Open Doors

THE FAITH FACTOR

A GLOBAL STUDY – BRIEFING

Faith Actors' Engagement in Post-Conflict Development Programs:

- New Hope Trauma Center, Iraq
- Humanitarian "Nineveh Relief" Organization, Iraq
- Shalom Trauma Center, Nigeria
- Legal Assistance Project, Mexico
- Cow Bank Project, Vietnam

Written by Kathryn Kraft, PhD
Senior Lecturer in International Development,
University of East London



Introduction

The global humanitarian system currently invests relatively little in local partnerships, and even less in local faith-based partners, despite ongoing efforts and dialogue to promote localization of aid. This is particularly noteworthy when it comes to the extensive role played by faith-based organizations (FBOs) or faith actors (for the purpose of this briefing, FBOs and faith actors will be used interchangeably). Faith-based giving, channeled directly to FBOs and through informal religious networks, is likely half or more of total assistance channeled to crisis-affected communities.

This study therefore aims to explore the benefits and challenges of faith actors' engagement in holistic community development and recovery in four different regions of the world. Case studies of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in Iraq, Nigeria, Mexico and Vietnam offer insights into the comparative effectiveness and limitations of similarly situated faith actors in relief and development programs. It expands on a previous study of two FBOs in the Nineveh Plains region of Iraq engaged in post-conflict development work. This study draws on insight from the example of those organizations along with three new case studies to position the work of small grassroots FBOs within the wider humanitarian and development space, to identify their unique and most significant contributions and how those can be best capitalized upon by the wider development and humanitarian communities.

The five case studies in this report present a diverse array of initiatives by Christians to address pressing needs in their communities. They are different in many ways, but they have some common qualities. They are all highly responsive, addressing specific needs according to a strong understanding of the needs of their community. They all seek to balance support for fellow Christians with a compassion-driven humanitarianism which seeks to see their entire communities benefiting. They are all on a journey of organizational development, seeking to have sufficient structure to ensure sustainability and integrity while resisting any urge to morph into something resembling a foreign NGO. This briefing will first offer a reflective description of each case study designed to build a picture of the work of LFAs, then present some key findings and themes that emerged across an analysis of all five cases.



A tribal Christian receives a cow provided by the Cow Bank Project

1- Introducing the five organizations

New Hope Trauma Center, Iraq

Established in 2015, New Hope Trauma Centre (NHTC) was founded under the patronage of the Chaldean Church in Iraq and under the umbrella of St. Rita Hands of Hope, a U.S. non-profit. It was co-founded by Fr. Aram Qia, a Chaldean priest who is native to al-Qosh, and Jihan Daman, also from al-Qosh who resettled in the United States as a teenager, where she is now a qualified social worker. Fr. Aram and Jihan's partnership began when providing emergency material assistance to families displaced by ISIS, but they identified through their friendship a mutual passion for addressing the deeper and emotional needs of their community following the recent history of traumatic events which shook all of Iraqi society.

NHTC offers a diversity of educational, cultural and social activities tailored to different ages and life stages, designed to give holistic psychosocial care that addresses individuals' psychological scars. It is both a social center and a trauma care center, running mainly group activities. NHTC has a mandate not only to offer psychosocial and trauma care, but also to bring dialogue about trauma and psychosocial needs out into the open in Iraqi society, where there is still considerable stigma about psychosocial needs. The Centre is also highly committed to engaging with the spiritual side of the psyche, using Biblical Scripture and spiritual disciplines as tools for addressing trauma and emotional weariness.

Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization, Iraq

Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization (HNRO) began as a health clinic to serve displaced people fleeing ISIS controlled regions of northern Iraq, with services in Erbil and its Christian suburb Ainkawa. It was born in the early days of displacement by a priest from the affected area who was based in Ainkawa at the time. He quickly identified several volunteer doctors, which then drew many requests for medical care from displaced families. A tent was erected out of which a clinic operated which soon grew into a charity with two established medical clinics. Even though it was founded by a priest, Fr Behnam Benoka, and it operates as a charitable extension of the church, from the beginning HNRO's mandate has been to serve the needy and vulnerable without any discrimination.

In 2017, when people began to return to areas freed from ISIS, HNRO's staff and projects also transitioned back to the town of Bartallah, where Fr Behnam was reassigned as parish priest. In collaboration with the church, HNRO supported the reconstruction of homes and businesses, opened a new health clinic, and began to organize a range of other services. They offer extensive livelihood skills training and small start-up grants to local businesses, and they run a legal clinic whose focus is on educating and offering individualized services to Christians. The legal clinic aspires to play a role in advocacy on minority rights in Iraq. HNRO has also mounted large-scale food and non-food distributions. HNRO is known for supporting people's dignity by helping them restore their livelihoods as well as meeting urgent material needs. In a community where level of trust for the government is low, many people look to them – as an arm of the church – to be a service provider. They have kept their doors open by diversifying their funding, moving from heavy reliance on international Christian donors to attracting several small grants, many of which are activity-based, from a large number of donors, still mostly Christian.

Shalom Trauma Center, Nigeria

Founded as a project in 2014, and officially opening its facility doors in 2019, Shalom Trauma Center operates as a hub for a variety of psychosocial services for Christians affected by violence in Northern and Central Nigeria. The center itself hosts residential retreats for severely traumatized individuals referred to the center by local churches. During these week-long events, individuals referred to by center staff as 'survivors' receive a variety of psychosocial services, participate in group activities, and are encouraged to simply rest in a safe haven environment. Other services organized by Shalom are offered through an extensive and growing network of churches and trained church members, referred to as 'caregivers', throughout the country. Dozens of pastors and 150 church members offer psychosocial support to people in their communities, identify severe cases for referral, and raise awareness about trauma and mental health more generally.

Shalom is also active in raising awareness about trauma and mental health needs resulting from violence, and the subsequent fall-out on community resilience and economic development. They lead sessions in theological institutions and with healthcare providers, and engage with NGOs and local government to build a dialogue around restoring community resilience in violence-affected communities. Shalom Trauma Center has national leadership and a strong network in Nigeria of staff, volunteers and promoters, but receives no domestic funding and answers to the international leadership of a Christian NGO which helped found it and which continues to raise most of the funds for the Center.



Veronica survived her village being burned down twice by Fulani herdsmen and she is now a cook at an the Shalom Trauma Center

Legal Assistance Project (LAP), Mexico

The Legal Assistance Project (LAP) began in 2016, as part of a strategic overhaul of the work of a Christian international NGO in Mexico. While the organization was aware of religious tensions in the tribal mountainous regions of southern Mexico, they had previously only offered material aid and asylum to displaced Protestant Christian converts from Catholicism but decided that legal assistance and advocacy for greater tolerance of religious converts in traditional communities was more strategic than aid which was more reactive in nature.

In some rural communities, local leadership including but not limited to the Catholic Church, apply pressure on converts to Protestantism, to either return to Catholicism or to at minimum continue participating in the festivals and activities of communal life. When converts refuse, they have at times been attacked with violence, imprisonment, or refusal of basic rights such as access to the electric grid or burial sites. Many families decide to flee their hometowns when this happens. LAP therefore exists to offer not only legal assistance, but also grassroots advocacy, for these converts, as well as to support efforts at reconciliation between them and their local leaders. To support these objectives, a local team is comprised of a team leader, three lawyers on retainer, one in each state where the project set its focus, and a network of volunteers. Now, in the fifth year of the initiative, they are preparing to register as an independent legal not-for-profit entity.
LAP offers legal services, with a focus on negotiation and reconciliation with various stakeholders, to families who have suffered rights violations because of their religious choice. They also conduct extensive training which includes a biblical orientation to help potential victims of rights violations reflect on their role in their communities. They are rolling this training out not only to victims of rights violations, but also to Protestant Christian communities in areas where such issues may be likely to arise. More recently, a local government office in one of the states where LAP operates has adapted the training curriculum to remove religious language, and is training other citizens in communities where there are social tensions.



Members of the Guerrero State Government, Mexico, negotiating the permanence of a Christian family in their community

Cow Bank Project, Vietnam

The Cow Bank Project, which launched in 2016, operates under the auspices of a church denomination in Northern Vietnam and serves some of the most remote tribal communities in the Northern Vietnamese mountains. The project employs a simple microfinance group-loan model, whereby beneficiaries of the project are identified by other members of a community, specifically by church members affiliated with the denomination which manages the project.

Beneficiaries are given a breeding cow as a loan, and after a year are expected to pay the loan back by returning the first year's offspring to the project, which in turn gives the cow to another beneficiary identified by the church. While the first recipients of a cow in a given community will be church members, the community is expected to identify non-church members to receive a significant portion of the second generation cows. The cows are given alongside training on livestock care, and orientation on small enterprise management as beneficiaries consider building their flocks. This simple project has reached a relatively small number of people, but is regularly expanding, as it has been found to become sustainable within only a few years once families have bred a couple of generations of cows.

2 - Key Findings

"Local" does indeed bring significant advantages

We can look at the grassroots nature of a project from various angles. From the perspective of local ownership, the two case studies in Iraq are fully embedded in their localities, founded by respected community members and even to some extent having participated in the displacement and return with the population they serve. The Cow Bank Project in Vietnam has a similar story of national origin but was founded by a church denomination based in a major city to be implemented in remote villages with extremely limited access to any educational or development services. The Nigeria and Mexico cases, however, were initially developed by foreign Christians but then quickly passed on to local Christians to own and continue implementing, and serve people across a broad geographical region.

"The Center is a part of the community, so everyone knows each other. We know most people in al-Qosh, it's a small enough community. So the center is just a part of my network. I think this Center is closer to the community than other NGOs, because it is unique to al-Qosh, while other NGOs come from other regions or have offices in other places."

COMMUNITY MEMBER

In terms of the programming itself, all case studies demonstrated an intimate understanding of community needs. We saw two examples of trauma centers, in both Iraq and Nigeria a novelty service; it was the trust and relationships maintained by center staff that ultimately assured the acceptance of a much needed but somewhat stigmatized service. Two of the initiatives studied included a legal advocacy component, both taking place in extremely complex settings requiring a prominent level of knowledge and sensitivity. The origins of the advocacy idea in both contexts seemed to emerge from dialogue between local Christians and international Christians, but was developed in a way that clearly met a felt need and was seen as highly relevant in both contexts. In both contexts, legal aid was quickly augmented by a strong component of training and capacity building for community members. The Cow Bank Project was a Vietnamese development program model adapted and introduced in new communities through a network of churches, with the revised model engaging with principles such as group lending to ensure local ownership.

All five cases illustrate the strength of being implemented by a team which is not only part of the affected community, but has shared in the suffering and traumas which bring beneficiaries to the project seeking assistance. The staff of all five cases are almost entirely Christians (in the case of Mexico, Protestant Christians specifically) in contexts where a significant portion of the population is of a different faith. A Christian faith motivated them to seek excellence in the assistance they offered and Christian teachings helped ensure that they were sensitive to strengthening human dignity through their work, and in particular promoting resilience and self-reliance. All five cases also have relatively few staff compared to larger NGOs and rely largely on committed volunteers, which has budget motivations but also demonstrates the commitment of community members to the work.

The five cases also serve Christians primarily, a model which is not locally questioned. It is through their embeddedness in a minority religious community that they are able in turn to build their programs to cascade the benefits out to the wider community, rather than designing their interventions to reach the religious majority from the outset. Church ownership helped ensure project affinity as well as sustainability, but also delineated the boundaries of who received assistance first by these specific projects. It was widely understood and required by both their funders and their constituents, that they support members of their church network first. However, an ethos of compassion and commitment to human dignity meant that, even if not all beneficiaries or even implementers were aware of this, project leadership in all five cases were constantly strategizing and negotiating to ensure that the project brought benefit to the wider community and not just to their narrow church network.

Different stakeholders each bring their own set of values and assumptions about what constitutes good programming

All five case studies illustrated a commitment to holistic care, including helping beneficiaries access services elsewhere which they themselves were not equipped to offer. Each initiative was somewhat unique, either providing a service not offered by other humanitarian or development agencies or offering it in a vastly separate way.

Their capacity by humanitarian standards, however, varied. The two cases in Iraq were continually professionalizing and developing their internal systems, staff skill sets, and organizational structures. The Cow Bank Project had the resources available to develop strong humanitarian capacity but preferred to stay small and build the skills of church members rather than develop organizationally. The Legal Assistance Project and Shalom Trauma Center did what they needed to in order to function ethically and according to legal requirements, but were not interested in developing more robust systems. Rather, they preferred to invest in relationship-building and in building the resources that they saw as most important to the affected community.

The organizations had varied approaches to the question of expertise, and in particular, spiritual care. All five cases saw the importance of spiritual care as core to their programmatic offerings. This suggests that religious affinity can be advantageous, as the spiritual care was for the most part very reflective of a shared faith tradition, with shared scriptures and shared spiritual practices. Shalom Trauma Center, especially, designed its trauma care around a faith ethos, that healing was only possible through forgiveness, and forgiveness only possible by the help of God. While Shalom found that occasionally non-Christians found their services relevant and helpful even with the use of Bible, NHTC chose to remove the Scriptural references when working with non-Christians. Both trauma centers found that they worked more easily and effectively with Christians, in large part because of the Christian ethos of their mental health services.

'Spiritual' expertise did not play such a distinct role in the other projects, but nonetheless, they all employed prayer, community and relationship-building, and an assurance that Christians elsewhere were concerned with the well-being of their 'brothers and sisters' in the affected communities.

There was a diversity of approaches to the question of whether they saw their impact primarily on the individual level or the communal level. The two legal advocacy projects present particularly interesting cases of communal impact through individual services. While both projects include personalized legal services and training for Christians specifically, they envisage those services as laying the groundwork for creating a more cohesive and tolerant society as a whole. In Mexico, in particular, bespoke legal services for a small number of isolated families has attracted the attention of local and state government, sparked processes whereby local communities are more accepting of diversity, and brought the issue of religious freedom to the attention of a few national-level denominations. Similarly, the vision of Shalom Trauma Center is that their support for conflict-affected Christians may be a means by which communities become more resilient, maintain their diversity, and promote tolerance. In contrast, the Cow Bank Project has made the deliberate decision to avoid having a communal or societal impact, in order to avoid political tensions in their efforts to support vulnerable families in a meaningful way.

Local faith actors aspire to grow but their church identity is important to them; they may not aspire to become like INGOs

All five case studies featured organizations that are growing at their own pace. They started out small and have gradually expanded their capacity and services. They want to continue to grow, but they value the gradual and consistent pace of growth rather than wanting to claim a much larger legitimacy or funding base anytime soon. All five cases are funded primarily through international networks of Christians. All five cases expressed a desire for more funding and talked about what they could do if their funding increased, but none of them wanted to compromise their approach or their style in order to access more donors. While the Iraqi NGOs were open to institutional funding if it were to become available, the other three cases would have to adapt their systems and their approach so much that they would not pursue institutional funding. In Nigeria and Mexico, there was acknowledgement that national Christians had the resources and capacity to support their work, but there was no evidence that they were working proactively to tap into those national funding opportunities.

The church is a source of legitimacy for all five cases, but in diverse ways. For the Iraqi organizations, they are simply part of the same social system and in some ways an extension of the church and in some ways supported by the church. For Legal Assistance Project, it is their commitment to helping small, marginalized churches that became their source of local legitimacy. For Shalom Trauma Center, a broad network of many different churches became both their human resources and their community access. Finally, Cow Bank Project operates under the auspices of a church and uses religious networks to identify churches as local partners in the communities where they work. Some were satisfied with this as the core of their legitimacy while others sought acknowledgement from the wider humanitarian community or a more diverse network of churches. None, however, were so keen to build their reputation that they would adapt their projects because they would see that as watering down their services for the sake of an external party. Expansion for all five cases would ideally involve broadening their geographical reach, or in the case of the trauma centers establishing new centers in new locations.

> "I know we might not have the fund but I have noticed something about trauma, it's not just about the money... It's about the care, the attention and then sometimes just being there, listen to their story, share in their pains and it is enough for them to find hope-the source of hope. So, even if the funds don't come, those volunteers out there are ready to work."
>
> IMPLEMENTER

Local Faith Actors do contribute to development or humanitarian objectives, but they may do so in their own way

While the original impetus of this research was to inquire as to how LFAs might be able to access flexible institutional funding as a part of the wider humanitarian agenda, the findings indicate that they are indeed contributing to global humanitarian and development priorities but in a very niche way. While there was no mention of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Charter for Change or other humanitarian declarations, there was some mention of the Humanitarian Principles and of International Humanitarian Law. Implementers did speak about compassion, dignity, resilience, self-reliance, mental health and psychosocial care, sustainability, economic empowerment, social cohesion and other concepts often referenced in humanitarian circles. However, the approaches taken are very bespoke and contextually unique. This is a core strength of the work of the LFAs: they understand the culture and the needs, and they respond in an appropriate way. However, it is hard to translate their contribution to the language of humanitarians.

> "Dignity is about taking care of yourself, about pulling yourself up on your own, and that people can't come near and be a threat. Dignity is something that we hold within, not something given to us."
>
> COMMUNITY MEMBER

Recommendations

For institutions and donors

- Recognize and acknowledge that local faith actors have easy access to communities in crisis and are usually the first responders.
- Map local faith actors as key potential stakeholders. This mapping should help identify several factors, including:
  - gaps in services
  - identify populations being served
  - the complexities of local social dynamics and the role played by different actors
  - modalities of assistance that are contextually and culturally relevant
  - individuals and organizations whose voice can help inform local and regional dialogue on development and humanitarian priorities.
- Involve local faith actors to participate in humanitarian coordination and development assistance discussions. Many of them are situated within the affected communities and are well placed to articulate their needs properly and design strategies on how to best address those needs.
- Collaborate with local faith actors to address the issues surrounding sustainability of projects, from crisis into development.
- Invest in religious literacy for staff, policymakers and partners. While it is important to understand what religious groups believe, it is arguably even more important to understand the nature of interactions and relationships between different groups and the spaces where they will and will not effectively collaborate with one another. In addition, religious beliefs can play a role in promoting resilience and sustaining peace.
- Consider the value of interventions to the community as a whole and not just to individuals when gauging the relevance or effectiveness of interventions. Reassess measures of monitoring, such as the SDG targets, to measure community impact as well as impact on a sum of individuals.
- Consider spiritual well-being, and in particular the contribution that can be made by practices and teachings from specific religious traditions, as an element of psychosocial and community development interventions.
- Offer local grassroots actors access to resources and training to help them improve their understanding of humanitarian principles, accountability and transparency, management and governance.
- Consider joining initiatives such as the UN Interagency Taskforce on Religion and Development, the International Partnership of Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), to understand the role of local faith actors in localizing response to humanitarian need.

For international faith-based NGOs

- Be an intermediary between institutional donors and local faith actors. Invest time in building relationships with local faith actors and design flexible partnership programs which allow each local partner to operate within its unique area of expertise.
- Build interfaith collaborations, acknowledging that your best local partners are likely to share your religious identity but that interfaith partnerships at the global level can help ensure that assistance through faith partnerships at the local level reaches all the most vulnerable regardless of creed or background.
- Invest in building the capacity of local faith actors through investment of time in relationship and mentoring.
- Create opportunities through which local faith actors can network with one another and support replication of ideas across geographical areas and regions.
- Offer funds to local partners with multi-year grants that cover core costs as a reasonable percentage of budgets. Require robust reporting, while mentoring local partners to strengthen their capacity for financial and programmatic monitoring.
- Help local partners think through decisions about growth, strategic planning, organizational sustainability and robust monitoring for impact reporting, and facilitate their access to training and resources to build their internal systems.

For local faith actors

- Stay true to your vision and ensure that all staff and beneficiaries understand your vision and core values. Communicate through informal conversations as well as formal training about humanitarian values along with the ways in which your faith motivates compassion and a desire to bless your entire community.
- Grow slowly and gradually, within the scope of your vision.
- Invest time and energy in relationships with other influential actors in your location, including government and actors of different faith traditions. Model collaboration and tolerance to the population you serve.
- Be aware of the benefits of stay local; if you choose to expand geographically, prioritize identifying passionate individuals, churches or organizations in other locations who share your vision, and allow them to lead in establishing programming in their own community.
- Consider investing in administrative and management systems, including for monitoring and evaluation, through hiring qualified staff and through accessing training or external support.