

## CHURCH AGENCIES AND FAITH BASED ORGANISATIONS IN COVID-19 HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

*It is important to consider the role of church agencies and Faith Based Organisations as significant local actors within the broader international and humanitarian response to COVID-19.*

Churches and Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) are engaged in and continue to support national and local government-led response to COVID-19.

**Together, governments, church agencies and FBOs, and humanitarian actors should consider the role of FBOs and churches in this crisis. Particularly their:**

- Ability to mobilise and share information (including utilisation of TV and radio)
- Influence as a trusted intermediary between government and local communities
- Voice of hope for all and compassion for vulnerable groups
- Vast networks of health and education services including in very remote locations
- Pastoral role which can provide psychosocial support and compassionate palliative care.

Effective humanitarian response requires holistic and coordinated engagement across key actors. CAN DO recognises that humanitarian response needs to be led by all levels of national governments, supported by effective coordination among the humanitarian system and effective

engagement with trusted local actors – including traditional leaders and faith communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis presenting a significant global and humanitarian challenge. The rapid spread of the disease, its implications on health systems, disruption to social life and economic impacts, and likely flow on effects are complex and unparalleled.

The UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan<sup>1</sup> (HRP), articulates three strategic priorities:

1. **Contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic** and decrease morbidity and mortality
2. **Decrease the deterioration** of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods
3. **Protect, assist and advocate** for refugees, IDPs, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

There are significant practical challenges to the delivery of humanitarian assistance given the social distancing and lockdown measures across the globe. As such, **the Global HRP recognises the importance of involving and supporting local actors** in the COVID-19 response.



### COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan

*Putting national and local NGOs at the centre of humanitarian operations has been high on the agenda for a number of years. This is becoming the reality in operations for the next few months, out of necessity. It can also provide the blueprint for humanitarian operations in the longer-term future also.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf>



## Localising Humanitarian Action through Local Faith Actors and FBOs<sup>2</sup>

There is growing recognition of the role of local faith actors in humanitarian response. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit FBOs were **recognised for their unique and comparative advantage in humanitarian contexts**.<sup>3</sup> It recognised that FBOs:

- Have both close proximity to and are part of populations affected by crises
- Are embedded in local communities and maintain relationships of trust and familiarity
- Are first responders who continue to provide assistance and protection during and after crisis
- Hold influence with national, provincial and local actors including governments and traditional leaders
- Share a critical responsibility and role in working for peace with the ability to facilitate sustainable behaviour changes based on faith motivations and worldview
- Provide ongoing pastoral support to communities including providing a sense of hope during and after disaster. In some crises this has been combined with training in psychosocial support, psychosocial first aid and palliative care.

At the Summit over 160+ faith-based humanitarian actors signed the **Charter for Faith Based Humanitarian Action**.<sup>4</sup>



## Learning from Experience – Local Faith Actors in Ebola Crises

We can learn from the role of local faith actors in the Ebola crisis in DRC (2018) and West Africa (2014-15).

**Evidence has shown that delayed engagement with local faith actors in the Ebola crises had significantly detrimental effects.**

- Response measures were at times contrary to cultural values and religious practices resulting in hostility and denial of the disease
- Response methods sometimes exacerbated existing tensions and conflict.

**When engaged, faith leaders were transformational in the humanitarian response, by:**

- Utilising religious texts to interpret relevant health messaging to control and prevent the spread of the disease and promote messages of hope.
- Countering misinformation as a trusted and influential source of information.
- Leading by example in behaviour change by modifying religious practices.

<sup>2</sup> Local Faith Actors (LFAs) and Faith Based Organisations (FBOs)

<sup>3</sup> The World Humanitarian Summit was a pivotal moment for the global humanitarian agenda, generating global momentum and political determination to move forward on the UN's Agenda for Humanity: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/summit>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/CHARTER%20FOR%20FAITH-BASED%20HUMANITARIAN%20ACTION.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://journal.cjgh.org/index.php/cjgh/article/view/160/403>

- Providing aid to vulnerable communities.
- Playing an intermediary role between the wider response and communities, particularly by dispelling fear and mistrust of critical interventions.



## Churches and Church Agencies in the Pacific

Over 90% of almost all Pacific Island nations identify as Christian<sup>5</sup>. Religious belief, predominantly Christianity, is core to all aspects of society in the Pacific, including politics and community life, with high levels of church attendance, and strong regard for church-based institutions. **Churches are embedded at the grassroots of some of the most remote areas of the Pacific and host many active social community affiliation groups such as youth groups and women's associations.**

Recent years have seen improvement in the coordination of Churches with national government response mechanisms and the wider humanitarian system in the Pacific. Church agencies have also invested in contextually appropriate community-based disaster resilience and preparedness programming.



## A Faith Based Response to COVID-19 in the Pacific

The Australian Humanitarian Partnership has supported churches and church agencies, through CAN DO to respond to recent emergencies and to strengthen local capacity through the Disaster Ready Program. Significant achievements include:

- Mapping of church infrastructure as potential emergency management centres
- Development of Pasifika theological framework for disaster preparedness and response
- Increased coordination of churches within national disaster response and humanitarian system
- Strengthened safeguarding systems and inclusion in preparedness & response

**There is momentum in the Pacific, which can be strengthened, particularly in this time of crisis.**

Churches and church agencies are already responding to COVID-19. Across the Pacific church leaders hold influence with national, provincial and local actors including governments and traditional leaders. Many church agency staff are in the process of returning to be with their families in local communities in preparation for pandemic lockdown measures. In the process of doing this, they are sharing important information regarding COVID-19 on the journey and in their home communities, as well as sharing supplies (eg. for soap making) to support public health at the very local level.