



## POLICY BRIEF 1 - 2011

The UNAOC works in part through thematic platforms. Their aim is to foster deliberate cooperation among countries that are part of the UNAOC Group of Friends, on issues related to the UNAOC mandate. Two thematic platforms are now active: one addresses media literacy, the other cooperation with and among faith-inspired actors in international humanitarian and development work. Development cooperation and humanitarianism are fields where obstacles to cooperation among actors with different worldviews are immediately visible. The core idea is that a simple exchange of views is insufficient to create trust; in some cases, if words are not followed by acts, such exchange can even be counter-productive. However, experience shows that practical cooperation can bridge gaps seen, at a conceptual level, as irreconcilable. The UNAOC thus hopes to document and encourage such “dialogue in action” within the thematic areas of the two platforms. This policy brief, the first of a planned series, draws on two meetings led by Switzerland and a working paper by Katherine Marshall that reviews the issue. [www.unaoc.org/docs/ThematicPlatformBridgingTheDivideWP.pdf](http://www.unaoc.org/docs/ThematicPlatformBridgingTheDivideWP.pdf)

## BRINGING INTERCOMMUNAL COOPERATION AND RELIGIOUS VOICES INTO HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

#### PRIORITY ISSUES AND KNOWLEDGE CHALLENGES

Two challenges underlie this UNAOC thematic platform:

- (a) Enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian and development assistance and its sustainable contributions to local development and to global goals, notably the Millennium Development Goals - MDGs and human rights.
- (b) Addressing tensions that affect relationships among different cultures. *Better understanding the roles of religious ideas and actors is an important and under-explored dimension of both challenges.* As religion has long been sidelined in relevant policy reflections, the roles that religious institutions, ideas, and identities play in the world’s poorest communities are rarely taken into account. The common, shared commitment to human dignity and compassion, exemplified in the active work of a host of faith-inspired humanitarian and development institutions, could potentially help address both challenges, at global and local levels.

*Poor coordination among the growing body of humanitarian and development actors and often poor strategic fit within national development strategies are significant problems in many parts of the world. Many, in some cases most, faith-linked actors fall outside formal aid harmonization frameworks (Paris/Rome/Accra declarations). National and local aid coordination mechanisms are often poorly equipped to deal with a diversity of views and a multiplicity of organiza-*

tions. This applies with special force in crisis and post-crisis situations where administrative structures are weakest and humanitarian and development agencies operate in a poorly regulated environment. Governance challenges tend to be particularly acute in these situations.

*Coordination efforts, while essential, can also contribute to patterns that favor larger and better known actors, working against smaller, often locally-based and innovative organizations.* The increasing focus on formal results and reporting arrangements, however desirable, can be a barrier to engagement by some groups and communities whose framing of issues fits poorly in the contemporary “results culture”.

Gaps in knowledge and understanding, together with explicit but often implicit attitudes and prejudices, can impair strategic approaches to the complex universe of religiously linked actors. Two priorities in addressing gaps are *global and country level mapping work so that the work is better identified and assessed, and probing assessment and dissemination of success stories.* Better knowledge can enable all partners, including governments and civil society, to discern more clearly areas of potential partnership.

*A few “bad apples” – groups that work counter to agreed norms and codes of conduct – can cause lasting and far-reaching harm to communal relations and to the reputation and roles of respectful and effective organizations.* The important but exceptional nature of these cases needs to be recognized and thoughtful but determined responses developed. For example, most faith-inspired organizations argue with energy

and conviction that proselytizing in emergency situations and exploiting situations of unequal power is inappropriate. Clarifying both the phenomenon and the majority position could help dispel concerns within governmental organizations and civil society.

Even with better mapping and a larger library of case studies, certain disconnects—such as those linked to different understandings of specific policy and rights issues, for example gender approaches, reproductive rights, orphan care, and the significance of religious freedom—require more than just better knowledge. *Dialogue about perceptions is almost as important as engagement on realities, and it can and should be undertaken with deliberate purpose and skill.* There is experience to build on but it tends to be fragmented and insufficient.

Religious dimensions have been markedly absent from much discussion about *failing states, or, as some term the areas of focus, the “global periphery”*. Given the important roles of religious institutions in virtually every such situation—whether as aid givers or parties affected by conflict and crisis—this gap offers a priority topic for analysis and reflection. There is significant potential for expanding partnerships involving faith communities and institutions specifically in these, the most difficult development and humanitarian situations. Yet this is also where acute tensions are most apparent. The UNAOC could play a material role in highlighting issues and seeking solutions.

## TEN SUGGESTED ACTION POINTS

- Governments can direct explicit attention to the missing links and material obstacles that sideline many faith-inspired organizations in **aid coordination processes**, at the global and local levels. Taking two countries as examples would help in working out practical steps which could have broader application.
- Governments, UNAOC, and leading Faith-inspired Organizations<sup>1</sup> (FIOs) could identify **flashpoint issues** that create obstacles to cooperation or sour the environment. Examples are cumbersome or poorly understood civil society regulation processes, absence of best practice voluntary codes of conduct, and ineffective anti-corruption programs.
- Staff of both public and faith-inspired organizations would benefit from a range of **training and exchange opportunities**. The UN Staff College workshop in November 2010 is an example. It helped to ground participants in basic understandings of institutions, strategies, and traditions but also made it possible to address specific differences and special concerns of representatives from different religious traditions and public organizations. The result was better common understanding and a foundation for more subtle approaches to future partnerships.
- **A special review, in a finite group of countries, could highlight mechanisms** that might achieve three UNAOC objectives: promoting action-oriented partnerships among institutions from different faith traditions, identifying meaningful examples of success, and engaging *diaspora* communities in specific action areas identified through dialogue. The thematic platform could recommend specific projects emerging from the study.
- **Support for promising networks, building on new technologies and with effective moderation** to filter and focus material for busy actors, could form the core of a series of projects (no single network can meet all needs).
- **Cooperation with media, both print/web and radio/television, could address poor intercultural understandings and highlight positive developments**. The work of faith-linked development and humanitarian organizations offers excellent grist for stories.
- Starting with a specific topical action program could show the way and **tuberculosis offers promise as an underexplored topic which could offer the basis for tangible results-focused collaboration**<sup>2</sup>.
- Bring faith actors into discussions about the *issues of immediate concern for aid-providing donors* (for example present concerns about steep increases in food prices) thus offering opportunities to build partnerships and produce more informed policy.
- As reflection on post 2015 MDG+ **frameworks** advances, the UNAOC could seek an appropriate convening role, bringing to bear the partnerships and experience gained through the bridging divides process.
- Pursue measures that **address financing protocols, laws, and preconceptions that contribute to disconnects and tensions**. These might include poorly formulated measures restricting charitable activity and giving, poor integration of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC)<sup>3</sup> and non-DAC institutions, and gaps in data collection and reporting systems which tend to exclude relevant faith-linked institutions and work.

## ABOUT UNAOC

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions. [www.unaoc.org](http://www.unaoc.org)

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<sup>1</sup> The term faith-inspired organization is used in preference to faith-based as it encompasses a broader group of organizations and places more emphasis on the motivation and origin of organizations than on their formal links to religious bodies.

<sup>2</sup> Tuberculosis offers promise as an action area because many faith-linked entities are engaged in health care and this could be linked to community roots which are a major strength of faith institutions. See Berkley Center/WFDD review: <http://repository.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/100914TBReport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; [http://www.oecd.org/department/0,2688,en\\_2649\\_33721\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/department/0,2688,en_2649_33721_1_1_1_1_1,00.html)