

Expert: Jeroen Jurriens

Title of the Session: Role of Faith-Based Organisations in Disaster Risk Reduction and Strengthening Resilience

Date: 24/11/2014 to 30/11/2014

Summary

It is common knowledge that disaster risks are on the rise and that local communities are most vulnerable to these disaster risks. Strengthening of resilience with a focus on local communities is therefore key. Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) due to their unique strengths and position in society can play a major role in strengthening resilience of local communities. FBOs can facilitate interventions at local community level as well as national, regional and global level. FBOs are well positioned to reduce disaster risks and address underlying causes of these risks.

Context

It is common knowledge that disaster risks are on the rise and that local communities are most vulnerable to these disaster risks. Strengthening of resilience with a focus on local communities is therefore key. Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) due to their unique strengths and position in society can play a major role in strengthening resilience of local communities. FBOs can facilitate interventions at local community level as well as national, regional and global level. FBOs are well positioned to reduce disaster risks and address underlying causes of these risks.

ACT Alliance has been involved in DRR work for a decade, and there are many best practices that have emerged through its global membership. These examples include mainstreaming of DRR into development, DRR with climate change adaptation embedded, DRR that fully utilizes the strength of faith based organizations, etc. Act Alliance is only one of the international networks of Faith-Based Organisations worldwide. There are multiple faith-based organizations in the different local contexts that play important roles in the process of reducing disaster risks.

Looking at past good practices and experiences in working on disaster risk reduction, several strengths of FBOs can be identified. They include the following strengths.

- FBOs have a huge unifying power because of their shared faith. This unifying power brings people together and has great mobilizing possibilities both at the local as well as the national and global level.
- Local faith-based networks reach every corner of our communities and nations; They are also found in communities that have weak, fragile or dysfunctional states. Also they are well linked to international structures and therefore able to participate in international discussions giving reflections from local realities in these discussions.
- FBOs and Local faith communities (LFCs) have material and social assets, useful for DRR action and emergencies. Material assets include loudspeakers in mosques and bells in churches and temples that can be the cornerstone of local early warning

systems. Religious buildings often host community disaster planning events and serve as evacuation centers during emergencies. The social assets of FBOs and LFCs typically include existing volunteer networks and relationships with other FBOs, LFCs, wider civil society actors, governments and other stakeholders.

- FBOs and LFCs are almost always first responders in emergencies; combined with the fact that most lives are saved within the first 24 hours after a disaster, this provides strong arguments to engage with and invest in FBOs and LFCs and their capacities in DRR.
- FBOs and LFCs also contribute to resilience strengthening by utilizing their pre-existing local networks and infrastructure especially at local level.
- FBOs and LFCs build on existing community's coping mechanisms and assets;
- FBOs can address man-made disaster risks, e.g. conflict, and play an important role in facilitating peaceful coexistence amongst religious groups
- FBOs often sustain development programs even in absence of any assistance from international NGOs, and in most cases they are able to respond to psychosocial issues and problems caused by disasters.

Seeing these strengths of FBOs and LFCs it is important that the future Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA2) refers to FBOs as unique stakeholders highlighting how FBOs can help communities from within to enhance their resilience, prepare for hazards, cope with impacts and avert losses. Multi-stakeholder partnerships at both local and national level should include FBOs. Consultations and monitoring mechanisms of HFA2 should include FBOs. National governments should recognize the role FBOs can play in facilitating peaceful coexistence amongst religious groups, by e.g. stimulating and supporting formation and functioning of interfaith councils. The potential to have local ownership and community voices heard through FBOs should be recognized and utilized in the functioning of the future HFA2.

In line with above, being a network of FBOs ACT Alliance has formulated a voluntary commitment in preparation for the HFA2 conference in Sendai. It reads as follows:

"In line with the strategic priority we accord to *community resilience*, the **ACT Alliance** will use the extraordinary reach and trust of its network of faith-based and church-based organizations to raise disaster risk reduction awareness at grassroots level, including in hard-to-reach locations, by influencing local leadership and educating community members." (as approved by GA ACT, October 2014).