

# Faith and impartiality in humanitarian response: Lessons from Lebanese evangelical churches providing food aid

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## Abstract

*This case study of a network of evangelical churches in Lebanon, based on data collected during an evaluation in 2014, presents a critique of common understandings about the humanitarian principle of impartiality, and questions assumptions about the compatibility between religious fervour and humanitarian values. Churches attempting to respect impartiality while implementing a food aid project for Syrian refugees have sought to mitigate potential problems through relationship-building and promotion of human dignity in order to ensure needs-responsiveness. Though many Lebanese Evangelical Christians do continue to engage in evangelistic activity, they benefit from strong community ties and demonstrate a high level of sensitivity to their beneficiaries' urgent needs as well as their sense of dignity.*

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Throughout much of the twentieth century, a dominant discourse of secularism crowded out voices of faith in humanitarian circles and in development studies. Nonetheless, as they have long done, people and institutions of faith continue to invest in education, health care, community-based empowerment, justice and other important types of service provision and social support.<sup>1</sup> In fact, during the years following World War II, many of the largest providers of relief were faith-based: a 1953 study found that as much as 90% of all post-war relief was provided by religious agencies.<sup>2</sup> During the decades that followed, however, those faith-based organizations which continued to play an active role in global humanitarian fora were those that began to downplay their religious identity.<sup>3</sup> “Religion might have been instrumental in the establishment of humanitarianism, but it passed the torch to secularism”<sup>4</sup> as academic, political and development discourses came to conceptualize religion as conservative and traditional, and in tension with societal progress.<sup>5</sup> The past decade, however, has begun to see the pendulum shift back to an interest in the unique contribution made by religious institutions, communities of faith, and other entities that may fall under the broad umbrella category of faith-based organizations (FBOs).<sup>6</sup>

Discourse in humanitarian, development and academic circles has long been marked by suspicion about the capacity of faith-motivated institutions to contribute to humanitarian objectives. These concerns are most notable with respect to locally based and grass-roots entities, many of which have a faith orientation to some extent.<sup>7</sup> In particular, practitioners and theorists alike have

1 Elizabeth Ferris, “Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, No. 858, 2005, pp. 311–325; Richard Wilson and Richard Brown (eds), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

2 E. Ferris, above note 1, p. 315.

3 Michael Barnett and Janice Stein, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 4; Alastair Ager and Joey Ager, “Faith and the Discourse of Secular Humanitarianism”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2011, p. 456.

4 M. Barnett and J. Stein, above note 3, p. 5.

5 Ben Jones and Marie Juul Petersen, “Instrumental, Narrow, Normative? Reviewing Recent Work on Religion and Development”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 7, 2011, p. 1292.

6 The term “faith-based organization” will be used in this paper to describe any faith-driven institutions which in any way have a religious identity, regardless of their primary mandate or objectives; see Gerard Clarke, “Agents of Transformation? Donors, Faith-Based Organizations and International Development”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2007, pp. 77–96; Jenny Lunn, “The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2009, pp. 937–951. The phrase “faith-motivated” will be used to describe the broader category of entities who have a faith ethos but which may or may not identify with a religious categorization.

7 The conceptualization of an organization as faith-based or secular is in itself contentious, as there are a range of attitudes amongst FBOs with regard to humanitarian principles, some almost indistinguishable from those of non-religious organizations. Other organizations, including arguably most local community-based organizations around the world, operate on a strong faith ethos but do not self-define as faith-based. See Sara Lei Sparre and Marie Juul Petersen, *Islam and Civil Society*:

expressed concern with regards to their ability to adhere to humanitarian principles, particularly that of impartiality.

Impartiality is one of the most oft-cited humanitarian principles (other commonly cited principles are humanity, neutrality and independence). As stated by then director-general of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Angelo Gnaedinger, in 2007: “Humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence have become household names in the humanitarian community .... Humanity and impartiality are principles that most, if not all, humanitarian actors adhere to.”<sup>8</sup> Humanitarian principles have long guided the operations of the ICRC, but they have also been adopted or adapted by other humanitarian actors over the course of the past century. The principles, which may be described “as a rudder with which to steer a course through the murky waters of relief provision in complex emergencies”,<sup>9</sup> are intended *inter alia* to help minimize or, ideally, eliminate any impact that relief may have on the dynamics of the conflict situation. There is an implicit understanding that aid provision can inadvertently create or tip power imbalances in already fragile contexts; humanitarian principles, therefore, serve as a reminder to aid providers that they need to be sensitive to these power imbalances and design their interventions in a way that seeks to contribute to the saving of lives without engaging in local community dynamics.<sup>10</sup>

The principle of impartiality is described by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as an understanding that “humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions”.<sup>11</sup> A key component of the principle of impartiality, therefore, is non-discrimination – that is, the importance of not basing the provision of aid on “race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria”,<sup>12</sup> as stated in Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions. Other key aspects of

*Case Studies from Jordan and Egypt*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2007, p. 13; Thomas Jeavons, “Religious and Faith-Based Organizations: Do We Know One When We See One?”, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2004, pp. 140–145.

8 Angelo Gnaedinger, “Humanitarian Principles: The Importance of Their Preservation During Humanitarian Crises”, speech delivered at the international conference “Humanitarian Aid in the Spotlight: Upcoming Challenges for European Actors in Lisbon”, 12 October 2007, available at: [www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/statement/humanitarian-principles-statement-121007.htm](http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/statement/humanitarian-principles-statement-121007.htm) (all internet references were accessed in July 2015).

9 Kate Mackintosh, *The Principles of Humanitarian Action in International Humanitarian Law*, Humanitarian Policy Group Report No. 5, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, March 2000, p. 1.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

11 OCHA, *OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles Factsheet*, June 2012, available at: [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples\\_eng\\_June12.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf).

12 Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 31 (entered into force 21 October 1950); Geneva Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 85 (entered into force 21 October 1950); Geneva Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 135 (entered into force 21 October 1950); Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 287 (entered into force 21 October 1950), common Art. 3.

impartiality are needed as the key deciding factor with regard to who receives which aid, and the expectation that potential beneficiaries not be required to do anything to deserve aid.<sup>13</sup>

Faith-motivated religious actors are therefore expected, by humanitarian agencies which subscribe to the humanitarian principles, to provide aid on the basis of need alone, without any discrimination in terms of religious affiliation or practice. Considering this shared understanding of impartiality and its importance in humanitarian response, humanitarian agencies are often concerned that FBOs may selectively choose their beneficiaries, prioritizing members of their own faith community,<sup>14</sup> or that they may engage in proselytization – that is, taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of their beneficiaries to entice them into certain behaviour, such as changing their religion.<sup>15</sup>

This paper explores ways in which local faith-motivated humanitarian actors conceptualize the principle of impartiality, using the case study of a network of local faith communities (churches in Lebanon) that had recently received their first funding from humanitarian donors to implement a response to a rapidly evolving influx of refugees. While agreeing with the concept, they continued to engage in overtly religious activities, as may be expected of long-established religious institutions. They sought to ensure impartiality through a highly relational approach to aid provision. Church members believed they were being impartial and acting in keeping with the general spirit of the humanitarian principles because they placed high emphasis on need as a key criteria for aid provision and because they developed an approach which sought to promote and preserve the dignity of the affected population.

This case study raises a number of important questions about common ideas regarding impartiality among humanitarian actors, including the expectation that material assistance should be separated from faith convictions, and the concern that engagement in religious activities may distract aid providers from meeting beneficiaries' urgent needs. It also draws attention to the importance of promoting human dignity and presents the view of faith-motivated actors that human dignity is, for them, an important principle for humanitarian action. Finally, it raises questions about how relationships can help meet the holistic needs of affected populations, while at the same time creating challenges to ensuring impartiality in aid provision.

A case study of a network of nineteen evangelical churches in Lebanon providing food aid to Syrian refugees will be used to explore these issues. The next section will provide an overview of the case study and of the research methodology; then, an outline of the key issues identified in the emerging literature on faith in humanitarian response will be followed by a critique of the

13 K. Mackintosh, above note 9, p. 8.

14 E. Ferris, above note 1; G. Clarke, above note 6.

15 Saroj Jayasinghe, "Faith-Based NGOs and Healthcare in Poor Countries: A Preliminary Exploration of Ethical Issues", *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 33, No. 11, 2007, pp. 623–626; Rick James, "Handle with Care: Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations in Development", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2011, pp. 109–117.

concept of humanitarian impartiality in current discourses. This will be followed by a discussion of how churches have adapted the concept of impartiality to their own *modus operandi*, in keeping with their religious and cultural values, by focusing on relationship-building with beneficiaries. The final section will discuss how churches have interpreted and applied their understanding of impartiality and humanitarianism in their own unique ways, highlighting the emphasis that they place on human dignity.

## **Case study: Evangelical churches in Lebanon and impartiality**

The data for this case study was collected in tandem with an external evaluation conducted for the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) in July–August 2014, with preliminary data collection taking place in January 2014. LSESD was receiving funding from an institutional donor to provide food aid to a total of nineteen churches spread across Lebanon, many of which were based in neighbourhoods where the presence of larger humanitarian actors was limited. Each church received between fourteen and 900 monthly vouchers or food boxes to distribute to refugee families living in its community. The families were selected based on criteria developed by each church under the close supervision of LSESD. For this research, five of the participating churches were visited; at each church, a leader, one or more volunteers and at least three beneficiaries were interviewed. Church meetings and distributions were also attended. In addition, staff of LSESD were interviewed.<sup>16</sup> For the evaluation, a variety of external stakeholders were also consulted, though data from those interviews, while used for identification of themes and triangulation of findings, are not presented in this paper.

The network established by LSESD provides an interesting case study for a number of reasons. First, very few of the leaders and members of these churches had ever engaged in humanitarian response prior to the influx of Syrian refugees that began in 2011. Some churches had provided assistance to displaced people during the six-week war between Hizbollah and Israel in 2006, but that experience was limited to a very short time period, and few churches developed active social programmes during or afterwards. During the Syria crisis, though, refugees have moved into almost every neighbourhood of Lebanon, and some were already into their third year of displacement at the time of this research. Local churches, as established community institutions, found themselves surrounded by extreme levels of need. Motivated by a combination of obligation, compassion and an opportunity presented by LSESD,<sup>17</sup> these churches began assistance programmes for refugees. After the programme was up and running, church leaders attended

16 Interviews were conducted in both Arabic and English, and in all instances transcribed real-time into English as recording was deemed too sensitive for this context. All participants were informed that the interview would be used for the LSESD evaluation as well as for academic research purposes.

17 See [www.lsesd.org](http://www.lsesd.org).

training on the humanitarian principles offered by LSESD donors, who were international Christian non-profits headquartered in Europe. For most of the church leaders, it was the first time they had heard an argument for the importance of impartiality in humanitarian assistance.

Second, the churches providing aid through this network were composed of Evangelical Christians, most of whom have a strong doctrinal mandate for evangelization. Some church leaders explained that they believe the spiritual human is lasting, while the physical human is temporary, and as such they have a deep conviction that investing in the spiritual health of disaster-affected people is more important than investing in their physical health – that is, they prefer to provide spiritual salvation for eternity than physical salvation for the present. As they have engaged in food provision, they have come to respect the principle of impartiality, agreeing that no one should feel religiously coerced because of their material needs, but are not willing to compromise their belief that the most important assistance they can provide to a fellow human being is the message of their faith.<sup>18</sup>

Third, while these particular aid providers were Christian, the majority of their beneficiaries were Muslim. A long and complex history of inter-faith relations exists in the Middle East, as well as a historical tension between Syria and Lebanon, most recently expressed in events during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1991.<sup>19</sup> For many Lebanese church members, their willingness to provide any type of assistance to Syrian Muslim refugees at all was novel and represented a shift in mindset from only a few years before, when their fear and hatred of Syrians precluded any thought of positive engagement at all. This, combined with a tendency to avoid extensive interaction with people of other religious sects, was initially a major barrier to considering working with Muslim refugees. For many of the churches in this case study, the very existence of their humanitarian work signifies a victory of faith-motivated compassion over historic animosity. Syrian Muslims' opinions about Christians vary considerably, but Syria does have a significant Christian minority of its own, and so the churches' beneficiaries were, at minimum, aware that they were receiving life-saving aid from members of a

18 This network of churches was developed by LSESD on a convenience basis, according to which churches had the willingness and resources to implement the project. Other evangelical churches are partnering with other NGOs, but most evangelical churches work only with donors who are themselves affiliated with evangelical churches, such as LSESD, which is a part of the Baptist Society. Other donor NGOs are less proactive about training their churches in humanitarian principles, and some actually require that their churches engage in evangelistic activity as a part of their aid programme. It bears stating that this case study is of evangelical churches; in contrast, non-evangelical Protestant (such as Presbyterian), Catholic and Orthodox churches typically do not engage in evangelistic activity but are also actively involved in aid provision for refugees in Lebanon.

19 From the early years of the Lebanese Civil War until 2005, the Syrian military occupied Lebanon as a self-designated peacekeeping force. The years of war in Lebanon exacerbated sectarian tensions, and the Syrian military was an active party in the conflict; many Lebanese in this research shared stories of atrocities committed by the Syrian military until they were forced out by public pressure in 2005, more than a decade after the Ta'if agreement which ended the conflict in Lebanon. Meanwhile, however, it bears noting that many Lebanese sought refuge in Syria and were provided with safe haven there at different times during the war in Lebanon.

different religious sect. The aid providers adhered to a religion that was indigenous to the country from which the refugees came as well as the one in which they were living, but the inter-faith nature of the aid provision allowed ample space for potential proselytizing motivations.

As such, LSESD, itself an NGO founded by the Lebanese Baptist Society, attempted to maintain a high level of impartiality while keeping to the mantra that – as stated by Rupen Das, then director of LSESD’s Relief and Development Department, and often repeated by LSESD staff and partners – they “let the church be the church”. Under LSESD’s guidance, churches developed their own approaches to respecting the principle of impartiality while also staying true to their own beliefs. These approaches will be explored below, after placing this discussion in the context of wider debates regarding the role of faith actors in humanitarian debates.

## The role of faith actors in humanitarian response

Local faith communities (LFCs)<sup>20</sup> are often first responders in humanitarian crises.<sup>21</sup> They respond quickly, but are also often approached by affected populations in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, sought out for both material and spiritual support, as well as for updated information.<sup>22</sup> Faith communities tend to be well established and enjoy a high level of trust and social capital in their communities, with existing social and physical structures which help them to intervene efficiently when services are urgently needed.<sup>23</sup>

Financially, faith-motivated actors are also well placed to act quickly. While unlikely to have contingency funds specifically set aside for emergencies, nor emergency preparedness plans in place, they are often able to mobilize flexible funds at short notice through their religious networks both locally and beyond.<sup>24</sup> While limited in size, donations received through religious channels are usually private and unrestricted, providing a resource base upon which FBOs can fall

20 Defined as religious and faith-based communities “such as congregations, mosques and temples ... whose members reside in relatively close proximity, such that they can regularly meet together for religious purposes, often in a dedicated physical venue”: Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Alastair Ager, *Local Faith Communities and the Promotion of Resilience in Humanitarian Situations: A Scoping Study*, Working Paper Series No. 90, Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, Oxford, February 2013.

21 Jean-Christophe Gaillard and Pauline Texier, “Religions, Natural Hazards, and Disasters: An Introduction”, *Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2010, p. 82; Ben Wisner, “Untapped Potential of the World’s Religious Communities for Disaster Reduction in an Age of Accelerated Climate Change: An Epilogue and Prologue”, *Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2010, p. 129; E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and A. Ager, above note 20, p. 4.

22 Fiona Samuels, Rena Geibel and Fiona Perry, *Collaboration Between Faith-Based Communities and Humanitarian Actors when Responding to HIV in Emergencies*, Project Briefing No. 41, ODI, London, May 2010, p. 2.

23 Nkwachukwu Orji, “Faith-Based Aid to People Affected by Conflict in Jos, Nigeria: An Analysis of the Role of Christian and Muslim Organizations”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2011, p. 483; Ignatius Swart, “Churches as a Stock of Social Capital for Promoting Social Development in Western Cape Communities”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2006, pp. 346–378.

24 F. Samuels *et al.*, above note 22, p. 2.



when funds are needed urgently.<sup>25</sup> The costs of FBOs are also often lower than those of secular organizations, as they may tap into significant volunteer resources, use existing facilities for running operations, and access other types of practical support through their religious communities.

The scope and scale of faith-based humanitarian response is largely unknown; much of the work of faith actors is “not quantified or recorded anywhere”.<sup>26</sup> At local, national and global levels, religious and denominational structures typically have their own system for donating and for responding, and rarely make an effort to incorporate those plans into the coordination systems of other humanitarian actors. While there may be many religious communities providing aid, each community’s reach is likely much smaller than that of large international organizations funded by institutional donors. As Elizabeth Ferris writes:

To date there has been no attempt to estimate the contributions of such diverse Christian groups as the Anglican Church in Kenya, the Christian Council of Malaysia, the YMCA in Sri Lanka and the Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia – all of which provide direct assistance to individuals in need from their own resources – in addition to the international support they may receive. Other religious traditions have a similarly varied assortment of organizations which provide assistance that is rarely included in tabulations of aid.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps this is one reason why FBOs’ voices in humanitarian and academic discussions have been somewhat limited thus far. Research, writing and discussion surrounding faith in development has been growing during the past decade; however, little research captures the specific perspective of religious institutions or people of faith with regard to how FBOs might best engage with the larger humanitarian community. The largest and most visible FBOs in humanitarian response, such as World Vision and Islamic Relief, tend to shy away from overtly religious activities, even though their foundations are deeply religious – indeed, World Vision was founded by an evangelist.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, more religiously zealous FBOs are moved to the sidelines of humanitarian discussions.<sup>29</sup>

There is little research that investigates how faith-based actors develop their humanitarian or development discourses.<sup>30</sup> There are writings on the theology of

25 N. Orji, above note 23, p. 483.

26 Elizabeth Ferris, “Faith and Humanitarianism: It’s Complicated”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2011, p. 610.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 610.

28 Erica Bornstein, “Child Sponsorship, Evangelism, and Belonging in the Work of World Vision Zimbabwe”, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2001, p. 605.

29 Marie Juul Petersen, “Islamizing Aid: Transnational Muslim NGOs After 9.11”, *Voluntas*, Vol. 23, No. 1, March 2011, pp. 126–155.

30 There are some interesting studies that do investigate humanitarianism from the starting point of faith; for example, Mathijs Pelkmans, “The ‘Transparency’ of Christian Proselytizing in Kyrgyzstan”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2011, pp. 423–445; Edward Smither, “Missão Integral [holistic mission or the ‘whole Gospel’] Applied: Brazilian Evangelical Models of Holistic Mission in the Arab-Muslim World”, *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Art. #483, September 2011; Mona Harb,



compassion in many religious traditions, but these theological works are generally quite different in focus and rhetoric from social science and development studies. As a result, there is little evidence available describing how FBOs actually engage with the principle of impartiality, and little space for dialogue between entities which define themselves primarily by faith and those which define themselves primarily by humanitarianism.<sup>31</sup> Instead, FBOs are expected to either conduct their business in a manner akin to secular organizations, or are assumed to be not truly humanitarian.

Some researchers have suggested that secular humanitarian discourse struggles to find common ground with faith discourses in part because of its historic focus on material over psychosocial support. “The value of a religious tradition to a secularist humanitarianism, then, is only in terms of what it may offer to a material agenda.”<sup>32</sup> Faith-motivated actors are more likely to contribute to meeting urgent needs holistically. This meets a strongly felt need among many disaster-affected populations, who are often eager to feel connected to a power larger than themselves, larger even than the event that has befallen them. Belief in God is, for many, an important coping mechanism.<sup>33</sup> “For many disaster survivors, their ability to recover hinges on their ability to make meaning of disaster experience and to integrate their disaster experience into their life narrative.”<sup>34</sup> This is most effectively done if the meaning fits within the framework of the existing beliefs and values of affected people.<sup>35</sup>

Faith communities are actually uniquely positioned to liaise between affected communities and aid organizations, due to their continual presence in areas where a humanitarian response is taking place; this continuity and dependability can help ensure mutual trust.<sup>36</sup> But these same faith communities are often relatively small, with few staff and limited financial resources, so they rarely feel they have the capacity needed to engage with the wider humanitarian structure.<sup>37</sup> Humanitarian organizations are increasingly seeking ways to actively involve faith communities in their responses by, for example, partnering with national FBOs, engaging in dialogue with local faith leaders about culture and values, working within existing faith structures to deliver aid, and seeking to build the capacity of faith actors for humanitarian response.<sup>38</sup>

“Faith-Based Organizations as Effective Development Partners? Hezbollah and Post-War Reconstruction in Lebanon”, in Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (eds), *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2008; Mona Atia, “‘A Way to Paradise’: Pious Neoliberalism, Islam, and Faith-Based Development”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 102, No. 4, 2011, pp. 808–827; M. J. Petersen, above note 29.

31 M. Barnett and J. Stein, above note 3, p. 4, A. Ager and J. Ager, above note 3, p. 461.

32 A. Ager and J. Ager, above note 3, p. 460.

33 E. Fiddian-Qasmieh and A. Ager, above note 20, p. 5; Monica Lindberg Falk, “Recovery and Buddhist Practices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami in Southern Thailand”, *Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2010, p. 97.

34 Jamie Aten, “Disaster Spiritual and Emotional Care in Professional Psychology: A Christian Integrative Approach”, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2012, p. 133.

35 N. Orji, above note 23, p. 488.

36 F. Samuels *et al.*, above note 22, p. 2.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

38 E. Fiddian-Qasmieh and A. Ager, above note 20, p. 6.

## Impartiality in practice: Power dynamics and tension between religious and humanitarian discourses

The issue of proselytization and conditionality is a historic sore spot for the international humanitarian community, as well as for communities around the world who have been on the receiving end of colonial or missionary endeavours. Many FBOs have sought to distance themselves from these historical memories, since “stories abound of Christian organizations which take advantage of people’s desperation by creating conditional connections between the provision of relief and faith”.<sup>39</sup> Though proselytizing may be most closely associated with Christianity, Islamic *da’wa* preaching movements have raised similar misgivings. For their part, humanitarians have often voiced concern that those who place religious objectives over humanitarian objectives will ruin the reputation of other humanitarian actors.<sup>40</sup>

Though statements outlining humanitarian principles, such as the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief,<sup>41</sup> do not explicitly forbid attempts at proselytization, and they do acknowledge that aid agencies might espouse particular religious opinions, it is widely understood and agreed that impartiality precludes proselytizing activities.<sup>42</sup> Disaster victims are highly vulnerable in a response situation, so there is a potential power imbalance whereby aid providers can wield great influence. Disaster victims may be emotionally susceptible and/or feel pressure to change their beliefs to conform to those of the people providing succour.<sup>43</sup> Even if aid providers do something as simple as include a religious text in their distribution packages, this may be perceived by members of the recipient community as pressure to convert or participate in religious activities, or even as an indicator that religious conscription is a condition of aid.

On the other hand, there is a secular bias in the interpretation of religious impartiality which should be acknowledged. “While secularism is in principle ‘neutral’ to religion, in practice the secular framing of the humanitarian regime marginalizes religious practice and experience in the conceptualization of humanitarian action at both global and local levels.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, the rhetoric of humanitarianism often resembles the rhetoric of colonialism by defining progress,

39 E. Ferris, above note 26, p. 609.

40 Eman Ahmed, “A Dangerous Mix: Religion & Development Aid”, *Challenging Fundamentalisms: A Web Resource for Women’s Human Rights*, July 2005, available at: [www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/WHRnet/2005/July.PDF](http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/WHRnet/2005/July.PDF); E. Ferris, above note 26, p. 617; E. Ferris, above note 1.

41 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and ICRC, Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief, 1994, available at: [www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf).

42 *Ibid.*, Statement 3, for example, says: “Notwithstanding the right of NGHAs [non-governmental humanitarian agencies] to espouse particular political or religious opinions, we affirm that assistance will not be dependent on the adherence of the recipients of to those opinions. We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed.”

43 E. Ahmed, above note 40; S. Jayasinghe, above note 15.

44 A. Ager and J. Ager, above note 3, p. 457.

human rights and materialist aims in a certain way, and unquestioningly espousing those values.<sup>45</sup> Humanitarian “doctrines” include, for example, civil society, good governance and privatization.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the difference between secular humanitarian discourse and religious discourse may be more accurately described in how they refer to themselves: religious discourse describes itself as values- and beliefs-oriented, while secular humanitarian discourse attempts to claim value neutrality.<sup>47</sup>

FBOs’ evangelization work is often critiqued for being coercive, but a similar critique is rarely applied by humanitarians to the “awareness-raising” and “consciousness-raising” work of humanitarian organizations. Such initiatives may be perceived by beneficiary communities as similarly “evangelistic” if they are introducing new ways of thinking or challenging cultural norms. Examples of such activities include hygiene promotion programmes which combine the distribution of hygiene kits with provision of informational materials that challenge traditional approaches to defecation or hand-washing,<sup>48</sup> or nutrition programmes that promote breastfeeding in communities where this practice is culturally sensitive, particularly in a context of disaster recovery.<sup>49</sup>

The word “opportunity” has been used by groups doing psychosocial work in emergencies – that is, they have seen that the emergencies presented them with an opportunity to support the “transformation” of social relations into something considered better within the values of secular humanitarianism. This may be seen in the design of humanitarian interventions that seek to challenge traditional gender roles or establish community committees that are understood by the aid providers to be representative but which are not necessarily considered legitimate leaders by members of the affected community.<sup>50</sup> This may even reflect a political agenda on the part of donor governments, as argued by Bruno De Cordier:

Various development and relief actors are perceived by populations and authorities as being instrumental in a political agenda of both governmental and non-governmental interest groups. These actors serve as vectors for spreading and promoting values, norms and forms of social organization that are often perceived as alien by local beneficiaries and both formal and informal leaders.<sup>51</sup>

45 *Ibid.*, p. 463; Barbara Bompani, “Religion and Faith-Based Organisations in Africa: The Forgotten Actors”, *E-International Relations*, 27 September 2011, available at: [www.e-ir.info/2011/09/27/religion-and-faith-based-organisations-in-africa-the-forgotten-actors/](http://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/27/religion-and-faith-based-organisations-in-africa-the-forgotten-actors/).

46 Bruno De Cordier, “The ‘Humanitarian Frontline’, Development and Relief, and Religion: What Context, Which Threats and Which Opportunities?”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2009, p. 667.

47 E. Fiddian-Qasbiyeh and A. Ager, above note 20, p. 6.

48 See, for example, Jelena Vujcic, Lauren Blum and Pavani K. Ram, *Strategies & Challenges to Handwashing Promotion in Humanitarian Emergencies*, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, 2014, pp. 19–20; Sarah House, Suzanne Ferron, Marni Sommer and Sue Cavill, “Violence, Gender and WASH: A Practitioners’ Toolkit Making Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Safer through Improved Programming”, *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, No. 60, Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), London, February 2014.

49 Ali MacLaine, “Infant Feeding in Emergencies: Experiences from Lebanon”, *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, No. 37, HPN, London, March 2007.

50 A. Ager and J. Ager, above note 3, p. 465.

51 B. De Cordier, above note 46, p. 667.

Such endeavours may be seen as much as a form of belief proclamation, or evangelization, as religious teaching, but are rarely questioned in terms of their adherence to impartiality and other humanitarian principles, in the way that religious groups' proclamations are.

Ignoring the ideological nature of such secular discourses can lead to an unquestioning imposition of values on affected communities without taking into account the perspectives of recipients.<sup>52</sup> For example, as De Cordier writes: "With growing impressions and imagery of a global civilizational conflict pitching 'the West' against 'the Islamic world', development and relief actors increasingly find themselves in a situation where they are perceived to be instrumental in hidden 'neo-colonial', 'Christian' or 'Islamist' agendas."<sup>53</sup> Communities receiving aid, therefore, may be increasingly suspicious of humanitarian actors, particularly those with a secular identity who claim to be acting in an entirely impartial manner yet have at times been perceived as promoting their own ideologies. For these reasons as well as their aforementioned social capital and local community ties, in many contexts faith-based aid providers are in fact more easily understood and trusted.

This is likely less complex when aid providers share a religion with the aid recipients. De Cordier points out that religion can serve as "a component of cultural defence" and as a means of defending identity when people feel "threatened in the course of major cultural transitions like rural–urban or international migration and the erosion of traditional identities and sources of authority".<sup>54</sup> Though this defence is strongest when aid providers share a religious identity with their recipients, it is in some ways less about a shared religion than it is about a shared culture, language and history, which Lebanese and Syrians do have. The following section will explore how churches in Lebanon focus on relationship-building and affinity, seeking to garner the trust of the people they assist in order to ensure that they are meeting the most urgent needs of the affected community.

## Impartiality sought through relationships

In the response to the influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, most of the church leaders in LSESD's network had attended training on humanitarian principles offered by LSESD's donors, and subsequently embraced the concept of impartiality. This did not, however, mean that they chose to refrain from evangelistic activity. Most saw their humanitarian work as a secondary ministry, and their evangelistic work as their primary calling from God; this was the message they communicated to the members of their churches who volunteered in the food aid programme.<sup>55</sup>

52 A. Ager and J. Ager, above note 3, p. 462.

53 B. De Cordier, above note 46, p. 668.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 678.

55 Findings in this and subsequent sections are based on primary data collected for this case study, as described above.

They agreed that they did not want any of their beneficiaries to feel coerced or pressured to consider religious conversion and that they did want to assist those in greatest need. However, they distinguished between using food to pressure beneficiaries, and using food as a starting point for building relationships. It was then through those relationships that they could provide quality services to address refugees' material needs and ensure that beneficiaries would provide honest feedback if they were feeling any undue pressure, and also share the evangelistic message.

### Project volunteers and church members seeking to reach the most vulnerable

Churches invested a large amount of time in interpersonal interaction with their beneficiaries, having mobilized teams of highly committed volunteers from amongst their membership. Church volunteers working on the response were expected by their leaders to demonstrate a strong level of commitment to the programme and an interest in spending time with beneficiaries. Home visits, usually conducted by these volunteers, were an important part of most churches' programmes, as an important means of assessing refugees' needs and identifying the most vulnerable.

Home visits ... provide a connection, a feeling of equality. We tell our volunteers that it is important for them to sit and drink tea, or drink coffee with them. They are our neighbours and our friends.<sup>56</sup>

Churches demonstrated a strong commitment to identifying refugees' most urgent material needs and seeking to respond to those on a timely basis. Home visits were focused on needs identification, and were designed so as to provide volunteers with the flexibility to respond to a diversity of needs that may emerge:

We tell the teams that on the visits they should not talk; they should mostly listen. Then one member of the team talks while the other team member either prays silently or plays with the kids so that the parents can focus. Then what they do depends on the needs. The team takes people to the hospital, or we take them to a doctor.<sup>57</sup>

In the context of home visits or extended conversations at community centres, church volunteers found they were often able to have an open conversation about beneficiaries' needs, as well as about those of other refugees living in the area. This helped build a sense of partnership with the beneficiaries and a shared understanding about vulnerability.

Most volunteers did not have time to consistently visit all refugees on their beneficiary lists as frequently or for as long as they may have wanted. In most of the churches visited, the frequency and duration of home visits had decreased over time

<sup>56</sup> Interview with church leader, Lebanon, August 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with volunteer team leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

and with the growth of the project. Some beneficiaries received very frequent visits, while others were visited only rarely: as happens in relationships, volunteers developed a stronger affinity to, and even became good friends with, certain individuals, and so gravitated toward them, investing more in those relationships and spending more time with those beneficiaries. This at times made impartiality difficult, as refugees who were the closest friends with church members may have had easier access to assistance.

Not all church volunteers in all places effectively used their relationships with beneficiaries to identify and discuss their needs, however. In fact, some volunteers preferred to focus only on the relationships and to let other members of their churches discuss material needs with refugees. One volunteer who led activities for children and facilitated a support group of young women reported that, while she was aware that distributions happened at her church and material assistance was provided, she let the lead volunteer take care of that; she focused simply on the relationships she was building with her new refugee friends.<sup>58</sup>

## Relationships as a component of effective project design

Relationships did not replace structure in churches' responses. Those churches that used relationships with beneficiaries most effectively for ensuring that the most vulnerable were reached were also churches that had a clear system in place, with strong leadership and clear roles and responsibilities. Volunteer visits and other meetings with beneficiaries were carefully scheduled.

For example, at one centre, the team leader had a team of volunteers organized into pairs, with a male and a female member each. Each pair was assigned a group of families from the beneficiary list and was expected to visit those families on a regular basis, with specific instructions as to what to do and how to conduct themselves while on visits. Visits were scheduled to include time spent listening to refugees' stories, prayer, playing with the children, checking the physical facilities of the refugees' residence, identifying any medical needs, and scheduling visits to the pharmacy or other local service providers.

At another church, which had begun to operate its own education programme for refugee children in addition to providing food aid, parent-teacher conferences were scheduled on a monthly basis at the church building so that church staff could be sure they were regularly meeting with beneficiary parents. In addition, a system was put in place to ensure that each beneficiary family received a visit in their home at least once every six months.

Church volunteers experimented with a variety of means for engaging beneficiary input into project design, in keeping with principles of accountability. They found this challenging, however:

I can't involve them. I try. Maybe I try to collect some statistics. I ask them, "What's your biggest need now?" ... They say everything. So maybe I give

58 Interview with volunteer church member, female, Lebanon, January 2014.

them two choices, to choose between, for example, a hygiene kit and a winterization kit that are of the same value. I am looking for a style to engage them with. But everyone – not 90%, let's say 99.9% – says that they have need. But some really are, some are really very poor. So it is a challenge for me, to find a style to engage. ... They don't have the courage to complain – because they benefit.<sup>59</sup>

Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon, newly displaced, had a low level of awareness about the various life skills required for living in crowded urban areas and had a low educational level on average. They were also living in extremely dire situations with many urgent needs. Therefore, it was difficult for them to provide specific input or recommendations. Church members explained that it was hard to capture just how difficult the situation was for many of these families, and that they often felt helpless to meet the many needs they encountered, though they went to great lengths to do what they could.

During meetings and visits, other vulnerabilities often came to light that, according to church volunteers, could only be noticed through a personal human connection. For example, one church's leadership made the strategic decision that all distributions would take place at the church; this was in fact against the initial advice of the church's donor, a North American non-profit, which had recommended delivering food packages to homes, but the pastor was confident about the leadership's decision, saying:

With food packages, they come to the church; we can make sure that they don't sell the food, and we build a relationship with them. Now they feel that the church is home and they come for any problem. Like if a husband has a problem with his wife, or the other way around, they come to us.<sup>60</sup>

An LSESD staff member noted that, in part as a result of this decision, this church had begun to function like a community centre, with office hours for refugees, medical clinic services, educational activities for all ages, and a space where families could often be seen sitting around in the shade. She believed that this expansion of the role of churches beyond merely religious activities was more in keeping with what a faith community should be.

The emphasis on relationships did restrict some churches' ability to take their response to scale. A number of external stakeholders made this observation, though most church volunteers stated that they would provide food vouchers or packages to as many people as they could, if given the material resources. They were overwhelmed by the extent of need and vulnerability among refugees in their communities and wanted to help as many as possible. Nonetheless, a staff member at LSESD summarized well their limitations, saying:

One consideration to take into mind is the qualitative versus quantitative nature of the intervention. Do you help 500 people with just food, or fifty with food and

59 Interview with volunteer team leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

60 Interview with church leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.



developing close relationships? I believe it is better to help just the fifty but to really invest in them.<sup>61</sup>

Though most church leaders expressed a desire to scale up, their actions indicated that their ability to reach more people with their current relational programming models was limited.

## Beneficiaries' response to churches' focus on relationships

Beneficiaries expressed appreciation for the time invested in them by churches; in fact, many refugees came from Syria to Lebanon without any remaining social structures and so found that visits by church members met a deeply felt need.

I have an open relationship with all the church people, especially J. He and [his wife] visit me each week. I have also visited them in their home. I ask him for advice. He is truly a brother, and I can ask him for any advice.<sup>62</sup>

I feel comfortable with them because there is love, affection, and I am able to relax with them.<sup>63</sup>

They used to visit our neighbours, but now they are too busy; there is too much pressure on their time. We were so excited when they said they were coming today. Finally we could offer them a cup of coffee.<sup>64</sup>

One man who had been benefiting from the food voucher programme for more than a year said that the church had become an integral part of his life and community, and that the church volunteers were the people whom he would tell if he had any problems. Usually, he acknowledged, they did not have the capacity to do anything to address his concerns, but he still felt comfortable sharing his worries with them, knowing that "they do what they can".<sup>65</sup>

It bears stating, though, that as much as churches may have sought to use personal relationships as a tool for ensuring that they served the most vulnerable and ran well-managed response programmes, most of the beneficiaries in LSESD's network of churches were, ultimately, primarily interested in accessing material assistance. Most church leaders and volunteers were aware of this. One volunteer observed that, in order to engage in this "ministry", they had to love unconditionally, and be willing to be used and abused; it was hard for him to come to terms with the fact that someone would only act like his friend to get something.<sup>66</sup>

61 Interview with LSESD staff member, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

62 Interview with beneficiary-volunteer, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

63 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

64 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

65 Interview with beneficiary, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

66 Interview with volunteer church member, male, Lebanon, January 2014.

Relationships, thus, were a culturally appropriate and generally appreciated means of ensuring that churches provided aid to the most vulnerable in their midst and identified the most urgent needs of the refugees living in their communities. As most church members were committed to and, in many cases, interested in developing relationships with refugees from a diversity of backgrounds, they found that this focus on building affinity was an effective means of helping churches to provide aid impartially by helping them to identify where the need was greatest and respond accordingly.

### **Shifting the focus: Churches' application of impartiality and emphasis on dignity**

Though churches did seek to be needs-responsive and non-discriminatory, the emphasis on relationships had the potential of introducing criteria that may not have been religiously motivated *per se*, but were not fully needs-based. The process of identifying the most vulnerable was complicated, and was influenced by the personal investment and commitment of church members. It was also highly influenced by a strong emphasis placed on using human dignity as a guideline for decision-making. Furthermore, affinity between volunteers and beneficiaries did likely lead to higher levels of church engagement among Muslim refugees, which had some positive benefits but could at times also be interpreted as coercive.

### **An informal social contract: Food for participation**

All churches engaged in LSESD's programme noted an increase in attendance at their Sunday services after beginning their response programmes, and many of the new attendees were Muslim Syrian refugees who were either receiving food aid or had been placed on the churches' waiting list. A number of staff and volunteers believed that many of these refugees attended church merely in order to access the aid, because they believed they would get material assistance if they attended – even though, in most cases, no one at the church ever communicated this to them as a requirement. Many volunteers were so enthusiastic about their church's evangelistic values that they habitually invited refugees to church, and even if it was little more than a rote invitation with little expectation, refugees may have interpreted those invitations as an explanation of what they could do in order to increase the odds of getting their names included on the distribution lists.

LSESD, knowing how sensitive Christian evangelistic work is in humanitarian circles, worked hard to convince churches of the need to be careful about this, and most churches agreed to commit to what they called “non-conditionality”. Regardless, many beneficiaries were not only willing but pleased to attend church in exchange for receiving aid. Therefore, while it was not formalized and churches did not describe their programmes in such terms, their assistance programmes operated somewhat like a Food for Work programme,

whereby humanitarian responses provide food assistance in exchange for beneficiaries' contributions to a work project on a day-labour basis. Food for Work contributions may be to infrastructure development, agricultural production or achievement of a humanitarian objective. In a similar tradition, Food for Education is a modality whereby families receive food when their children attend school regularly, in addition to school meals for children.

These programmes, while controversial, have been found to have a fair degree of success in some locations, preserving the dignity of beneficiaries and even strengthening their resilience while providing them with urgently needed food or cash assistance.<sup>67</sup> As discussed above, there have also been some response programmes that have required beneficiaries to attend awareness-raising sessions before receiving assistance packages; for example, both volunteers and refugees in this study told me that they had heard that some humanitarian actors in Lebanon were requiring beneficiaries to attend hygiene training sessions before receiving hygiene kits. Such practices were perceived by many members of the affected population as a type of neo-colonialist evangelism, though it may have been considered by others as humanitarian best practice.

Church meetings took on a similar role. One beneficiary woman explained:

Everyone who benefits from the project comes to the meeting. If they don't come, [the church leader] won't give them assistance, that's what he said. But that's fine. It's my right. I attend meetings, leave my children and my family to participate in the meetings, and in return they give me assistance. They can't just give me stuff if I don't do anything; that's not logical.<sup>68</sup>

It is important to note that the leader of that particular centre stated that he did not require attendance at church meetings, and several staff and external stakeholders confirmed that beneficiaries were not actually being told that they needed to attend meetings. Nonetheless, this woman came to accept that she was, in a sense, employed as a church attendee in exchange for the ability to feed her family. This same woman reiterated what many beneficiaries stated in no uncertain terms: they are Muslim, and they are confident in their identity, so they did not feel that attending meetings at a Lebanese Christian church was in any way a threat to their religious identity.

They were, however, pleased to have an activity to do, and gain some education in the process. Most beneficiaries coming to the churches were women, and their attendance was possibly a means of empowerment whereby they could do something to support their families, since there are significant cultural barriers

67 Jamie Watts, *Synthesis Report of the Evaluation Series on the Impact of Food for Assets (2002–2011) and Lessons for Building Livelihoods Resilience*, World Food Programme, Office of Evaluation Report No. OEV/2014/11, May 2014; Sarah Adelman, Daniel Gilligan and Kim Lehrer, "How Effective are Food for Education Programs? A Critical Assessment of the Evidence from Developing Countries", *Food Policy Review*, No. 9, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2008.

68 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

to many Syrian women undertaking manual labour, which was what many of their husbands were doing.

Indeed, even church members did not necessarily understand the difference between “criteria” and “conditions”, and used the same word in Arabic for both. One volunteer in a church observed with regard to a project implemented in her church but not funded by LSESD:

I saw one paper written in Arabic ... that had a list of conditions like that they be in an extremely difficult situation, etc. And on that list it also said that they should be listening to the Message.<sup>69</sup>

As she understood it, vulnerability was as much a condition placed on assistance as was interest in Christian teaching.

In comparison, the pressure on churches to behave in a humanitarian manner and to give every appearance of impartiality actually led to some confusion, including doubts among beneficiaries that they could trust church leaders’ reassurances that food was given unconditionally.

Some people want to hear God’s word. Others fear that if they don’t they won’t get support. But this is because of their desperate need of support, and it can be fed by the practices of some churches. Some pastors would agree with these concerns, but other pastors don’t mind creating fear.<sup>70</sup>

A Syrian refugee who was volunteering at a church was very critical of the church’s approach, not because it was pressuring refugees to convert, but instead because of the church’s own confusion about refugees’ interest in Christianity:

The idea of combining the bread with the word is a failure. People think, “If I can get things from Christians, then that’s good.” Yes, they are taking advantage of the church. Every time there’s a message, people convert to Christianity. Yes, this is good, but that’s not really what’s happening. I’d say that maybe 5% would continue coming to church if there were no more assistance. You can tell who those 5% are. They are the ones who are asking for more discipleship and teaching. But more, they are the ones who didn’t complain when they stopped receiving assistance.<sup>71</sup>

One church visited for this research did require weekly attendance at meetings, and the level of confusion was indeed lower amongst beneficiaries and volunteers involved at that church: it was clear to all involved what beneficiaries were expected to do. Refugees did not “perform” according to what they believed the church members wanted to see in order to “ingratiate themselves” to the humanitarian actors,<sup>72</sup> in this case church members; rather, there was a more clear sense of a trade-off of goods for services, food for attendance. However,

69 Interview with volunteer church member, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

70 Interview with LSESD staff member, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

71 Interview with beneficiary-volunteer, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

72 Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, “The Pragmatics of Performance: Putting ‘Faith’ in Aid in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2011, p. 534.

most of that church's beneficiaries were Christians from Orthodox or Catholic traditions, still considered a different religious sect from Evangelicalism in Lebanon but socially less distant than adherents to Islam. Few Muslims were willing to agree to the social contract presented to them. In comparison, most churches which sought to achieve impartiality but still encouraged church attendance provided most of their assistance to Muslims, and many though certainly not all of their Muslim beneficiaries opted to attend church.

### Church involvement as a part of aid packages

Most Muslim refugees attending church began doing so of their own volition. Some came without any invitation, while in most churches, volunteers extended an invitation to refugees. Most volunteers and beneficiaries spoke of church involvement as primarily a means of further strengthening relational ties, both between volunteers and beneficiaries, and between refugees themselves.

The complexity of the connection between affinity and church involvement was reflected in the account of one church leader. He noticed that several food voucher recipients began attending church on Sundays, even though his volunteer team's policy was to not encourage them to do so, leaving him wondering about their motives. Then he told a story about a woman who was on the church's waiting list to get food vouchers – they recognized that she was in need, but had run out of vouchers to distribute – and who began attending church regularly. He admitted that when a spot on their distribution list opened up, they moved her to the top of the waiting list, in part because they saw how vulnerable she was but also because she had invested a significant amount of time in being an active member of the church community. However, he was impressed by her response: she refused to accept the voucher because she had observed that there were people who needed the assistance more urgently than her. The church leader concluded that, as she had attended the church, she had become friends with other refugee women who were also attending, which gave her a greater sensitivity to the needs of her fellow refugees. Her own morality thus challenged the church's natural tendency to reward attendance.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, for some refugees, church and friendships with volunteers became an important social outlet. According to the wife of a church leader, some of the Syrian women who had been attending her church told her that the greeting and social time was the reason they kept coming. One volunteer, when asked about the refugees' needs, said:

Their biggest need is to have a friend, to feel respected and cared for – that is, to be listened to and heard.<sup>74</sup>

Confirming this sentiment, one church leader said that he figured many people, especially women and children, were just so bored, and their lives so empty in

<sup>73</sup> Interview with church leader, male, Lebanon, January 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with volunteer church member, female, Lebanon, January 2014.

Lebanon, rarely leaving their homes, that they wanted to come to church for some social activity.<sup>75</sup>

Refugee beneficiaries similarly expressed appreciation for the social outlet provided by the church. When asked whether she attended church, one woman explained that she attended for a few months because she wanted to hang out and see her friends; she came for the social atmosphere but eventually stopped attending Sunday services because her life had become too busy. She did, however, continue receiving the food vouchers.

Many beneficiaries who attended church also reported appreciation for the opportunity to expand their horizons and learn about Christianity from an educational point of view.

Before, I didn't know who Jesus is, but I wanted to know more, to develop myself culturally. ... But it's not just teaching about religion, also social and personal issues, learning more about God in general.<sup>76</sup>

This was a new experience for many beneficiaries, particularly women, who were raised with little knowledge of Christianity, or in some cases were taught negative things about Christianity, even though Christianity is recognized as a predecessor to Islam.

### Affinity in tension with vulnerability

As alluded to already, church members found it difficult to refuse aid to people with whom they had developed a strong personal connection, knowing that they were highly vulnerable, but also that there were others in the community who were even more vulnerable. One LSESD staff member noted:

Yes, [church partners] parrot back the importance of conditionality, and it's great that they know it, but some don't get the implications – for example, that vulnerability criteria should be used as *the* criteria. That need should be placed in higher importance over persistence. It will come up in conversation; we do discuss it a lot, and try to explain the importance to them.<sup>77</sup>

She continued, observing that when a church member develops a relationship with someone, it is hard to then tell that person that they will not receive help. This was aggravated by the fact that, as observed by volunteers, some refugees whom they visited were more interested than others in investing in relationships with church members. Some volunteers found that home visits to some families felt like a formal meeting, while visits to others felt more like a social visit with friends.

Furthermore, the churches in LSESD's network, even those churches with well-structured systems ensuring that volunteers spend time regularly with beneficiaries, relied primarily on informal conversations to capture important

75 Interview with church leader, male, Lebanon, January 2014.

76 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

77 Interview with LSESD staff member, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

monitoring information. A child protection adviser working in the LSESD office at the time of the fieldwork commented:

I can see how the approach of depending only on visits to people's homes is good. It helps to build relationships, and there is a lot of accountability in relationships, for example to make sure people aren't lying about their need. But ... it's very risky. There is no one outside the relationship that people can go to if they have a problem.<sup>78</sup>

Many church volunteers were aware of this. Out of a desire to preserve the highly personalized nature of the services they provided, they were resistant to putting strong monitoring and accountability systems in place; however, they did try to be attentive to possible concerns.

Our relationship encourages them to share. We are very open. But we have no system in place if they have a problem with the team. So we are observant.<sup>79</sup>

Some beneficiaries also indicated that they valued their friendships with church members more than any opportunities to provide objective feedback. One beneficiary who was volunteering with the church, when asked if he had any critique of the programme, described members of the church as “truly his brothers” – that is, family who should not be criticized in the presence of an outsider.<sup>80</sup> Another woman commented that she would come to the church centre to ask for help meeting any need other than a material need. Since she saw the people who worked or volunteered at the centres as her friends, she preferred to go to someone with whom she had a more formal relationship – such as her Lebanese landlord or neighbours – with requests for financial assistance beyond the aid that the church already gave her.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, though most church leaders may have embraced the concept of impartiality, seeking to use affinity ties to identify the most vulnerable and stating that aid was unconditional, they were not willing to consider impartial humanitarian aid as a more important objective than evangelism, which was part of the founding ethos of their institutions. One couple explained that, as much as they were enjoying developing friendships with refugees and were pleased that they could help meet their most urgent needs, they were constantly alert for any opportunities to engage in religious discussion. After visiting a refugee family a few times, they felt that a friendship was developing, so they invited the beneficiary family to their home for dinner. They also invited a few Christian relatives to join them at the dinner, saying that they had hoped their presence would “pave the ground” for a spiritual conversation.<sup>82</sup>

78 Interview with technical adviser working at LSESD, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

79 Interview with church volunteer team leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

80 Interview with beneficiary-volunteer, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

81 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

82 Interview with two volunteers, Lebanon, January 2014.



## Dignity as churches' main "humanitarian principle"

While evangelical churches wrestled with applying impartiality, and did so in ways somewhat different from other humanitarian actors, they also had their own highly valued principles. In fact, some of the informants in this case study were somewhat critical of other, larger humanitarian actors for their poor respect of other guidelines that they considered essential to good humanitarian response. The "principle" most emphasized was that of human dignity.

We treat beneficiaries with respect. When they come in to the centre, we stand up, shake their hands, offer them a seat. This is different from the UN and their partners, who even refer to the refugees as "animals".<sup>83</sup>

A member of LSESD staff who interacts regularly with local vendors had similar concerns about their behaviour and saw his role as ensuring that beneficiaries were treated with the dignity that other stakeholders were less likely to demonstrate:

There have been some shopkeepers who did not respect them, and they complained. I went straight to the shopkeepers and I spoke to them strongly. I warned them that if they did not respect the people, there were many other shopkeepers waiting for our business.<sup>84</sup>

As seen above, church attendance became a means by which beneficiaries could preserve their dignity by contributing something instead of just receiving hand-outs. Churches and LSESD worked hard to defend the dignity of beneficiaries in other ways as well. Of particular concern was the liberal use of photography by foreign journalists or donors, often without beneficiaries' permission and without explanation to beneficiaries as to how the photographs would be used. One church leader said that he would like many more outside stakeholders to visit his centre and have the opportunity to meet beneficiaries,

but please, no pictures! They get suspicious of how we use the pictures, think we are taking advantage of them to get even more money than we are giving to them, or maybe for political purposes.<sup>85</sup>

A member of LSESD staff, similarly, admitted:

I struggle with every picture on the website. ... We Lebanese have been displaced, too. I don't want my pictures used!<sup>86</sup>

Leaders of one church said that one of their priorities was honour. Through their engagement in this response, they learned that Syrians typically came to Lebanon with a strong sense of honour, but felt that they had lost it when they were

83 Interview with volunteer team leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

84 Interview with LSESD staff member, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

85 Interview with volunteer team leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

86 Interview with LSESD staff member, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

displaced. This made it difficult for them to accept help, and even more difficult for them to ask for assistance.

They would be hurt if we were the “helpers” for them. So we reassure them in our actions and words, we show them how much we value them, that we see them as heroes. ... Typically Lebanese take a “downward approach” to Syrians.<sup>87</sup>

Beneficiaries felt this respect for their own dignity, and saw it as one of the greatest benefits of receiving assistance from churches. They appreciated having an opportunity to smile and talk, and they liked the attention they received:

At the church I feel like I matter.<sup>88</sup>

The main thing is that we are respected. Everyone else looks at us like martyrs or like the enemy. But here, we are alike, we sit together. The church members care for our children. If our children are happy, then we are happy.<sup>89</sup>

A few beneficiaries also made a negative comparison with other local aid providers. One woman said that the quality of the assistance packages provided by the church was much better than the quality offered by the local Muslim community organization.

The mosque once gave us food, but it was just this little tiny packet with almost nothing, but they seemed so proud and were showing it off!<sup>90</sup>

In comparison, she felt that church members were genuinely interested in her well-being, and it was this contrast in experience which led her to seek involvement in all the activities the church offered.

Learning to show respect for human dignity was actually a difficult process for many volunteers. A complex history between Syria and Lebanon led many Lebanese Christians to feel suspicion, and even hatred, towards Syrian Muslims. One volunteer explained that at first it was hard for her to empathize with refugees. There were a million Syrians in Lebanon but she did not notice them. Through her involvement in the food programme, she made Syrian friends, friendships based on mutual respect. She said that they now saw each other as fellow human beings, something that she believed was important for challenging growing tensions in Lebanese host communities.<sup>91</sup>

It bears noting that not all churches were focused on dignity. There were a few isolated instances of churches treating their beneficiaries with some degree of disdain.

87 Interview with volunteer team leader, female, Lebanon, January 2014.

88 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

89 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

90 Interview with beneficiary, female, Lebanon, July 2014.

91 Interview with volunteer church member, female, Lebanon, August 2014.

I went to one project in a large warehouse. ... I showed up and it was full of people sitting on the floor, very very quiet. I asked the pastor why it was so deathly calm. He said, "I am a dictator."<sup>92</sup>

More commonly, though, there were limits to the level of dignity afforded to beneficiaries. Though valued, they were rarely trusted even though church members sought to earn their trust. In most churches, beneficiaries did not participate in decision-making. The leader of one church explained that beneficiaries were informed about the church's vision and plans when they attended distributions; this church's decisions were made primarily by a team including the pastor and two head volunteers. Occasionally church members also participated in strategic discussions, but not beneficiaries.<sup>93</sup>

At another church, the volunteer committee was in a season of transition in management and was exploring options as to who to include in their team:

We are trying to grow the committee. But we are not getting [the one Syrian volunteer] involved in decision-making, for example who to provide assistance to. ... Maybe he can give us ideas about their situation. ... We asked him because we can trust him. He comes to all the meetings. Many people lie, though.<sup>94</sup>

It was a big step for churches to start supporting and befriending Muslims; it would be a much bigger step to engage them in decision-making or entrust them with management responsibility. Dignity was considered of paramount importance, but churches were limited in the level of dignity they afforded their beneficiaries. This was, in part, because beneficiaries were refugees and Syrians, but also because they were not Christians. Nonetheless, many churches felt that they respected human dignity more than did other, non-faith-based humanitarian actors, and other members of Lebanese host communities.

## **Conclusion: Questioning conceptions of humanitarianism**

The experience of evangelical churches providing assistance to Syrian refugees raises a number of questions about how the principle of impartiality is, or might be, applied in practice. While their work demonstrates a level of commitment and compassion which may be considered exemplary, the depth of their religious convictions was such that they could not separate material assistance from their understanding of refugees' spiritual needs. New to humanitarian work, church members agreed to seek to be impartial, in many cases with a great deal of conviction, and yet they continued to teach about Christianity and invite beneficiaries to their churches. There were ways in which their approach did not live up to the standards of humanitarian impartiality, but there were other ways

92 Interview with LSESD staff member, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

93 Interview with church leader, male, Lebanon, July 2014.

94 Interview with volunteer church member, female, Lebanon, August 2014.

in which they did demonstrate a strong sense of impartiality as well as emulating their own humanitarian values, rooted in their belief that human dignity is crucial. The following are some questions raised through this experience.

*Can, and should, humanitarian actors seek to separate material assistance from their own convictions?* Evangelical church members would answer that they should not, and if forced to choose, it seems likely that many would continue to preach their religion and cease to provide food to refugees, which would potentially leave many refugees vulnerable since churches have deeper access into many communities than other humanitarian actors do. Secular humanitarians, on the surface, may answer that material assistance should indeed be separated from convictions, but questions about the impartiality of secularism challenge such a view. Participants in this case study felt that they were being more needs-responsive and more attentive to their beneficiaries' humanity than other humanitarian actors, specifically because of their religious convictions.

*How can aid providers distinguish between when religious activities meet a felt need, and when they may be experienced as religious coercion?* Many Muslim beneficiaries interviewed for this case study spoke of Christian church activities as meeting felt needs for social and for educational services. Other beneficiaries, and indeed at times the same beneficiaries at other moments in the conversation, indicated that they participated in church activities to ingratiate themselves to their aid providers. None indicated that they felt coerced to attend church, but the example of one of the churches which required attendance at meetings suggests that other Syrian Muslim refugees may have opted not to accept assistance from churches, which is of concern if they are not accessing aid elsewhere.

*If aid is provided with no conditions at all, how can the dignity of beneficiaries be preserved?* Syria is a country which had not experienced any major natural disasters or conflict for several decades before the current crisis, so most of the refugees arriving in Lebanon were not accustomed to being on the receiving end of charity. Many beneficiaries found they could preserve a bit of honour and dignity by engaging as equals with church members both inside and outside of church meetings. Some decided that churches required their attendance at meetings in order to access aid, which suggests that churches were not acting in an impartial manner even if they did not intend to require attendance; but those same beneficiaries expressed pride in feeling they could do something to earn assistance, just as they would have done when they had a job in pre-conflict Syria. This seems to suggest that more intentional food-for-something activities, even if of a religious nature, may be a tool meriting further exploration for helping stem a trend toward aid-dependence in affected populations.

*To what extent can relationships and the subsequent psychosocial support be provided to disaster-affected populations without leading to preferential treatment for beneficiaries with whom aid providers have developed an affinity?* The personal touch is an important component of any emergency response programme, particularly in a context of displacement and conflict, where many beneficiaries are recovering from trauma. Churches and other faith-based actors are uniquely equipped to provide such personalized support, and one of the highlights of LSESD's programme was

its relational nature, utilizing a large network of volunteers from its partner churches. However, affinity ties inevitably became stronger with some members of the affected population than others, and it was easy for beneficiaries who had not made those personal connections with volunteers to be overlooked; this also has ramifications for humanitarian accountability, in that different beneficiaries were able to communicate to service providers with different levels of honesty on the basis of the personal relationships they had developed.

In conclusion, while local grass-roots faith-based entities agree with the humanitarian principles, they interpret them in markedly different ways than most secular actors, particularly those headquartered in other parts of the world than where a humanitarian emergency may be taking place. Improved dialogue between these local faith-based organizations and other, larger humanitarian agencies is invaluable. Such dialogue can help strengthen the quality of care given by all aid providers, by improving all parties' understanding of the humanitarian principles and how they can best be applied, taking into consideration the historical lessons learned that underpin the humanitarian principles as well as the perspectives of local community members.

