

## FORCED MIGRATION POLICY NOTE

**LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITIES AND RESILIENCE IN  
HUMANITARIAN SITUATIONS**

December 2012

Local Faith Communities (LFCs) engage in a range of activities across the humanitarian spectrum. Resilience, defined as the ability to anticipate, withstand and bounce back from external pressures and shocks<sup>1</sup>, is increasingly a key construct in shaping humanitarian strategy by the international community. Faith groups are often central to strengthening resilience and reinforcing the local processes of identity and connection that comprise the social fabric of communities disrupted by disaster or conflict. There is increasing recognition of LFCs' roles by the mainstream humanitarian community, as evidenced by emerging research and international dialogues on faith, such as the UNHCR Dialogue on Faith and Protection in December 2012. However there are a number of challenges to establishing partnerships with LFCs. This Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) on Faith and Local Communities has sought to understand the role of LFCs in strengthening resilience, as well as addressing three challenges to full engagement with LFCs: a lack of evidence regarding the impact of LFCs on individual and community resilience; a lack of trust, knowledge and capacity for such engagement; and the need for clear, implementable actions to improve partnership and the effectiveness of humanitarian response. Under the auspices of the JLI on Faith and Local Communities, the Learning Hub on Resilience, made up of 20 practitioners, academics and policymakers expert in humanitarian services and faith community, has guided a scoping report on the question of evidence for LFC contribution to resilience.<sup>2</sup> This note abstracts from that report, and summarises available evidence.



Anglican Bishop of Tamale in Ghana with local government responding to drought with food aid 2012. Credit: Anglican Alliance

**Building an improved evidence base  
on the impact of LFCs on resilience**

Phase one of the JLI Resilience Learning Hub process mapped existing evidence relevant to the impact of LFCs in resilience with regard to four major issues: disaster risk reduction (DRR), emergency response (both with respect to provision of basic services and psychosocial support), and the identification of durable solutions for affected populations. The key findings presented below are based on an extensive literature review of over 280 academic and policy documents, written contributions submitted by over a dozen partner secular and faith-based humanitarian organisations, and semi-structured interviews conducted with over a dozen leading practitioners and faith leaders from around the world.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed definition, see UNICEF (2011) *2011 UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children: building resilience*.

<sup>2</sup> Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) 'Local faith communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations: a scoping study', Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper and FMO (2013) 'Local Faith Communities and Humanitarian Situations', Forced Migration Online Resource Page – both available to download from [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk) in January 2013.

## Disaster risk reduction

Examples of LFCs' involvement in community-based DRR show that the narratives, values, and identity provided by LFCs can provide a basis for 'community formation' even in highly fractured situations (e.g. urbanisation, conflict) where social fragmentation is a major contributor to disaster vulnerability.

**LFCs have material and social assets which make them a natural locus for DRR.** Existing evidence shows that mosque loudspeakers and church bells are a staple of local early warning systems, and religious buildings often play a role in community disaster plans. The social assets of LFCs often include existing volunteer networks and relationships with other LFCs and wider civil society actors. There are many examples of international NGOs building on this existing capacity to promote community based DRR. An external cost-benefit analysis of this DRR work with LFCs showed that for every \$1 invested in building the capacity of LFCs for DRR, \$24 dollars was saved.<sup>3</sup>

*"Our hope comes from God. He is the air that we breathe. He is the sand that we walk on. Without him, we would not have made it, but through him we will have a future."*  
Dinka elder's account of his community's survival\*

**Distinctively religious narratives about the causes of disaster can be a spur to DRR action.** Interviews with disaster survivors and observers reveal that religious explanations citing divine action remain very common. This is often seen as a barrier to addressing the physical, political, and social root causes, as such beliefs can spur passivity and guilt and undermine psychological resilience in the face of disaster. However, the evidence suggests that supernatural beliefs often coexist with acceptance of other causes and the willingness to address them. For example, many evangelical church networks in Zimbabwe believe in a 'spiritual context' that explains drought and food crisis, but are also engaged

*"I have the feeling that our planet Earth is suffering, and this tsunami is the cry of the Earth as it writhes in pain: a lament, a cry for help, a warning".*

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's response to the 2004 tsunami\*\*

in a practical nationwide campaign to promote drought-resilient 'conservation agriculture'<sup>4</sup>. The role of religious leaders in interpreting religious values and applying them to DRR is central: through their leadership, post-disaster soul-searching can lead to practical transformation.

## Emergency response: basic services

There are many examples of LFCs meeting the basic needs of displaced persons, such as shelter, registration, food and non food items, and some evidence to suggest such provision may have a stronger ethos of service and may be more culturally appropriate. However the decentralised and informal nature of LFC assistance means is very challenging to reliably estimate the total value of basic services provided by LFCs annually.

**LFCs are 'first responders' in emergencies.** In many contexts LFCs are particularly well situated to respond within the first 24-96 hours of an emergency, when access to remote or disaster affected areas may be physically impossible for external actors, or in contexts of weak, fragile and dysfunctional states. Despite this, a number of examples were identified of LFCs having provided significant forms of support to affected communities, only subsequently to be implicitly or explicitly marginalised by international actors.

**LFCs have key resources that equip them to provide basic services.** The social capital of many LFCs enables them to mobilise human and financial resources relatively quickly from within displaced communities and from those that host them. Religious buildings are used for storage, information



LFC unloading food aid in Tamale Ghana. Credit: Anglican Alliance

<sup>3</sup> Cabot Venton, C. and Siedenburg, J. (2010) *Investing in Communities: The benefits and costs of building resilience for food security in Malawi*, available at [www.tearfund.org/investingincommunities](http://www.tearfund.org/investingincommunities).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://trumpetcallzimbabwe.org>.

\* Cited in J.Holton (2010) *Building the resilient community*, Cascade Books.

\*\* Cited in M. Falk (2010) 'Recovery and Buddhist practices in the aftermath of the Tsunami in Southern Thailand', *Religion*, 40, 96-103.

hubs, shelter and protection. In some fragile state contexts, such as Haiti, LFCs act as ‘pseudo state interlocutors’ through whom international agencies gain access and understanding of local communities.

**Engagement with LFCs may facilitate appropriate understanding of need.** LFCs may be particularly well situated to recognise the extent to which ‘basic needs’ transcend secular organisations’ perceptions, as demonstrated in the case of Muslim women affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, for whom headscarves were essential to maintain their dignity and a prerequisite to be able to access other services in public fora.

## Emergency response: psychosocial support

LFCs’ understanding of the complexities of psychosocial issues and their situatedness within the community, often combined with existing records of pastoral care, may particularly suit them to provide psychosocial support. This usually takes the form of counseling, prayer, solidarity or therapeutic narratives. Some humanitarian agencies raise concerns about the lack of professional training within religious communities for this work. However LFCs often provide a ‘psychological first aid’ which promotes individual and community resilience by building on existing coping strategies.



A temporary mosque in the form of hanging sheets in the Stadion Maguwoharjo IDP camp, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Credit: Lindsay Stark

**Individuals hold beliefs that help them to recover from or manage adversity.** There is an established body of research literature documenting how religious beliefs frequently operate in support of resilience: values of positivity and motivation and ways of interpreting change equip individuals to withstand shock.<sup>5</sup> Interviews with survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 Tsunami reveal that belief in God and prayer remains critical in helping respondents cope with disaster. Religious coping, however, is not monolithic but is expressed differently in different contexts, so in some cases religious worldviews promote specific claims that hinder resilience, by promoting fatalism and blame.

**Active religious practices provide psychosocial support and may promote resilience.** Psychosocial practices are embedded deeply in the practice of religious communities: rituals and rites define passage through phases of

life, communities united by belief systems offer mutual support, and respected leaders offer interpretations of life’s challenges and advice on the means of surviving them. This is demonstrated by the priority given to religious articles and spaces during disasters, such as prayer mats and the reconstruction of shrines, temples, churches and mosques.

## Transitional and durable solutions

LFCs can often play a crucial role in fostering recovery, relief and reconstruction because they are often better attuned to the needs, culture, practices and language of a community than large international organisations, and benefit from high level of trust from other local actors. In many instances LFCs are often crucial operational partners assisting larger agencies. Practical examples of this include registering asylum seekers, community peace building, conflict mitigation, promoting sustainable livelihoods and child protection.<sup>6</sup>

**LFCs can help to build cross-border networks that ease integration in contexts of displacement.** In many cases LFCs have strong links with affiliated LFCs from the same tradition in neighboring countries and further afield, which can provide an anchorage for displaced communities. UNHCR reports that in urban or non-camp settings, in Ghana and Liberia for example, refugees have established relationships with host communities through shared religious beliefs and praying together. In Burundi the Anglican Church helped long term returnees from Tanzania re-establish livelihoods and provided frameworks to negotiate land rights.

<sup>5</sup> See the Conor Davidson Resilience Scale, available at <http://www.connordavidson-resiliencescale.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Clarke, G. (2010) ‘Trans-Faith Humanitarianism: Muslim Aid and the United Methodist Committee on Relief’, *European Journal of Development Research*, 22(4): 510-528 and Gaillard, J. C. and P. Texier (2010) ‘Religions, natural hazards, and disasters: An introduction’, *Religion*, 40(2): 81-84, p. 83.

**LFCs are uniquely positioned to engage with controversial issues.** LFCs may have access to issues that are considered too sensitive, taboo or stigmatised to openly share with external actors. A study of Kikuyu victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya highlights how faith and faith communities were the only actors able to provide trauma counseling.<sup>7</sup> However evidence suggests some LFCs also perpetuate stigma by failing to challenge social norms that undermine individual resilience.

**LFCs' social and political capital can be used to promote peaceful durable solutions.** During and after conflict, local faith leaders are often key actors in local peace building initiatives. However, LFCs often struggle to remain impartial or to 'name and shame' as they are subject to political, sectarian, ethnic affiliations and have often also been affected by the disaster themselves. LFCs' embeddedness can thus both promote and hinder of resilience. This posits a challenge to the humanitarian principle of neutrality; durable solutions will always needs socio-political solutions.

## Conclusions and recommendations

**LFCs' impact on resilience.** Evidence suggests that LFCs utilise their pre-existing local networks and buildings, plus their shared identity, social vision, religious narratives and public leaders, to mobilise, coordinate, register, train, consol, encourage and help resolve conflict. This approach builds on existing community coping mechanisms and assets, harnesses social capital and thus strengthens community resilience. Concerns remain around the use of religious values to promote fatalism, inaction or scapegoating, and the risks of conditionality and proselytising when LFCs engage in the delivery of services.

- Further inquiry is required into the added value of working with LFCs, including the use of social capital in community based responses, the importance of religious values and beliefs for responding to and preparing for disasters, and comparative cost effectiveness of building on existing structure and networks.
- Further inquiry is also essential to understand the processes of inclusion and exclusion by LFCs, and to critically assess generalised assumptions about LFC conservatism or exclusivity.

**LFCs' presence and influence at community level.** Respondents varied in their assessments of whether LFCs were inherently part of local community structures in predominantly religious societies, or whether such partnerships must be defined by engagement with religious specialists (clergy, scholars) or distinctly religious institutions (temple, church, mosque). This illustrates that in many parts of the world, the community's religious life is not readily distinguishable from its broader social and cultural life; it also suggests that many organisations are already using LFC capacities in humanitarian activities, perhaps without recognising the fact.

- Participatory research in real time during disasters would enable stakeholders to identify the multiple informal ways LFCs are already contributing to the protection of displaced persons.

**LFCs' partnerships with humanitarian organisations.** Interviews with humanitarian agencies showed that many already engage to greater or lesser degrees with LFCs. However, barriers remain to deepening and expanding these partnerships, such as conflicting secular and religious worldviews, issues of technical competency and independence from local political dynamics.

- Further inquiry is recommended to critically interrogate barriers to partnership, such as the extent to which LFCs are already meeting international standards in delivery and their levels of access and engagement with humanitarian coordinating mechanisms.

*The policy note summarises the findings of a major JLI scoping report edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford; elena.fiddian-qasmiyeh@rsc.ox.ac.uk) and Alastair Ager (Program on Forced Migration & Health, Columbia University; aa2468@columbia.edu): Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) 'Local faith communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations: a scoping study,' Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper. Phase two of the JLI Resilience and Humanitarian Learning Hub will engage in new research to address some of these emerging issues. For more information on JLI/LFC contact the Global Coordinator, Jean Duff on jeanduff@fullcirclepartners.org.*

<sup>7</sup> Parsitau, D. S. (2011) 'The Role of Faith and Faith-Based Organizations among Internally Displaced Persons in Kenya,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(3): 493-512, p. 507.