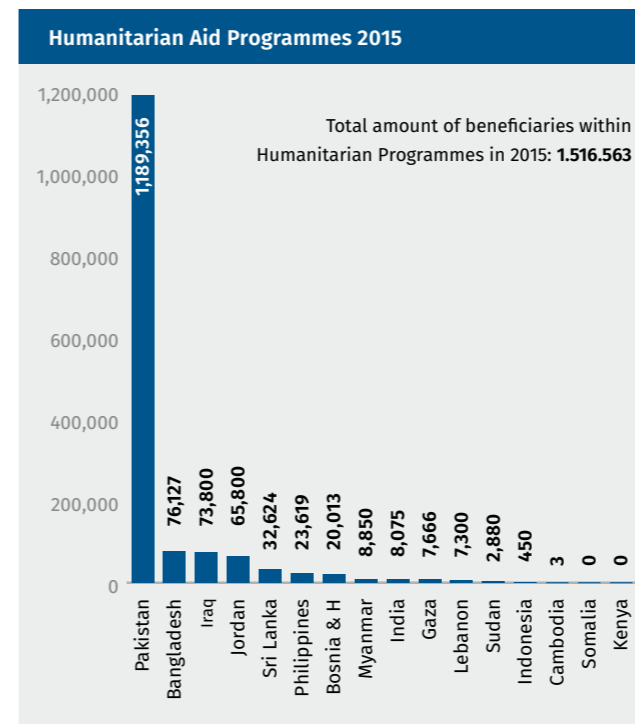
In May 2015 Muslim Aid came into their community promising decent housing for the family. However, the agency requires its beneficiaries to help by providing land on which to build the shelters, transporting building materials to the site and assisting the skilled construction workers and labourers. After the building was completed, the father said he wanted to make further improvements to the shel-

*"Once again, not only the need to provide food and medicine to those in need but also the protection and restoration of human dignity were the motivations for humanitarian work."*<sup>6</sup>

*Rex RB Reyes, Jr. General Secretary VII*

Muslim Aid not only helped with the construction of villages consisting of durable shelters. It also gave local people an opportunity to gain the construction skills they might one day need in order to rebuild their homes and thus withstand future natural disasters. In addition, Muslim Aid set up a number of programmes designed to strengthen the resilience of local communities. These focused on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and dealing with emergencies. The Philippines frequently experiences more than 20 storms per year and is prone to landslides, flooding and droughts. A proactive approach and confident response to natural disasters and their impact are therefore of great importance.

In 2016, another emergency struck the Philippines, and Muslim Aid once again provided support. On this occasion, the organisation came to the assistance of drought victims in Mindanao. Due to the impact of El Niño, this province – along with others in the Philippines – is struggling to maintain its water supplies.<sup>5</sup> The country urgently needs to prepare for this challenge and other consequences of climate change. However, its inhabitants are not alone – Muslim Aid remains at their side.



Based on information supplied by the London-based Muslim Aid Regional Programme, Middle East and Africa

ter using the skills he had learnt when helping the builders. This response highlights the sense of empowerment and determination that Muslim Aid sees as crucial in its efforts to prepare local people to deal with future disasters.

*"We can't give you anything in return, but surely, you, Muslim Aid and the other organisations will always be in our prayers."*

*Letter from 'The Beneficiaries'*

- <https://www.muslimaid.org/about-us/the-history-of-muslim-aid/?p=3>
- MUSLIM AID, TRUSTEES' REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR 2014 <https://www.muslimaid.org/about-us/finance/>
- <https://www.muslimaid.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/>
- Number of beneficiaries Muslim Aid 2015
- <http://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-mindanao-impact-el-ni-o-january-2016>
- Rex RB Reyes, Jr. General Secretary VII, NCC Philippines at the Forum on Faith-Based Organizations and the World Humanitarian Summit: PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTER, April 27, 2016, Quezon City

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## Combatting Ebola – the power of religion to end the crisis



Meeting of religious leaders in Sierra Leone.  
© CAFOD/Louise Norton

Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea are among the world's poorest nations and among the worst-affected by violence as well as political and economic crises. Their health systems reflect this weakness and were anything but prepared for a large-scale epidemic such as the recent outbreak of Ebola, which caused more than 11,000 deaths up to January 2016.<sup>1</sup>

After the first infection was identified in Guinea in December 2013, daily life in the country's forest region was badly affected by the deadly disease. Without any public warning at the time, Ebola quickly spread across national borders to the neighbouring states of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Only in August 2014 did the World Health Organization (WHO) recognise a public health emergency of international concern due to the drastically increased number of patients.

*“When they started participating in the revised burial practices, people knew they could trust it, and resistance ended. The participation of religious leaders was a game-changer.”<sup>2</sup>*

UN staff member in Sierra Leone

Public health specialists had already focused on traditional practices, e.g. the ritual of mourners touching or washing the highly infectious bodies, as a significant contributory factor to the scale of previous Ebola outbreaks. Although such practices increase the risk of infection, they play an

important role in all three countries despite their diverse religious composition. While Liberia has a majority Christian population with significant Muslim communities and large numbers who practise traditional religions, Muslims make up the majority in both Sierra Leone and Guinea<sup>3</sup>.

Both governmental and non-governmental organisations advised communities to avoid such unsafe traditional practices. While some communities responded positively, most remained wary of advice given by government bodies, NGOs and public health services and continued practising their religious and cultural traditions. It became clear that the issue of community trust and engagement was critical in efforts to combat the Ebola outbreak. Those calling for change had to be trusted and firmly established members of the villages and communities if they were to have a chance of convincing people of the risks and offering alternatives.

*“Faith leaders have reached into every part of the country, and they are highly trusted by community members.”<sup>4</sup>*

Government coordination staff member, Bo district, Sierra Leone

Once international and national humanitarian agencies and organisations recognised this need for a new approach, they established and reinforced links to the communities through local faith leaders in order to advocate alternatives and encourage a change towards safe practices that were religiously and culturally accepted. Imams, pastors, nuns and priests drew the attention of their communities to passages in the Qur'an and the Bible that provided a religious context to the new, safe burial practices, showing that they were acceptable and not at all less personal or spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

Religious leaders gradually became more and more engaged with the crisis and spread vital information among their congregations and during prayers, including interfaith messages. They presided over dignified burials, consoled and counselled mourners and survivors and showed local people how to prevent and control the spread of the virus. Several faith communities used text messaging to disseminate health advice and check on those in quarantine. Radio stations were used to reach the public due to the high level of trust they enjoy.<sup>6</sup> The joint effort of these groups to

inform the public contributed significantly to a slowdown in the rate of new infections and helped to rectify stigmas about those suffering from Ebola.<sup>7</sup>

*“Lofa County had been a hot-bed of Ebola-denial and it was difficult to get health staff in to assist. The imam and the local chief worked together using messages from the Qur'an and the Bible to talk to people about the need to change their practices. This paved the way for health staff to carry out their work in the county.”<sup>8</sup>*

Senior UN staff member, Monrovia, Liberia

As shown by WHO data and by the joint report entitled “Keeping the Faith” published by Christian Aid, Cafod, Tearfund and Islamic Relief Worldwide, the efforts made to slow down the epidemic were successful within a few months. At the end of January 2015, WHO announced that its emphasis had moved from “slowing transmission” to “ending the epidemic”.<sup>9</sup>

Interreligious cooperation in particular has proven to be a significant factor in this process. The call for a change in attitudes and behaviour in order to combat the disease was all the more powerful because it was issued by both Christian and Muslim leaders collaborating in churches and mosques. One Christian leader in Bo District (Sierra Leone) observed that “The voice of a sheikh in the church was more powerful than that of the host reverend. This was an interesting lesson for me.”<sup>10</sup>



Children were also affected by the disease.  
© Photo: World Vision / Bundu

During the Ebola outbreak, religion inspired people to change and adopt live-saving practices. In pursuit of a common cause, Christians and Muslims spoke with one voice and made a significant contribution to the wider campaign. This example demonstrates the potential of religious communities and interfaith networks to support emergency responses. In particular, local faith-leaders should be integrated into disaster response measures whenever traditional practices need to be altered in order to deal effectively with an emergency. ■

- 1 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28755033>
- 2 Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide: Keeping the Faith. The Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response. July 2015, p. 8
- 3 Corman, Crystal, Lindsay Horikoshi, and Spencer Crawford. “Response to Ebola: Mapping Religious Networks and FIOs.” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. February 10, 2015.
- 4 Katherine Marshall, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs Georgetown University, World Faiths Development Dialogue: Responding to the Ebola Epidemic in West Africa: What role does religion play? Teaching Note for Case Study. March 2016.
- 5 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/15/churches-and-mosques-educate-on-ebola.html>
- 6 Mukpo, Ashoka: SURVIVING EBOLA. Public Perceptions of Governance and the Outbreak Response in Liberia. International Alert. 2015. [http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Liberia\\_SurvivingEbola\\_EN\\_2015.pdf](http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Liberia_SurvivingEbola_EN_2015.pdf)
- 7 Christian Aid, et al., p. 36
- 8 Christian Aid, et al., p. 28
- 9 World Health Organization: Ebola Situation Report. January 28, 2015. [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/150249/1/roadmapsitrep28Jan15\\_eng.pdf?ua=1&ua=1&ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/150249/1/roadmapsitrep28Jan15_eng.pdf?ua=1&ua=1&ua=1)
- 10 Christian Aid, et al., p. 33

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## Meeting basic needs in times of civil war – Caritas Internationalis in Syria



A Caritas centre for children with special needs in Syria's coastal area. Caritas provides basic aid items and a safe learning space. Photo: Caritas Syria

There is still no end in sight to the brutal civil war that has afflicted Syria since March 2011. To date, the conflict has claimed over 470,000 lives. More than ten million people have been forced to flee the country, and over six million have been internally displaced. Three million people have sought refuge in the neighbouring states of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Almost 11 million people in Syria are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the violence in Syria, Caritas Internationalis (CI) is present on the ground and provides support for local people affected by the war. CI is a global confederation of more than 165 independent national organisations that work together in nearly every single country throughout the world as part of the humanitarian and development mission of the Catholic Church. In total, more than 1 million people from different national, ethnic and religious backgrounds, including many volunteers, work for CI.<sup>2</sup>

In Syria, 110 employees and 40 volunteers working for CI are currently deployed in the regions of Damascus, Aleppo, the coastal region, Homs, Latakia, Hassake, Qamishli, Horan and Hama. In addition to working with Catholic communities such as the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, they have established links to Shia, Sunni and other humanitarian organisations in order to reach the maximum number of people in need.

In Damascus, CI runs a number of centres that look after displaced people, distribute food and provide urgent medical and preventive healthcare services. In Aleppo, several centres have been set up thanks to the committed support of volunteers from the local community.

CI distributes food, blankets, clothing and other urgently needed items. The war has deprived many Syrians of all sources of income, and CI has responded by providing shelters and rental assistance as well as educational services and psychological support. In 2015, CI spent USD 84 million in Syria and the neighbouring countries, helping around 1.3 million people.<sup>3</sup>

Undaunted by the hardships of the war-torn country, CI runs several programmes to help young people. It supports pupils and students enrolled in public and private schools and other educational institutions by paying their tuition fees and transport costs. Volunteers also offer recreational activities. Since many areas of Damascus are no longer safe for young people, CI has identified safe spaces in cooperation with local authorities and takes care of youngsters during their free time.<sup>4</sup>

*“We approached Caritas and explained our situation and that we have no one to support us. They gave us food vouchers. It was very helpful. No other charity is supporting us in this way.”*

*Father of a Syrian family from Maaloula now living in Damascus*

The story of one Syrian family is typical of the country's terrible reality. Already suffering from the loss of two sons-in-law who were killed in the civil war, the family's only son was hit by a sniper while he was crossing a street after the curfew. The bullet destroyed some of his spinal vertebrae, leaving him paralysed and in need of permanent medical services and instruments such as a catheter that are nearly impossible to obtain in times of war. The son, who wishes to remain anonymous, does not feel anything from his abdomen to his toes, yet he thanks God devoutly that his hands are still working. Together with his extended family, the paralysed son moved from one shelter to another. Eventually they left their hometown Irbin and

*“Caritas offered us moral support. We saw their beautiful smiling faces before anything else. They didn't make us feel like we were taking a donation.”*

*Mother of a Syrian family living in Adra who wants to stay anonymous*

travelled to Damascus, where CI has several centres. Living conditions for families are also difficult in the capital city, and they now live in an overcrowded warehouse together with eight grandchildren. CI provides food, clothing and blankets. “We can't survive on our own,” states the mother emphatically. “We need charity – also from other countries.”

Many people in Syria say that they will not give up hope for as long as organisations such as CI continue to offer support. They also highlight that the only solution for the Syrian people and future generations is an immediate end to the war. For this reason CI is launching a global campaign for peace in the destabilised country, aiming to remind the world community of its responsibility to work for peace



Jina Deeb, a Syrian social worker from Caritas on a home visit at a displaced family in Damascus. The family received rental support and a hygiene kit. Photo: Nicholson/Caritas



Caritas provides vouchers for fuel, rent, food and other aid items to Syrians in the coastal area. Photo: Caritas Syria

and solidarity and to engage with the many refugees that the war has produced

- <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured>; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Annual Report 2015, p.17. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2015/201509-corp-IDMC-annual-report-en.pdf> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)
- <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/march-april-2015/caritas-internationalis-service-and-advocacy> by: Monsignor Robert Vitillo
- Handout for Side event - 16march 2016. And telephone interview with Susanna Tkalec, Caritas Internationalis humanitarian director, April 28, 2016.
- <http://www.caritas.org/where-we-are/middle-east-north-africa/syria/>

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## Religion inspires Sikhs to provide welfare services and emergency assistance worldwide



UNITED SIKHS providing emergency aid after the severe typhoons of 2013/14 in the Philippines. Photo: iMKIRAN, UNITED SIKHS

UNITED SIKHS began in 1999 when a group of Sikhs from the New York metropolitan area banded together to promote the socio-economic development of immigrant communities in the borough of Queens. Today, UNITED SIKHS is a grassroots organisation with chapters in America, Asia, Africa and Europe that pursue projects for the spiritual, social and economic empowerment of underprivileged and minority communities.<sup>1</sup>

*“The aid we provide has to be credible and free of any missionary agenda. It must be delivered to all those who are suffering regardless of their background or religion.”*

*Hardial Singh, Director at United Sikhs*

‘Acknowledge our common spiritual origin. Trust in the wisdom of the Creator. Seek spiritual enlightenment. Live virtuously, modestly and in harmony with nature. Promote unity, justice and human well-being.’ These are insights from the Sikh Religion, which formed a religious community in northern India in the 16th century. It is a world religion with about 25 million followers. At the heart of Sikhi (Sikhism) is a series of written, spiritual insights (Gurbani) of a timeless nature. They inspire Sikhs around the world to adopt a holistic lifestyle characterised by voluntary and selfless service (Seva). British Sikhs donate GBP 125 million to charity every year. According to the British Sikh Report 2016, the community spends over 65 million hours each year on voluntary activities.

Several organisations such as UNITED SIKHS, EcoSikhs and Khalsa Aid, as well as other initiatives that are not formally registered, provide emergency aid and education at both local and international levels, as well as advising on human rights and performing environmental conservation work. The UN-affiliated organisation UNITED SIKHS is active in the fields of emergency aid and human rights. It is registered in ten countries as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), and its 1,000 registered volunteers around the world carry out 90 per cent of its emergency aid work. The main coordination centres are in the United States, Canada, India and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

*“I’m not only a professional doctor but also a religious volunteer – sevadar. I do my best to provide good-quality medical relief.”*

*Dr Amarjeet Singh, Nepal relief team member*

Social media and smartphone apps play a key role in the organisation’s internal communications, fund-raising campaigns, volunteer recruitment and media work. The first port of call in any country where a disaster has taken place is usually the local Sikh community centre (Gurdwara), which acts as a free base camp for volunteers, a place to store donated materials and a gateway to the local population, local administration and political leaders.

The range of activities in which the NGO is involved is diverse. Together with the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, UNITED SIKHS has provided emergency aid in the wake of natural disasters in Banda Aceh, Myanmar, the Philippines, Japan and the United States. It has distributed food in Kenya and Somalia, helped flood victims in Malaysia and Kashmir and supported internally displaced people in Pakistan and impoverished farming families in northern India in cases where the father had committed suicide as a result of utter financial ruin due to crop failure or floods. The NGO helps Sikh families who suffer discrimination in Afghanistan to apply for asylum in Canada. Praise for the work of Sikhs has been expressed not only by those who benefit from their good works but also by leading politicians such as US President Barack Obama.<sup>3</sup>

*“Our volunteers know that any misconduct in this area would cause us to lose all our credibility among our supporters and in the eyes of the Creator, as well as discrediting our religion.”*

*Mejindarpal Kaur, Director at UNITED SIKHS*

The emergency aid offered by UNITED SIKHS following the Nepalese earthquake in April 2015 is a good example of the organisation’s work. Immediately after the earthquake, Sikh volunteers collected medicine, food and clothing, and organised the transport and distribution of relief items. Within just a week of the earthquake, the relief team had set up four medical camps and provided medical assistance to over a thousand people. Ramesh Tamang from Rasuwa was one of those victims. “Our houses were destroyed. The Sikh volunteers looked after us. They supplied medicine and metal sheets to make temporary shelters. They gave us a ray of hope.”<sup>4</sup>

Mejindarpal Kaur, one of UNITED SIKHS’ directors, describes their work as follows: “We can mobilise a lot of volunteers quickly. These volunteers are motivated



Within one week the UNITED SIKHS Nepal Relief Team provided emergency assistance after the devastating earthquake in Nepal April 2015. Photo: UNITED SIKHS



Sikh volunteers supporting flood victims in Kashmir. Photo: UNITED SIKHS

by their religion and not by salaries or careers. Their actions are based on empathy and altruism. That allows us to keep our administrative costs very low. Nevertheless, the funds at our disposal are relatively small, and we face a challenge in terms of capacity building, which requires investment.”

Kaur sees accountability as a given: “Our project management teams are responsible for ensuring that donations are used in a transparent way. For this job we only select experienced people with a record of altruistic work. If we don’t deliver on our commitments, donations will simply dry up. Our volunteers know that any misconduct in this area would cause us to lose all our credibility among our supporters and in the eyes of God, as well as discrediting our religion. The aid we provide has to be credible, free of any missionary agenda and impartial in the sense that it must be delivered to all those who are suffering regardless of their religion. This approach promotes respect, understanding and cohesion.”

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/about.php>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/community/uk-sikhs-donate-125-m-to-charity-every-year/214376.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unitedsikhs.org/Nepal-Relief-Effort/>

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## Religious engagement in humanitarian crises – improving coordination and cooperation between governments, local religious communities and religious organisations

As shown throughout this brochure, local religious communities are deeply rooted in their respective societies. They are present before, during and after each and every crisis and are often the first to respond. Mosques, churches, temples and Gurdwara, for example, offer basic shelter for refugees and are regularly turned into hospitals and kitchens. The knowledge of local conditions is particularly valuable when it comes to providing effective disaster relief. A readiness to cooperate with religious communities, learn from their unique approaches and apply their proposed coping mechanisms may be crucial to the success of any emergency response. Religious communities and their leaders also offer spiritual assistance to help people cope with the extreme stress caused by emergency situations. As intermediaries between global processes and local action, their engagement is needed, now and in the foreseeable future, to facilitate a smooth transition from emergency assistance and early recovery mechanisms to medium-term and sustainable development.

There are, no doubt, many more examples of good practice in addition to those highlighted in this brochure. They offer clear evidence of the enormous potential of religiously motivated individuals and organisations to play a key role in the wider response to humanitarian crises.

The Agenda 2030 includes a pledge to “leave no one behind”. To this end, it is vital that we support those directly affected by humanitarian emergencies, and to do so effectively we need to identify and close the gaps between global response mechanisms and local needs. In particular, we must improve communication and coordination between those providing disaster relief and those at whom their efforts are directed. Religious actors can help to bridge this gap through their global reach and their own local networks. These allow them to act as mediators between the global discourse and local implementation. In this way they can help to deliver a more effective humanitarian response at times of crisis by connecting local communities and their needs with major international actors such as governments, multilateral as well as secular NGOs.

If religious actors are to assume such a role, they will need effective recognition and support from within the global humanitarian system. Integrating them into the global humanitarian discourse and strengthening their role is therefore crucial. However, this requires intensive dialogue and mutual understanding between religious actors, politicians, officials and representatives of humanitarian organisations.

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#### Published by

International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)  
Hosted by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and organisations. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the members of PaRD.

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#### Cover photo

Sri Lankan Muslim of the eastern part. Only seven percent of Sri Lanka's population are Muslims.

Credit: Walter Keller/third-eye-photography.de

#### Design

kippconcept GmbH, Bonn

August 2016

This publication has been funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The PaRD secretariat is responsible for the content of this publication.

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