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**Background Paper
Strengthening protection: The role of faith-based organizations**

Tuesday 28 June 2011, 14:00 - 18:00, Room 2

**Strengthening Humanitarian Protection Efforts:
the Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Complex and Insecure Operating
Environments**

Introduction

While faith-based organizations (FBOs) are at the forefront of humanitarian responses to conflict and disaster affected communities around the globe, very little is known about the nature, scale and impact of their interventions. Local and national FBOs, in particular, play a major role in the protection of crisis affected communities, but their efforts are not adequately understood or recognised within the broader international humanitarian system.

This session aims to rectify the imbalance by casting the spotlight on the role of faith communities and faith based actors in the protection of conflict and disaster affected communities in complex and insecure environments. The session will examine the challenges faced by local and national FBOs in providing protection, and the opportunities that exist to strengthen the protection role they play both within communities and at the national level through stronger more effective partnerships with UNHCR and INGOs.

Session Objectives:

The session aims to:

- Develop a better understanding and appreciation of the nature, scale and impact of FBOs efforts to provide protection.
- Consider what strengths FBOs have in protection and what protection roles they are best placed to play given their unique community relations.
- Identify the key challenges faced by FBOs working in complex and insecure operating environments.
- Gauge the extent of coordination and collaboration between local and national FBOs and international humanitarian actors.
- Examine the effectiveness of collaboration, coordination and capacity-building efforts and how they may be improved.
- Consider how UNHCR and INGOs might improve partnerships with local and national FBOs that build on their protection strengths.
- Identify key questions and issues for further research.

Session Outline

The opening panel draws together four national FBOs working in conflict and disaster-affected countries in different regions. Each are field-based practitioners from different faith backgrounds (Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist).

The panel will be followed by breakout groups, which will each cover the same three topics:

1. *Perceptions and challenges*: What contribution do FBOs make the protection of people affected by conflict and disaster and/or forcibly displaced people? What threats and challenges do they face in providing protection in complex and insecure environments? How are they perceived by other humanitarian actors and what impact do these perceptions have?
2. *Strengths and opportunities*: What protection roles are local FBOs best placed to play in complex and insecure environments and why? Do FBOs have any distinct advantage in different types of protection work such as addressing discrimination, reducing threats and vulnerabilities, or strengthening people's coping capacities? Do they have a comparative advantage in community-based protection work?
- 3.
4. *Building better partnerships with FBOs*: How can UNHCR and INGOs strengthen partnerships with local, national and international FBOs in support of their unique humanitarian role and function in complex and insecure operating environments?

The second panel, which will be composed of representatives from UNHCR, an INGO and a national FBO, will then focus on how, in the context of the issues raised, we can work together more effectively to maximise our collective protection efforts through building stronger more supportive partnerships.

Background

FBOs are as diverse as the cultures and societies that sustain them. Indeed, they are so diverse that locking them together under the term 'FBO' and treating them as the same is of questionable value. Yet, while efforts to define or even categorise FBOs have been illusive, one fact is certain. They play a major role in the protection of conflict and disaster affected communities. That said, comparatively little effort has been made by humanitarian actors to understand the strengths and opportunities they have in providing protection or the challenges they face.

While faith plays a major role in the lives of those at risk or those affected by conflicts and disasters, Western humanitarianism has been largely shaped by secular values, which tends to overlook or downplay the influence of faith, or worse still, treat faith with scepticism and caution, delegitimising the role of faith outside the domain of private belief. Faith, however, not only runs deep in the veins of conflict and disaster affected communities, but it plays a major role in their lives. It helps people cope with trauma; it validates their humanity and informs their decisions, and it offers guidance, compassion, consolation and hope in their darkest hours. At risk or affected communities also turn to FBOs for physical protection, material assistance, guidance and counselling, spiritual confirmation, compassion and understanding.

Moreover, faith plays a highly influential role in local communities and in society and politics more generally. Indeed, in a world where faith is increasingly manipulated as a tool to divide people and drive conflict, it is ironic that oppressive regimes and armed non-state actors are far more adept at using religion to incite violence and division than humanitarians are at conceptualising, valuing or using faith as an instrument for protection and conflict resolution.

That fact notwithstanding, the environments in which humanitarian actors operate are becoming more complex and insecure and international humanitarian agencies are becoming increasingly reliant on national actors. Not only gain access to affected communities, but also to utilise their local knowledge, expertise and community links.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the role of FBOs among donors, UN agencies¹ and INGOs, and increased academic and policy engagement,² but this has not translated into a greater focus on their protection work within the humanitarian system. The focus has mostly been on the role of FBOs in providing basic services, particularly health and education where FBOs play a major role. The protection role played by FBOs has largely been overlooked, partly due to the low visibility of the work they do and the fact that local FBOs are rarely linked-in to the humanitarian system. Perceptions of FBOs lacking protection expertise and capacity and being overly focused on proselytising have also impacted on the willingness of many humanitarians to engage with FBOs.

Why focus on local and national FBOs?

Because of their local ties and wide-spread presence, local FBOs have an unparalleled access to conflict and disaster-affected communities, particularly in complex and insecure operating environments where affected communities are often beyond the reach of inter-governmental agencies and international NGOs. Not only are they deeply embedded in, and respected by, local communities, they are stitched into the fabric of local societies and intimately attuned to social and political dynamics.

Like most national NGOs, they are also present before, during and after disasters and conflicts, have a strong stake in local issues, and long-term convictions. Similarly, they are well-versed in the local culture and the nuances of politics, and; are often well-established and connected. As such, they can and do work in areas where governments or mandated protection actors have little presence or authority. Indeed, in many cases their reach extends far beyond that of the state, particularly in remote and rural areas.

The relationships between FBOs and faith communities are also quite distinct. FBOs usually have a high level of trust within their community and a high level of moral authority among the faithful, including in some cases having considerable leverage with state authorities and non-state actors.

By the same token, however, FBOs are also quite vulnerable and exposed to threats. They are often targeted because they do speak for the oppressed and the marginalised. Even when FBOs are not outspoken in condemning the behaviour and actions of perpetrators and belligerents, they are often still targeted simply because they embody an alternative value system with strong moral and behavioural codes. All too commonly, FBOs are accused of taking sides in a conflict and/or proselytising as a way of undermining the humanitarian nature of their concerns and actions. Many also refuse to countenance any form of physical security, preferring to focus on building relationships of trust and mutual understanding as a way of ensuring their own security. Last, but not least, despite their local knowledge and contacts, they often lack 'technical' protection expertise and funding, and; are overwhelmed with competing priorities for their time and resources.

¹ UNAIDS, which brings together 10 major UN agencies, for example, has developed a strategic framework for working with FBOs.

² Oxford University Refugee Studies Centre, for example, held a conference on Faith-Based Humanitarianism in September 2010.

Additional Questions for Consideration:

- How do FBOs understand ‘protection’ and what is the primary foundation or source of protection (e.g. international law, humanitarian principles, morals and ethics, religious texts)?
- What are the main types of protection activities that FBO engage in and why? What impact do FBOs have in terms of preventing discrimination, alienation, exploitation and abuse? What role do FBOs play in preventing violence? What remedies do they provide for those who have been abused or mistreated?
- How successful have FBOs been at combating SGBV and harmful traditional practices and what strengths or weaknesses do they have in this regard?
- If FBOs have a high level of moral authority, how is it used to protect people at risk? For example, in persuading political leaders, armed groups, mobilising support from their constituencies etc.
- What role do FBOs play in mobilising the faithful, inspiring reform, speaking out and persuading religious leaders and to what extent is religion a rallying point and an organising principle for protection?
- What role does faith play in helping at risk and affected communities come to terms with their situation? To what extent does faith inspire and guide the protection work of local faith communities and FBOs?
- How does faith contribute to peoples coping capacities and what role do FBOs play in helping people cope on an emotional, psychological and spiritual level? Does being more in touch with issues of faith place FBOs in a better position to deal with the psychosocial needs of the faithful?
- FBOs are well-known for their prominent role in providing health and education, but to what extent is protection mainstreamed in these programs?
- What expectations do at risk and affected people have of FBOs? To what extent are FBOs expected to provide physical protection, material assistance, guidance and counselling, spiritual confirmation, compassion and understanding?
- To what extent do national FBOs collaborate with other national actors in protection programs and advocacy and what protection role do they play at the national level and within communities?
- How do religious teachings such as justice, compassion and forgiveness, and practices, such as Zakat (compulsory Islamic charity) or welcoming the stranger, impact on protection?
- To what extent are FBOs able to draw on and use religious teachings and texts to strengthen protection, such as citing Bible chapter and verse or Suras from the Koran? How successful have secular NGOs been at doing the same? Do such references resonate more with local people than human rights?
- To what extent should secular human rights and humanitarian agencies use religious precedents, teachings and beliefs as a tool for protection? What are the dangers and limitations in doing so?
- Are FBOs targeted more or less for the protection work they undertake? What strategies are used by state and non-state armed actors to weaken, discredit or undermine the work and influence of FBOs? How widespread is the practice of falsely accusing FBOs of proselytising and what impact does it have?
- What comparative advantages do national FBOs have over other protection actors and how well are they recognised and factored into the wider protection efforts of states, mandated protection actors and NGOs?
- What forms of protection capacity have FBOs invested in? How successful have attempts been to build the protection capacity of national FBOs? What skills, values, relationships, beliefs and approaches need to be considered?
- What elements need to be in place for effective protection partnerships between faith communities and FBOs and other humanitarian actors?

- What types of protection partnerships already exist and what types might be envisioned?
- What unique capacities do FBOs have for protection work and are these capacities recognised and considered a value-add in partnerships?
- To what extent is the unique nature of FBOs taken into account in UNHCR and INGO partnerships with national FBOs and how does this impact on their relationship and their joint work?
- Are the distinctive sets of skills, values, relationships, beliefs and approaches that underpin FBO protection work recognised in efforts to professionalise the humanitarian sector?
- What might FBOs, UNHCR and INGOs learn from each other humanitarian agencies learn from each other regarding protection policy, practice approaches etc.?

This paper has been prepared by the NGO focal points organizing the session. Opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of UNHCR.