

Engaging local faith actors in urban response



**JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE on
FAITH & LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Webinar transcript

Urban areas are home to a diverse range of stakeholders, from civil society to first responder groups, academics and many levels of government. Local faith groups/leaders are one of several different urban stakeholders that humanitarians often fail to engage with effectively. Reflections on recent humanitarian crises, such as the Ebola response in West Africa, have highlighted the critical role local faith actors can play. In particular, when sharing information and changing mindsets and behaviours, both of which are incredibly difficult to do. Secular organisations often do not know how to engage with these local faith actors, and miss opportunities as a result.

In urban areas, diverse populations live side by side. Each neighbourhood may contain people from a range of different faith backgrounds, and faith groups may be just one sort of community people identify with. Faith groups, just like all forms of community, take a different form in urban areas than they do in rural. Even a single neighbourhood will likely contain many different faith actors, and faith communities are not always geographically bound. These dynamics pose challenges for humanitarians trying to understand which faith actors they should engage with and how to do so effectively.

This webinar, part of ALNAP's ongoing webinar series on urban crises, is jointly organised with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), a network of actors who do research on religion, humanitarianism and development. The webinar will bring together a panel of speakers from ALNAP and JLI Member organisations, to share experiences engaging local faith actors in urban response, and to answer questions from the audience.

Chair: Paul Knox Clarke, Head of Research, ALNAP

Panellists:

- Nobuyuki Asai, Programme Coordinator, Soka Gakkai International
- Estella Carpi, Postdoctoral Associate, University College London
- Silvia Correa, Faith and Development Manager, World Vision Mexico
- Olivia Wilkinson, Director of Research, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

This webinar was 90 mins long. Read the full transcript below:

Paul Knox Clarke: Hello everybody, and welcome to this, which is ALNAP's 19th urban webinar, which I think is going to be a really fascinating one. It's not just ALNAP, of course, it's being presented jointly by ourselves and by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. My name is Paul Knox Clarke. I'm the head of research here at ALNAP, and I'll be today's chair. I'm taking over from my colleague Leah, who unfortunately was not able to chair today.

I think it's going to be a really fascinating discussion. I was reading something recently, David Rieff again, about how humanitarianism is, in a way, a secular religion of its own, with its own sort of dogmas and principles, and I think my own experience of when that comes up against, and is working alongside faiths which are deeply embedded in the lives and the social and economic structures of the people with whom we're working. When those two things interact, I think some very interesting things happen, both positive, and sometimes quite challenging, and I think it's going to be really excellent to explore some of that with the experts that we have today.

But before I introduce our four experts, I would like us to just all participate in a poll which we're going to put up on the screen, to get a better sense of who is in our virtual room. Have you ever engaged with faith-based actors in the past? If you could just select one of those, and I will feed those back to you in just a minute, so that we know who is here.

Meanwhile, let me introduce our panellists. Firstly, Olivia Wilkinson, who is the Director of Research at the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. As Director of Research in Washington D.C., Olivia works at the intersection of sociology of religion, and international humanitarian and development studies. She's a sociologist of humanitarianism and religion, and has a doctorate and masters in humanitarian action from Trinity College Dublin, and Université catholique de Louvain respectively, and a B.A. in theology and religious studies from the University of Cambridge. Most recently, she's been investigating the position of local faith actors in humanitarian and refugee response, and she'll be telling us a little bit about that later.

Next up will be Nobuyuki Asai, who is the Programme Coordinator of Soka Gakkai International. In this role, he's in charge of advocacy and networking in humanitarian affairs. He joined Soka Gakkai's recovery task force in Tohoku, which was established after the great East Japan earthquake in 2011. And after the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016, he served in Soka Gakkai's relief coordinating team. Nobuyuki participated in the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, and the Asian roundtable dialogue for faith-based organisations and religious leaders in humanitarian action, which was held in Bangkok in 2015, and of course in the WHS in May 2016.

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From Mexico, we have Silvia Correa joining us today, the Faith and Development Manager at World Vision Mexico. Silvia's faith and development specialist, manager and leader, for international development programmes and projects, and she's got more than 20 years of experience in the USA, Mexico, Central and South America. She's designed projects, implemented child protection and spiritual nurturing methodologies, through interfaith networks, working with government, with NGOs, with community leaders, and of course with World Vision staff. She's helped to strengthen church partnerships and faith networks to develop and implement projects across Latin America in many sectors, including but not just, health, human rights, economic development, and child and youth participation.

And finally, but by no means least, Estella Carpi, Post-doctoral Associate at UCL University College London. Here, as a research associate in the migration research unit, at UCL, Estella is working at the moment in the framework of an ERC project on southern-led (ph 04.19) humanitarian responses to displacement from Syrian, in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. She received her PhD in social anthropology from the University of Sydney in Australia, researching humanitarian assistance provision and identity politics, in Lebanon's emergency crises. After studying Arabic in Milan and Damascus, she worked in several research and academic institutions, in Egypt, Lebanon and the UAE, mostly focusing on the politics of aiding, welfare and forced migrations in the Arab Levant.

So, I think you'll agree, this is a stellar panel with a massive amount of experience, and can't wait to find out what they're going to say. But, before we do, the survey results are just in. 56% of you have engaged once or twice with faith-based actors, but want to know more. 27% are experts, and should have been a presenter. Well, we'll bear that in mind for next time. 15% would like to engage with faith-based actors, but don't know how to do so. And 2% have never engaged on the subject. So, quite a broad set of experiences. About a quarter of you are experts, and about three quarters of you would like to know more. So, I hope that both your questions and your comments and expertise will come out in today's webinar.

So, without further ado, I'd like to move on to our panel. I'm going to ask each panellist to share some opening thoughts on the topic, from their various research and experience. And we can start here with Olivia. Olivia, the floor is yours.

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Olivia Wilkinson: Thank you very much, Paul. So, I'd like to extend the warm welcome on behalf of the Joint Learning Initiative, we call it the JLI for short. And the JLI is not a faith-based organisation itself, but is a network of organisations including faith-based, academic, secular NGOs, UN agencies and such like everyone is interested in the topic of research on religion, humanitarianism and development, and that's where we convene around that subject.

So, I'm going to be giving the initial overview of this topic. I'm not going to be talking about a particular case, because we're going to be hearing that from our next three speakers, but I'm going to be kind of collating a lot of the information that we've learned over the years, the JLI, on the role of local faith actors, in humanitarian responses in urban environments.

So, very quickly, I've put it into an opportunities and challenges. Obviously, it's never quite as simple as that, and I'm coming from a place of wanting to understand the complexity of all of these interactions, but to give us an initial framework to think about, I thought that these few bullet points might be helpful. So, in terms of opportunities, and this is coming from our research really around the world, and with lots of different organisations, there's a few things that regularly come to light when we're talking about local faith actors.

And actually, sorry, I should just say very quickly, what we're defining as local faith actors. So, there's really quite a broad range of who could be included in this. We do include local and national faith-based NGOs, but we would also include religious leaders, informal committees, community groups that are based out of religious institutions, there might be other kinds of networks that exist in that environment that are not formally registered NGOs, that have a presence across several different communities or regions in any given area. And so, there's really quite a broad range of who we might include as local faith actors. So, basically, just to say that I'm not only talking about local and national NGOs.

So, for the opportunities, we have, first of all, the thing that comes to light very frequently is access. So, that's access through existing religious networks and infrastructure, and that's the ability to work with and across what we have seen in the second bullet point, is the various points of capital that religious actors, local faith actors have, and that's human, social, cultural, financial capital. Human capital, such as volunteer networks, and the ability to organisation and mobilise a large amount of people quickly in a response. The social and cultural capital they have, and we'll get on to this idea of trust and authority in a bit, and then financial resources.

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The ability to already have resources in place to be first responders, because they are located in that-, in any given location where there needs to be a response, rather than having to transfer funds from outside, or have a delay in any of that kind of financial structure that sometimes does cause delays.

So, this allows them to be both first responders, but also into the long term, and I want to bring this up just in terms of how we think about a new way of working, and a humanitarian development and peace nexus, and what we find is because, again, local faith actors are often those who are first of all defined by their faith in many cases, but also defined by their location and their embeddedness in that location, and that means that there's not going to be an exit strategy to leave that location, but that there's going to be an understanding of the interlinked and overlapping elements of humanitarian development and peace work that might be going on.

Then we have the idea of trust, authority and embeddedness. The trust and authority point is something that comes up quite often, and was most clearly demonstrated recently in the response in 2014 and 2015 to Ebola, and there was a big amount of research that came out that really pinpointed the role of religious and other community leaders in changing the course of a lot of the sensitisation that was happening in that response. We've had scholars calling it a 'game-changing role', and that it was a wake-up call to the humanitarian community overall about the role that religious and community leaders can play in response.

And so, then we have the idea of spiritual, and the spiritual and psychosocial practice, and this is an area that has also been gaining an interest. There's recently been-, as some of you might also have been on the webinar from the MPHSS network about the role of faith-sensitive psychosocial response, and there's a new set of guidelines out on this from Islamic Relief and Lutheran World Federation that I would recommend. But it's this idea that, yes, people's spiritual life and also their cultural embeddedness doesn't end or stop because they have experienced a disaster or a crisis, and that's going to be very much part of their coping mechanisms, and the way that they interpret what's happening to them, and therefore that's an important part of any type of psychosocial response.

We have the idea of religious motivations, which links, again, to this voluntary network that religious organisations might have. But, the religious motivations to help others, and we see this in a lot of the research about faith-based organisations, that it's often faith-based organisations that can fill the gaps and continue to fill the gaps, even when other funding has subsided, and there are these gaps in social protection that should be otherwise funded by the government or otherwise.

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And then finally, we have the idea of integration and social cohesion. And so that's the way in which the local faith actors will be both part of the community that they're helping, and particularly in displacement in thinking that volunteers then become friends to displaced people, and then that then, in terms of local integration, everyone becomes part of the same community, and so we have that overlap between who is a host, and who is being hosted, and then part of who grows into the community as a whole.

In terms of challenges, I think this is probably why a lot of people have come on this call, because we're aware of the challenges, and I think we'll get into this a lot more as we progress into the rest of the questions later on. The thing that comes out, this is what I want to highlight first of all, is the challenge of instrumentalisation of local faith actors. So, what we hear from local faith actors, and indeed, local actors overall, you'll probably be familiar with some of the debates in the localisation agenda, there's a co-opting of resources and access and capital, all the points that we've seen in the opportunities column there, that international actors will instrumentalise these assets, and leverage them for response but without any equitable type of partnership in which there's shared capacity and building of relationships, and I think there's a growing-, in some areas, particularly those areas with a lot of international actors, growing disenchantment with the way that some of the local faith actors are treated.

The fear of proselytising is one of the major things that we'd hear about most frequently in terms of the fears surrounding engaging with local faith actors. I think it does happen, and I think it is a problem, but I also think in many cases, it really does not happen, and there are lots of local faith actors who are incredibly aware of the risks of proselytising to that standing in the humanitarian community. We can talk a little bit more about some of the ways to overcome that, but there are definitely ways around, with training, other capacity building approaches, in which that should not be a final barrier to engagement.

Lack of capacity. So, lacking technical capacity, and this is something we also see across any local actor, but is equally relevant to local faith actors. Lacking capacity in terms of knowledge of principles and standards, and again, kind of linked to proselytising, it's the lack of knowledge of the principle of impartiality and neutrality that would be very worrying to people. I mean, I would say that that is a complex issue in which we also see there's a lot of humanitarian actors have their own problems around this as well. So, we need to approach this with an openness to the idea that it's not always the case that it's the local faith actors that are the least impartial, and there is a lot of impartial assistance from those actors, but it might look a little different, and I can give examples of that. That sounds a little bit mysterious, but we can talk about more of that in the question and answer section.

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The influence of theological positions, such as positions around gender equality, can often be a sticking point when people are coming from very different positions about how we might interpret something that's mainstreamed across your response otherwise. The fact that religious belief can be influential, either in terms of the initiation of conflict, or the way that the current conflict is playing out, and then finally, just to, again, be a little bit challenging, I think that a challenge in itself is the secularity of the humanitarian system. So, the idea that a lot of the time it's the faith actors that are having to change their ways of working, in order to fit within a secular system.

So, downplaying the fact that they're faith-based or hiding the fact that they're faith-based, because they think that they will lose funding, or not be able to engage with partners otherwise. And there's a lot more research on that, that we can, again, go into in a little bit more detail. But the underlying point is that being secular is not a neutral position in itself, and that you are bringing your own assumptions to the fore, if you are coming with a particularly secular approach, just as you are bringing your assumptions if you're coming with a religious approach.

Just to underline some key takeaways. That daily religious belief and practice will be part of any context that you're in really, both for the people that you're assisting as a humanitarian actor, but also your staff members. So, this is something that I know that we have to deal with on a daily basis, in a lot of cases, so it should not be ignored or pushed to the side. And then fundamentally, the localisation, many local actors are also faith-based actors, and we haven't really talked about how that plays into localisation overall.

A few points just to recognise then, as well, that religions are always dynamic and changing, and that means that there's no monolith of one religion. So, just because you know what, say, Catholicism looks like in your country, does not mean that you will know how that looks in another country. And then religions are socially, culturally, politically, economically embedded in their context. So, it's about contextual analysis rather than, again, a kind of assumption that world's religion 101 course will tell you everything you need to know about how that religion will look in any given place.

So, that's the overview from me. I will now pass back to Paul.

Paul Knox Clarke: That's marvellous, thank you so much, Olivia. An awful lot there to consider, but I hope we've got time to give quite a lot of those ideas a bit of an airing. Let's go straight to an example from the ground. Nobuyuki Asai, the Director Soka Gakkai International. Nobuyuki, tell us about your experiences.

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Nobuyuki Asai: Thank you moderator. I am Nobuyuki Asai from Soka Gakkai International, or SGI. I'm based in Tokyo. SGI is a community-based (? 20.01) organisation that promotes (? 20.02), culture and education centred around respect for the dignity of life. It has membership across the world, but one half are based in Japan, and we have more than 1,000 cultural centres around Japan. After the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, some hundreds of thousands of people had to evacuate. Public shelters, such as school gyms and general community centres were not sufficient. Some evacuees, rushed into nearby stable buildings, including those of religious organisations. 42 existing Soka Gakkai centres accommodated 5,000 evacuees at the maximum. Some were in urban areas, and others were in rural, but the number was larger in other areas.

Most of the evacuees were residents in the neighbourhood and included both Soka Gakkai members and non-members. For most of the non-members, it seems to have been their first time to visit the centre. The government was completely in a mess, and which shelters were run by local leaders, who were entirely gathered there (ph 21.12). I hear that some of non-members were hesitant to come to our centre initially, but (? 21.18) completely in emergency, and local leaders couldn't distinguish members and non-members at the initial (? 21.26). So, non-members didn't feel uncomfortable. The atmosphere of cooperation generated through a couple of days.

Tokyo is located about 600 kilometres away from the epicentre, but we felt a huge tremor. So, public transportation was down all through the day. That's why more than 1 million people couldn't go back home within the day. They had to stay at office or (? 21.54) rooms all through the night. In this context, a couple of our centres in Tokyo also accommodated those people on the night (ph 22.04). Kitaku-nanmin, or temporary refugees in Japanese, is a major concern in many cities. It is estimated that a huge disaster in Tokyo could generate millions of those people. (? 22.17) office, it's severely concerned about it.

As I said, shelters at Soka Gakkai centres were mainly run by voluntary Soka members. The headquarters and local branches in other areas delivered relief supply from outside to such centres, because the government couldn't cover private shelters at the initial stage. There were some advantages for our centres. The members regarded management of centres and shelters as an extension of their day-to-day religious activities. Also, even when small problems or conflicts occurred among the evacuees, leaders of the organisation could mediate them relatively easily. Using the organisation's register of community members, they were able to account for the evacuees at the centres, and identified those who were not present, which helped them in confirming people's safety and whereabouts.

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The environment was such that displaced people could easily share their problems with the leaders. And the leaders quickly understood their needs. Both male and female leaders were involved in decision making from the start. A place for prayer or spiritual reflection was secured, and also, we could give psychosocial support to the affected people.

So, a challenge in Japanese urban cities (? 23.48). So, Japanese as a society face many challenges. People do not know each other, even in their own neighbourhood. We cannot expect mutual cooperation at the small community level, in many places. Japan is a fast-aging society. Nearly 30% are above 65 years old. We have to help some millions of those elderly people if a huge disaster hits Tokyo. The government is encouraging each local community to create a disaster evacuation plan, but those elderly people are always a serious issue, particularly in urban areas.

Traditional, local neighbourhood associations and local voluntary fire prevention groups have weakened in cities, and the capacity has become lower. So, as a solution, some religious organisations are actively tackling these issues. An interfaith platform was established in Tokyo immediately after the 2011 earthquake, so we literally gather and share information on relief and recovery from (? 24.47) perspective. And agreements between municipal officers and religious organisations are increasing, in terms of providing their facilities at shelters. If the information is ready in advance, people will feel more comfortable in evacuating to such facilities. Also, the Tokyo office has a policy of giving financial aid if such facilities (? 25.11), we haven't received such aid in terms of some of our centres in Tokyo. That's all, thank you.

Paul Knox Clarke: That's great, thank you so much Nobuyuki, particularly interesting, I think, the urban element here that you are dealing with a different social environment where people don't know each other, and maybe that's something that we can pick up and how faith-based organisations can address that when we come to the questions. But, for now, we're going to move right across the Pacific to you, Silvia, and your experience working with churches in Mexico's urban areas.

Silvia Correa: Good evening everyone. Thank you, Paul. It is my pleasure to share with you part of the experience of World Vision working hand by hand with faith leaders in humanitarian response in urban context. As you must have heard, Mexico City had two earthquakes in September 2017, with a high impact in ten different states in the country, with more than 12 million people affected. With this large number of people in this urban environment, it became a great challenge to bring humanitarian aid to everyone, and to have accurate data that will help us to reach most affected and vulnerable people.

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Nevertheless, the work we have been doing, before the earthquake, with different faith groups, gave the trust to work in this emergency, and allowed us to facilitate and share resources, that each group could bring to the table.

It was a great challenge to have accurate information about impact and affected groups, but through different networks, and connections already established in the city, especially our connection to the church, we had validated location and population groups and individuals with urgent needs. Through different networks we gather large amount of humanitarian aid. We got transportation, places for storage, and volunteer people to package and do the distribution. This help us to reach a large number of affected people. Our prepositioning, being present in the city and neighbourhood and establishing strong connections with key urban actors, were vital people (ph 27.29) for the earthquake response.

Faith leaders were responding urgently, but not necessarily (? 27.34). They became aware of the importance to be prepared before emergencies occurred. They saw that at some places have received so much humanitarian aid, but unfortunately, there were some others that had received nothing. They found that there were a lot of clothes and food donations, but people were living on the streets, because they had no housing. Children were highly vulnerable, because parents were so busy looking for help, that no one could care and gave them psychological or spiritual support.

Working hand by hand with NGOs had helped faith leaders to understand service, and to be clear that it is necessary to do it correctly on time, and considering their own security. So, they had asked and looked for trainings, not only to do the correct assistance, but also to do it according international rules. With this, I remember a pastor that was clear in helping his fellowship, and had enough humanitarian aid for them. He was concentrated (ph 28.34) to have his fellow's wellbeing (ph 28.35) simply ignore other people's needs. After he was trained by a specialist and World Vision humanitarian networks, he was able to understand that giving help is to open doors to everyone, not only his followers. This is the 'do not harm' approach that we adopt to help everyone equally (? 29.01) just peaceful series (ph 29.03).

Faith leaders have presence at every space in the world. They have the first contact with the reality (ph 29.08), and with the crisis. If they are prepared and their followers know how to react on emergencies (? 29.16) context, hostile environments, they will activate quickly to give inclusive services to people's needs. But not only during the emergency, but also, they have human resources (? 29.28) located to continue recovery in a mid and long-term. Recovery after the earthquake has brought great challenges. Working hand by hand with faith leaders to have a clear plan and where and how to keep the help.

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To be careful and not conditioning (ph 29.48) help, to be clear on what to tell people without making promises that would not be possible to achieve. To learn that it is important to be prepared for a catastrophe.

So, in that sense, World Vision have worked in three different areas with a church, with faith leaders, and one of them is migration issues, where we create strong awareness on how to host refugees and migrant people. Also, in the humanitarian response, as it was in the earthquake. So, we have answers and evaluations, and also with child protection in prior context. To have different groups of volunteers to protect children and have the right protocols to follow in protections. With this I close, and I would like just to mention that in Venezuela we have help, we brought some humanitarian aid with two people through the church. So, churches have helped to bring humanitarian aid in different areas in Venezuela. So, thank you so much, thanks Paul.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you, Silvia. Really interesting. A couple of things pricked my ears up there, certainly. One is the role of faith-based organisations in information collection, because that's such a huge challenge in urban environments. And the other was this discussion about impartiality and the ability to train and discuss these issues with faith leaders, both of which we will come on to, both issues we'll look at in more detail in a minute. But before we do so, I'd like to invite Estella Carpi to tell us about her experience and research in Lebanon.

Estella Carpi: Hi, hello everyone and thanks to ALNAP for having me today. I think, first of all, it's important to clarify what sort of urban, and what sort of faith-based action we can talk about in the case of Lebanon. So, most cities in Lebanon are characterised by uncontrolled demographic growth, lack of urban planning, especially after the years of the civil war. So, 1975, 1990, for the sake of clarity. I also need to specify that most development in humanitarian organisations are working both for Lebanese people, vulnerable Lebanese people and Syrian refugees at the moment. So, I also feel the need to specify that camps, like refugee camps, look like urban slums in Beirut, and here I particularly refer to Palestinian refugee camps, whereas in the case of smaller cities and peri-urban areas, refugees can live either in apartments or in informal settlements.

I say that, because the notion of urban here would need to be taken with a pinch of salt, I think. I refer to the lack of urban infrastructure, or the fact that rural and peri-urban areas both rely on rural resources to general livelihoods. So, this is quite meaningful, and it tells a lot about the development of the urban in Lebanon.

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And we also need to consider that humanitarian agencies have reached out to urban authorities, quite at a late stage. So, humanitarians initially operated independently and without looking for local approval, and this is the history of international humanitarian action in Lebanon. So, I'm not just referring to the Syria refugee crisis in Lebanon, but also previous crises, so the case of the Palestinians, the Iraqis, the Sudanese in Lebanon, although like quite to a smaller extent, and also internal emergency crises.

And in the case of urban intervention, we therefore need to consider that it's quite a new concept for both Muslim and Christian faith leaders in Lebanon, who have historically been involved in charity acts, mostly assisting orphans and the chronic poor. So, the focus on the urban needs to be highly contextual, I think. That means that we need to wonder who's willing to participate in city making, and after several interviews that I conducted over the years, especially in the north of the country, I realised that the local willingness to be included in plans that are mostly pre-established plans, may not always be the case. So, we really need to wonder who wants to be involved and who doesn't want to. And we also need to be very careful to consider the previous political and urban infrastructure in place.

So, that means to question the kind of system in place that was responding to the refugee crisis before the arrival of the humanitarian agencies. And unfortunately, probably these historical details have been lost a little bit in the humanitarian narrative.

So, here I put a picture of an urban market that has been financed by UKAID and UNDP. It was built in 2016, but it short-lived, basically, four days literally, and local residences see these as an attempt at urbanising the area, but the market didn't survive, let's say, because it was built in middle of nowhere. Like, in an area that is very remote from the centre, and it's not served at all by public means of transportation, in an area where most citizens, not only most refugees, are unlikely to afford private cars.

I also want to mention successful attempts of the urbanising of the area, like in awareness, let's say, with awareness. Like the costal cleaning of the Akkar region in the north, the asphaltting of roads of many towns in Lebanon to temporarily employ refugees and vulnerable Lebanese people. So, actually, urbanisation is running along with livelihood programmes at the moment. And humanitarian donors have unluckily released the importance of well-functioning public infrastructures quite late, only when the Syrian crisis became protracted. So, waste management, access to portable water, are all issues that have been addressed at a very late stage, in all honesty.

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So, as I briefly mentioned, religious leaders are both Christian and Muslim, but here I just mentioned the largest groups in Lebanon, because, as I mean, as some of you may know, it's a country formed by 18 different faith communities. So, faith leaders in general, even if they belong to different faith communities, still engage in informal ad-hoc interventions. So, actually, the way of providing aid is quite standardised in that sense. And they increasingly serve as intermediaries for provision of food and clothes, but also like a sort of moral support to refugee and local communities. For example, the other day, some local people mentioned to me the presence of faith leaders as food providers, when some workers were cleaning the roads in a northern town. So, they are increasingly involved as moral support and food providers in livelihood programmes, which I think is pretty much-, I mean, it's quite positive in that sense.

We also need to consider that they are normally invisible to outsiders, because they are like no loggers (ph 38.27) in the public space, so you really need to be-, like, to know a lot about a place before approaching the faith leaders, but they are the most known to refugees and locals, as aid providers. I realise that people really have a clear map of where exactly they are located, and how they keep in touch with outsiders who can provide support on request in turn. So, both refugee and local people are really aware about the role of faith leaders at a local level.

And the last observation I would like to make is about some international organisations working with faith leaders as a standardised way of intervention. So, I think faith leaders should be involved if local partners propose that themselves, as they know the areas, and they know where exactly the involvement of faith leaders is really needed, and desired, for example, in matters concerning early marriage, but that might be problematic if it becomes a standardised way of intervention, that doesn't really speak to the context, let's say. So, yeah, so thanks for that, and I will be happy to answer any questions.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you very much, Estella, and thanks also for reminding us in particular about the importance of context. I mean, we are talking about faith actors, and we are talking about urban environments, and talking, in some ways, in generalisations, but I think the point you repeatedly made there about each city is individual, and also the nature of the relationship between faith and culture, as Olivia was saying, is going to be different in each space, is also worth bearing in mind.

We're lucky in as much as some of those, many of those of you who are online and taking part in the webinar were kind enough to submit questions to us in advance, and I've got a list of those here, and I think I'd like to kick off with some of those. So, this has been covered to a degree already, but I think it would be nice to sort of encapsulate it in this first question.

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Nobuyuki, for you, from your perspective, why do you think humanitarians should be working with local faith-based actors? What happens if we don't? What's the cost of not doing so?

Nobuyuki Asai: Okay, thank you. So, in urban areas in particular, ties among the residents tend to be weak, and often people don't even know their neighbours. In the case of Japan, there are several million people who are living alone in cities, and some of them are really isolated in the local community. So called isolated (? 41.29) have been (? 41.30) over the past (? 41.31) which means that after this, someone's body is not found for some days or weeks. Also, the rate of people joining local (? 41.40) associations, it's considerably lower in urban areas. In such situations, leaving no one behind in terms of evacuation or relief becomes very difficult. Meanwhile, faith groups often have close ties among residents of a local community, including vulnerable or marginalised people. They can easily utilise these ties in their relief and recovery activity. I believe they can complement relief activities by government and secular actors. This is my comment.

Paul Knox Clarke: Great. So, very specific there, and I'm sure this is true in other cities as well, but to this sort of (? 42.19), the isolation of urban life and the way that faith-based actors can address that in Japan. Taking a sort of broad overview, Olivia, because you've looked at these issues in many places, what would your response be to why humanitarians should engage more with faith-based actors?

Olivia Wilkinson: Thank you, Paul. So, yes, I think there's a lot to say on this, but to just take a structure that we should be familiar with, in terms of the humanitarian response, you know, what we're evaluating on are things like relevance and appropriateness, effectiveness, and I think particularly for relevance and appropriateness, this is as Estella was making the final point of her presentation, also brought this up, you know, understanding with local actors, who the important religious leaders are and who is in the mix, in terms of religious representation and belief and practice in any one place, is going to help you understand how you can increase the relevance and appropriateness of your work.

So, a very basic example that we hear, we did a study several years ago with Allister Ager and Alena Fiddiasmea (ph 43.35), and they said they brought out an example in that study that was about the response in 2004/2005 in Indonesia after the tsunami in which dignity kits did not provide headscarves for people there, so therefore there was not a full concept of dignity was in that case, because there had not been an understanding of people's religious beliefs and practices, and how that links in to the cultural space in which they live in, and the social dynamics of women in that place.

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So, I think that's a kind of very clear and basic example that we can use, and I don't know if anyone was listening to the webinar yesterday on dignity as well, but that was something else that was brought up there, about how we conceptualise dignity in humanitarian response, and how we improve relevance and appropriateness of that response.

Paul Knox Clarke: Great, thank you. I'm going to cut right to the chase now, because I'm sure quite a lot of our participants are asking themselves this question about principles. That humanitarian organisations, I think it came up in some of the presentations, are often concerned about principles, about the degree to which faith-based organisations will or feel themselves able to abide by humanitarian principles, and particularly the principle of impartiality, that is to what degree are they going to be able to provide assistance to members of all faith communities and none rather than just to their own faith community.

So, I wondered what your experiences and thoughts were about that? How can humanitarians engage with local faith actors in such a way that they ensure the impartiality of their assistance? I don't know, Estella, if you have any thoughts on this?

Estella Carpi: I mean, yes, of course, I do. Because in particular, in the Middle East region, there's these sort of lanes of exceptionalism (ph 45.53) that we use to understand conflicts and crises, that is like kind of associated with religion, but I honestly think that there shouldn't be any particular, or let's say special concern about this. Well, first of all, as Olivia was saying, secular also means something.

You're not coming as a neutral actor in any case, because to the eyes of beneficiaries, for example, many secular aid providers that I know are still playing a political role once they intervene, once they start providing aid in times of crises. And second, faith leaders don't provide assistance regularly, or are very rarely, like let's say, employed, recruited professionally or formally by international local actors.

So, sometimes beneficiaries change all the time, and faith leaders tend to address people's needs on an ad hoc basis. So, it's not even a scenario where faith leaders necessarily debate (? 47.01) personal relationship with beneficiaries. I know many Syrian refugees do benefit from faith leader's help, but aren't that religious, or maybe they don't know the faith leaders personally. So, most of the time, in the case of Lebanon, the faith leaders involved are located close, geographically close, to their own communities. So, there's not even the ground for proselytising, like, confessional beliefs.

And even when that might be the case, like aiding is just part of the spiritual mandate in a sense, so you do see Christian churches in Muslim majority parts of Lebanon, like the north, that provide stuff to Syrian Muslims, or similarly like mosques do not enquire the faith of their Syrian beneficiaries. So, I don't think that should be a concern.

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Paul Knox Clarke: Thanks for that. Silvia, I think you touched on this when you were speaking about some of the work that you had done with faith leaders in Mexico. Would you like to tell us a little bit more about your thoughts on how humanitarians such as World Vision can work with faith leaders and faith groups in such a way as to maintain impartiality.

Silvia Correa: Yes, as I mention on my speaking, the experience of one pastor. What help us with him to create the awareness of helping everyone in the community, not only his fellows, it was the awareness we had created before with his own faith leaders on the high level. So, for us, our experience, if you begin to work with faith leaders since the beginning, before any catastrophe occurred, you will have the opportunity to create a (? 49.06) with them, so that they could trust in you and trust in what the international rules and protocols are recommended to give humanitarian aid.

I have experience in Mexico and in Central America, where the churches are asking us how to help everyone with impartiality, and with how the people feel that there will be evangelised with their beliefs. So, they have been trained, and they have been asked to be (? 49.50) or refresh in the new international protocols on how to help others. So, for us, working with different levels of faith leaders and creating awareness with them, have helped us to approach at the local level, with impartiality, on the humanitarian response area.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thanks Silvia. And I must just plug slightly our own research here, from the State of the Humanitarian System, where certainly, we did not find examples, or a strong tendency, for local organisations at least to be any less principled than international organisations. Rather, what we found there was that the principles, for reasons I think you're bringing up Estella, are challenging for all. They're challenging for all humanitarian organisations, but sometimes for different reasons. But we probably shouldn't be assuming that there is necessarily any virtue or merit in any organisation until that's been proved.

I think, if I may, Olivia, just ask you, you rather tantalisingly mentioned earlier on that you had come across ways to address this challenge of proselytising, and the fear that humanitarians have around proselytising. And as Silvia just brought it up, I wondered if we could tempt you to say a little bit more about that?

Olivia Wilkinson: Thank you, Paul, yes. So, some of the examples that we've had from different organisations around the world do include a lot of training and capacity building about the principles, as Silvia was already mentioning, and some of the tips that we've heard around that is very practical role playing of what impartiality might look like.

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So, not just a kind of abstract explanation of the idea of impartiality, but very grounded in, you know, this is impartiality, and this is not impartiality, in terms of giving assistance from a church building, for example, because a lot of the times there might be some infrastructure that you have that is a church building that can be a place for distribution.

Now, while that would be a, you know, a building is a fine as the concept, it's what maybe happens within that building, in terms of if there's any requirements to attend a service, or anything like that. And that's where you can say, well, you know, you are getting into the grounds of making the aid conditional, you're getting into the grounds of proselytising, or, for example, that there would be only congregants were allowed first, or something like that, where you're really getting away from the principle of impartiality. So, yes, making the examples very concrete to that place.

And then we've also heard equally about the ways in which there's a little bit of a different interpretation of who counts as impartial, and who is actually partial. So, as a few people have already hinted at, I've done some research in the Philippines with various different organisations, and there was a different understanding of what counted as impartiality neutrality, and it was that humanitarian organisations, in themselves, the international organisations, I mean, that looked to be partial and not neutral to local communities, instead of the faith-based actors, who are embedded in a place, as we were saying before, and as Estella has already said as well.

It's very difficult for local religious leaders, or a religious community in any way, to act in ways that might be perceived as partial or impartial, because they will also be vilified from a community if that happens, because there are those local structures that will put apart any organisation that is acting for the benefit for some rather than all, and there are the communities dynamics about how you negotiate your space within a community, and most of them, at locally based faith actors, are not wanting to separate themselves from the community. So, there's their own reasons for acting as impartial actors.

And so, an important part is discussing the principles of impartiality, and what that looks like for the local actors already, rather than assuming that there is this kind of sacrosanct principle of impartiality that only humanitarians know about, only international humanitarians know about. So, there's, again, concrete examples, but also dialogue around what impartiality actually means in that place.

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Paul Knox Clarke: Fascinating, thank you very much. We have a question here for you, Estella, this is from colleague Isasala (ph 54.58) Mohammed who is working in northeast Nigeria, and it's taking this idea of sort of impartiality, I think, and putting it in the context of conflict, and particularly religious conflict, conflict that has a religious element, and what Isasala Mohammed is asking, is how, Estella, do you engage local faith actors in areas where there is existing religious conflict, when the task ahead requires that these faith leaders come together? Do you have any experience of that from Lebanon, or anywhere?

Estella Carpi: So, in that sense, I'm honestly not aware if these sort of partnerships, let's say, informal partnerships between faith leaders and international humanitarians was carried out in the years of the civil war. I would be surprised, but after the civil war, actually, as Olivia was saying, it's quite about embedded local structures of giving, and aid reception. So, it's not much about putting different faith leaders together in the same sort of humanitarian programme. What international humanitarians are doing at the moment in Lebanon, is trying to plug into very local networks, in very different localities, and try to be aware about how to have easy, safe, rapid access to local and refugee populations.

So, you need to be aware about that particular leader, and you rely on that particular leader for specific purposes. So, it's not something that would put-, like would kind of trigger religion-based conflicts, or whatever, and we also need to take into account that most of the reasons for conflicts are actually economic or political, so like putting religious leaders in the picture might not enhance the material possibilities for conflict, but at the same time, religion is still the lens through which we read conflict in the Middle East region.

So, we always need to be, as outsiders, at least, we always need to be aware about this sort of double-edge way of working with faith leaders. So, contextualisation also means realising what sort of social role that faith leader has, not only spiritual role and spiritual and cultural influence over the people. And I would also add that it also depends on the service we talk about. If it's about food and clothes, like that actually might happen along interfaith lines, whereas if it's the case of influencing local mentality about early marriage, of course the international humanitarians are just relying on the Christian faith leader to have access to the Christian population. On a Muslim, Sunni or Shiite leader to have actually an influence over their respective faith communities.

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Paul Knox Clarke: Thanks, Estella. I'm going to put the same question about bringing together faith actors in situations where there are conflict that has some sort of faith element to it, to all of our panellists, if any of you would like to answer. But, before I do, I've got another question as well. So, I'm going to throw these two questions to the panel, and any of you who wish to pick one or both of them up, please do so.

This second question is from Prania Pranachetzni (ph 59.09), Tearfund Nepal, hello Prania. What you're asking is how do you deal with different world views regarding disasters that faith leaders may have? And I'm reading into this question, and apologies if I'm getting this wrong, the idea that people coming from a more metaphysical position, might assume that disasters are perhaps the will of God or punishment or something like that, which would not be the way that many secular humanitarians would view these things. Do you have any experience of that, panel, and if so, what can you do with that? First question. And also, any experience of putting faith leaders together, or addressing working with faith communities in situations where faith is an element of conflict? Those two questions, I throw them over to you.

Olivia Wilkinson: This is Olivia. So, just to answer that first one, actually, in a piece of research with Tifie (ph 01.00.15), but in the Philippians, and also with International Care Ministries, ICM in the Philippians, we were looking at this question of the interpretation of disasters from a religious viewpoint, and this was with a piece of research with a group of largely conservative evangelical pastors, and the finding from that research, was that there was not, in fact, this purely fatalistic interpretation of the disaster.

It's that there is this idea that, yes, this is part of God's plan, and I am part of God's plan, but at the same time, that I should still be prepared and have preparedness, so this was in the context of the DRR training, by the way, disaster risk reduction training, and that I think we had an interesting quote, and I'm slightly paraphrasing here, but it was just to say that God is giving me the ability to be prepared, physically prepared.

So, the spiritual and the physical were completely intertwined, and it didn't lead to this pure fatalistic picture of, well, this is all part of God's plan, so I can't do anything about it, and I'm just going to let it be.

So, I think what this all goes to say, is this space for both having an interpretation that you're maybe not completely in control of it, from a spiritual perspective, and the theological would be behind that, but at the same time that that doesn't preclude preparedness and other disaster risk reduction mechanisms and response. That those things can exist together, and they're not in fact mutually exclusive to each other.

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And we've seen that in other circumstances too. So, I think that basically it's just saying that there's still space to talk about that, and we shouldn't assume that that's the end of the conversation, just because someone has expressed a, perhaps, more fatalistic viewpoint.

Paul Knox Clarke: Great, thank you Olivia, and I think we'd love to see that research. If you'd be good enough to give us a link, we can share it with all of the participants who signed up for this, because I'm sure a lot of people would be interested in it.

I don't know, do any of our other panellists have answers? Silvia? Or Nobuyuki? Either to the issue of how to address faith leaders and their ideas about disasters, or ideas about how to work with faith groups in conflict?

Silvia Correa: Hi, Paul, this is Silvia. Yes, we had a great experience with Global Network of Religions for Children, where in Mexico we are like 14 different faith-based organisations that have gathered just to protect children and violence against them. So, it has been a great challenge to put in a table objectives or a cause to fight for, and the different beliefs, they just gather to fight injustice happening. So, this has been, for me, a great experience, because we have built up different forums and discussions and actions and as you have seen on my presentation, I had a picture with a list with Christian background, evangelical, from the Salvation Army and (? 01.04.01) person and a Catholic person. So, everyone gathered together just to fight violence against children.

So, if we put on the table a cause that will motivate each faith group, they will just gather because of the cause or the objective. And just put aside their own beliefs and principles, and they will just put in the middle of the table, what it is important to build up a good and just world for children. So, it has been a great experience, and we have a forum in September, where we're going to have like 15 different faith religions to discuss about sexual harassment against children.

So, this is possible, but it's also important to see and observe in each faith group, which are their main goals or their main issues to address. So, in that sense, we can find if we can gather together, or if we can just gather, work with one faith group, on their own objectives or on their own main issues to address. So, this has been a great experience, The Global Network of Religions for Children.

Paul Knox Clarke: Sounds remarkable. I would say, as well, 27% of you are experts in this area, we would be absolutely delighted if, for either of those two questions, you were able to send in any documentation or comments that you had, knowledge that you have, experiences you have, that we could share with everybody, and particularly with our two questioners. I'm going to move on. I'm just going to go back now to some of the questions that had been asked before the webinar.

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One here, for you Nobuyuki, which is a little bit about the sort of challenges-, I mean, we come at this very much from the humanitarian. I'd be interested to know, what challenges local faith-based organisations might experience in dealing with international actors. You know, looking at it from the other way around. What problems would you like the humanitarians to know about that occur when working with humanitarians?

Nobuyuki Asai: Okay. So, I'd like to (? 01.06.40) two challenges. Firstly is (? 01.06.44) earthquake, our cultural centre had to accommodate (? 01.06.47), even if there were other public shelters nearby. So, leaders had to come to those centres to help out, no matter what their own situation might be. People's expectations of faith-based groups can be quite high in emergencies. If we cannot respond to such expectations, we may lose trust from the local community.

Secondly, collaboration with local governments didn't go well in some cities. The Japanese constitution's policies, the principle of separation of church and state, and this tends to be interpreted too strictly. So, shelters of (? 01.07.26), or other faith-based organisations were made less of a priority in terms of government (? 01.07.32), because communication with them was infrequent and some local government officials even thought that they weren't allowed to deliver supplies to religious organisations or their facilities. So, collaboration with local government is a challenge to us.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you. I think that's great, actually, just to bear in mind both of those points about volunteerism, and that the stress that volunteers might be under, and also to try and take into understanding the world in which not just faith-based organisations, but any local organisation is working, and it's a politicised world, and that they have their own things going on, politically. So, that's a really good reminder. I'd put the same question to you, Silvia. What challenges do you find that faith-based organisations have in articulating with and working with the humanitarian international, as it were?

Silvia Correa: The challenges that I have seen, it's in one hand the secular groups or the international groups, we have some thoughts about how the church work, and we approach them with this (? 01.08.50). Sometimes there are fears, or somethings there are prejudice. And, in this approach, we create a barrier on speaking with them, so the church also creates a barrier because they think that the approach is just to ignore their own religious belief.

So, sometimes this issue, or at least it's what I have seen on the work I have done, it's that we create our own barriers to work with them, and so the challenge here is to break this barrier, like listening to the different beliefs, or the different values of the religious groups.

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As Olivia has mentioned before, sometimes it is just a matter of sitting with them, and listening their own thoughts or their own understanding of the wellbeing of people. And, with that, create a new project or work or a plan to work with them. Putting aside their beliefs, and putting aside their own fears, or personal fears that we have about them. So, it's just breaking the prejudice we create through our life history, or the cultural background.

Paul Knox Clarke: Caller Jordan (ph 01.10.23) has asked an excellent question, which I think goes well with what you're saying here, Silvia. I'd just like to ask you to continue with this question, if you would. We think about the risk to humanitarians in terms of reputational risk, or the principles, or even perhaps physical risk in working with faith-based organisations, but looking at that from the other way around, have you encountered risk that occur to faith-based organisations in working with humanitarians? Are there things that faith-based organisations are risking when they engage with us?

Silvia Correa: Let's see if I got it. What risk they do have in engaging in humanitarian response? That's the question?

Paul Knox Clarke: In humanitarian response, and also in partnership with international humanitarian organisations.

Silvia Correa: The risk they found is to lose, yeah, the risk is to lose their own followers. It sounds kind of funny, but I have found some churches that they fear that doing or engaging with different groups, international NGOs, they will lose their followers. So, it's kind of funny that, but also in the other hand, there are some faith groups that they love to engage with international groups to improve their own knowledge approaching humanitarian response.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you. I wonder, any other panellist thoughts on this? On the risks that faith-based organisations might be taking working with humanitarians?

Olivia Wilkinson: Yes, I would like to add to that. Thanks, Silvia. So, I think that the point that we often see, is this idea that-, and it's a problem within localisation overall, as well, but that there's this underlying-, something doesn't work out when you're asking local actors to professionalise to certain standards, that then might disassociate them from the communities that they're in, because all of a sudden they have to spend so much more time on bits of compliance and stuff.

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So, what you often see happening, and there's various different organisations that do this, that you'll have within-, so, say there's a church, or some other structure within a country, will then develop its own relief and development branch that has the competency and the staff to be part of the humanitarian system, and everything that requires, and then there's also a little bit of a separation between that and the work of being a church, or being a Mosque, or being a temple, which is often a separate piece of work, and as we were talking about impartiality before, kind of needs to be a separate piece of work in many ways.

So, I think that you'll see the local faith actors that are more involved in humanitarian response already, quite often that's the structure that has been used. But, the risk, therefore, is that you're losing everything that's part of your connection to the local faith community, and the advantages that come with that. So, there's a real difficulty to get that balance. And as we've seen across some of the debates around localisation in general, there's this push and pull about how much, as I said before, you're being instrumentalised and just being used for the fact that you have, say, a good network that can get to a place that's otherwise inaccessible.

So, the power dynamics that are going on in those relationships can make local faith actors feel kind of a little bit of this 'used and abused' and a loss of some of that identity that's connected to the faith-based. But there are ways around that, as we see with the development of these other type of professional or humanitarian wings. But I think often what ends up happening, is that they'll be a kind of faith-based organisation, and this shows the dynamics of what it means to be a faith-based organisation, but it won't communicate any of that faith-based to international partners. All the staff might have that religious motivation, but it will kind of secularise itself in order to be acceptable within the humanitarian community.

So, there's a lot of that, the presentation and power dynamics that are going into the mix of how local and international partnerships can come about. So, overall, that's why we say there's kind of like the humanitarian system is mostly a secular space, in which local faith actors negotiate how much of faith-based presence they can be, and will often, therefore, not hide, I'm not saying it's devious, but just minimise the faith-based element in order to become professional humanitarian actors that are eligible for partnership.

Paul Knox Clarke: Great, thank you. I'm wondering about timing. I'm looking at the clock here. There are so many more questions. I'm just going to throw this one in. If anyone can just give-, if one of the panel can give us a fairly brief response. This is from Michelle Markey from CRS, and she's thinking about-, obviously, humanitarian action, as we know, the resources are never adequate to meet needs globally, and whether one of the areas that we should be evaluating and appreciating from faith-based organisations is their ability to bring additional resources into humanitarian response, and different funding models.

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So, she gives the example of the Catholic church's networks of schools and hospitals, which are essentially social enterprises. I think maybe these are resources which are often working in humanitarian action, but are undervalued or not noted by international humanitarian actors. I wondered if any one of our panellists had any examples of how faith-based organisations were bringing additional resources to humanitarian response?

Estella Carpi: I can try to respond to that. So, yeah, just very briefly, actually, I think it's quite hot topic. There's a hot debate among secular humanitarian in Lebanon about developing stronger partnerships with the private sector or not, and it's something that is not ethically acknowledged yet, let's say. But that practically happens like on a daily basis, I would say, with faith leaders and local faith actors as well, because it's in the case of Lebanon, but also like the Arab Levant, more in general I would say, it's the history of charity, assistance, humanitarian or not, but it's always been historically funded by private donations, and also private companies, in a sense, oversees through diaspora networks.

So, in that sense, let's say that local faith actors are already at that stage of engaging with private funding, unlike international humanitarians. So, in that sense, I think there are lots of lessons that they can teach in this respect.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you. I'd like to end by putting one question to you, Silvia, and to you Nobuyuki, and this question, I'd like a very short answer, if you can, just in a sentence or two sentences maximum, and the question I have for you is this. What do international or national-, what do secular humanitarian actors need to know in order to work effectively with faith-based organisations? Silvia?

Silvia Correa: Yes, the main values of each trade group that will match with response we want to give in every area.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you, thank you. So, that's really about taking the time to understand. What about you, Nobuyuki? What would your answer to that be?

Nobuyuki Asai: I believe that faith-based organisations can provide spiritual encouragement or resource to the affected people, and that really makes sense in emergencies.

Paul Knox Clarke: Thank you, yes, really worth remembering that emergencies go beyond, as we know, they go well beyond the physical and the physiological, and that there are many other needs that need to be addressed. I think that's a great place to finish. I would like to thank our speakers very much for sharing their experience with us.

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I'd like to thank all of you online who've participated in this, and certainly encourage you to participate in the future, and also to share, send in any references or resources you think we should share with the community, and we'll send that out.

I'm deeply indebted to Leah Campbell, my colleague here at ALNAP for, with Olivia, organising and putting all of this excellent webinar together, and to Bethul (ph 01.21.20) for her help in doing that, and also to the colleagues that I'm sitting with here from the comms team, Cara and Maria, who have been making it all happen. So, thank you so much for taking part, and then finally, whatever faith you are of, or none, to wish you, from us, a very peaceful rest of the day. Thank you.