

Faith Action for Children on the Move: Unique and Critical Contribution of Local Faith Communities for Internally Displaced children

Submission to the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (HLP)

Submitted by:



I) The Consideration of the Unique and Essential Partnership with Local Faith actors

The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (HLP) is a unique opportunity to provide clear recommendations reflecting effective partnerships that can play a vital role in responding to the unique challenges internally displaced children face. Conflict and disasters triggered 33.4 million new internal displacements across 145 countries and territories in 2019.¹ Local Faith Communities, and specifically local faith leaders, have an essential role to play. As trusted community leaders, faith leaders have vital social, access and spiritual capital.² They play an essential role in sharing accurate fact-based messages, combatting myths and engaging within their communities to address harmful or unhealthy practices—lessons learned from the Ebola crisis.³ They also influence and engage with families, offering vital insight into identifying the most vulnerable children, providing referral mechanisms and addressing underlying beliefs that may support or end violence. Faith leaders can play a vital role in combating fear, reducing stigma and encouraging social cohesion. Conflict and cycles of displacement have particularly significant impact on children, who experience especially high risk for abuse, neglect and violence, illness and distress, poverty and other harm to current and future well-being.⁴ Faith actors can and do play vital roles in strengthening relationships, standing up against xenophobia and other drivers of conflict.⁵ Further, faith communities provide spiritual support for children and caregivers which serves as an essential resource for healing and resilience.⁶ Faith leaders are already engaging in prevention and response work but often need support, resources and capacity-building to do so more effectively.

¹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>

² <https://evac.jiflc.com/resources/a-mixed-blessing-roles-of-faith-communities-in-ending-violence-against-children/>

³ Smith, Sally, et al. "Religion and Ebola-Learning from Experience." The Lancet. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)61082-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)61082-0)

⁴ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201911-twice-invisible-internally-displaced-children.pdf> p. 6

⁵ Faith Action Learning Brief: Building Peaceful Societies and Combating Xenophobia

⁶ Faith Action for Children on the Move Learning Brief: Spiritual Support.

This submission opens the conversation between faith-based organizations and the HLP to consider the unique and essential role of local faith actors and international faith-based organizations, who have trusted relationships with local faith communities. It will promote innovative partnerships focused on

Request to the HLP before finalising its Recommendations:

- We request the HLP initial recommendations highlight the unique and essential role of local faith actors and invite Faith Action for Children on the move to co-convene a conversation about equitable, mutually beneficial and transparent partnerships.

2) What are the unique vulnerabilities of displaced children, made more evident with the current COVID-19 epidemics?

COVID-19 is likely to be disastrous for children, particularly children on the move. Familial systems that children rely on are already precarious for children on the move as they may be separated from family networks and even their own parents. Further, the interruption or total breakdown of already stretched or limited health systems, formal and informal child protection systems and education systems. Also, steps being taken to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 are resulting in essential service suspension, restricted freedom of movement, and limiting humanitarian access.

36 million children representing more than 52% of Refugees and 40% of Internally Displaced Persons forcibly displaced by conflict are already living in precarious and insecure conditions in low-income and fragile countries. Many of these children are in large over-crowded camps or densely populated urban settings with limited or no access to basic services like sanitation, education, health and protection and support including basic healthcare. These children are subject to increased threats of disease as physical distancing is often not possible. They also face increased threats of violence including psychological, physical and sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and child marriage, and child labour. They also experience lapses in educational opportunities and are at increased risk for mental and psychosocial health challenges and trauma⁷.

3) What is the unique and essential evidence-based contribution of faith actors to internally displaced children?

We invite the HLP to prioritise evidence based approaches - including those culled from the experience of faith-based and faith-inspired entities - as critical components of its overall recommendations for sustainable solutions to internal displacement and to alleviate the impact on millions of affected children.

The Faith Action for Children on the Move Coalition has identified three primary pillars of work, reflecting the evidence based-approach to children on the move.

Providing spiritual support to children, families and caregivers as a source of healing and resilience

Children's spirituality enhances their resilience during displacement. Religious meanings, networks, and places impact the development of the individual and collective identity of children on the move. Psychosocial support that does not recognise children's spirituality, as well as their questions about their own faith traditions and other traditions, will miss a crucial part of children's experience. We recognize children have an innate capacity for spiritual development, and we acknowledge that religious

⁷ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201911-twice-invisible-internally-displaced-children.pdf> p. 5, 14

communities play an important role in nourishing children’s spirituality in ways that are respectful of their religious beliefs and cultures.

Strengthening the continuum of care for child protection

Faith actors’ grounding in local communities allows them to build the community’s trust in and ownership of child protection mechanisms. Faith actors build bridges – between faith actors, government actors and other organisations, and with the host community – that are crucial for the success of child protection programmes for children on the move.

Community and grassroots initiatives need capacity training, resources, and support from broader networks in order to effectively contribute to the protection of children on the move. Religious networks, which span across countries and regions, support faith actors to provide for children on the move and advocate for continued protection.

Building peaceful societies and opposing xenophobia, racism and discrimination

An awareness of the embeddedness of religion in social, cultural, political, and economic realities will help all actors to understand the nuances of faith partnerships. Because children on the move are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, faith actors are compelled by their beliefs to speak out for the protection of children and advocate for better practices, especially among people of the same faith. By speaking out for children on the move and raising awareness of their needs and migration journeys, faith actors can shift attitudes and behaviours towards children to enhance their protection. Further, faith actors play a role in strengthening social cohesion, leveraging their social capital, access capital and spiritual capital. In addition, faith actors have an essential responsibility to promote interfaith dialogue that contribute to building peaceful societies.

4) What is the contribution of Faith Action for Children on the Move Coalition?

Faith plays a role in the lives and behaviours of 84% of the world’s population.⁸ Faith leaders, in particular, can exercise considerable influence in many communities. COVID-19 has further illustrate the influence—positive and negative—that faith leaders can have in terms of sharing accurate information, modelling healthy behaviours and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable. Humanitarian and development actors have often failed to consider faith leaders and faith communities as essential partners in understanding local contexts, addressing root causes and designing solutions. Even when recognising the important role of faith leaders, governments, multilateral organizations and NGOs have often approached faith leaders as a tool/instrument to further specific agendas, failing to take into account the importance of building relationships or understanding the diversity and nuance of faith perspectives even in the same context. Support and nurturing of faith and spirituality must be recognised and prioritised as essential contributors to children’s overall well-being and resilience⁹.

Recommendations for HLP:

- **Governments, donors and the United Nations** should recognise the essential role that faith-based organisations (FBOs) play in building and sustaining relationships with local faith actors through appointing clear, permanent focal points. These sustained relationships, building trust over time,

⁸ Pew Research Trust, 2012.

⁹ Maria Alejandra Andrade Vinuesa (2017) The role of spirituality in building up the resilience of migrant children in Central America: bridging the gap between needs and responses, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 22:1, 84-101, DOI: [10.1080/1364436X.2016.1278359](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1278359)

provide an essential engagement platform, leverage the faith literacy of the FBO and ensure more equitable communication and relationships.

- **Governments, donors and the United Nations** should commit to building their own internal capacity to engage with faith-based organizations by building essential faith literacy in partnership with FBOs.
- **Governments** should prioritise faith leaders/faith partners as essential stakeholders with clearly outlined mechanisms for engagement to help prepare and protect internally displaced individuals, families, and children.
- **Governments** should make child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) core components of support for internally displaced children. They should implement a faith-sensitive MHPSS strategy for reaching those directly and indirectly impacted, especially those most vulnerable. This support should include partnering with faith communities to address fear, stigma, negative coping strategies, and other needs identified through assessments. It should also build on the ability of faith communities to leverage positive spiritual practices and prayer, in collaboration with other civil society stakeholders.
- **Governments and NGOs** should collaborate with local faith leaders and communities to support internally displaced children. Faith leaders are often among the most trusted leaders in a community, so it is important to ensure they have accurate information and encourage them to share it with their constituents/communities for more effective uptake of healthy behaviours.
- **NGOs** should collaborate with and support local faith communities to increase their knowledge of COVID-19 and to develop faith-sensitive MHPSS skills (e.g., psychological first aid) alongside religious and spiritual supports that contribute to resilience as well as how (and where) to refer individuals who may need more specialised support.
- **NGOs, including FBOs**, should take into account the underlying spiritual beliefs in the communities where they work. They should partner with faith actors and support the government with development of risk communication/community engagement plans based on these assessments, sensitise community leaders/champions, and amplify agreed risk communication/messaging. FBOs and faith actors can play an important role in addressing beliefs and attitudes that may cause harm or limit an effective response or promote cultural or religious values that enhance the response.
- **Faith actors** must play their unique and essential role in communities by:
 - Providing appropriate spiritual and psychosocial first aid to contribute to healing and resilience for children and their caregivers;
 - Contributing to the child protection referral mechanisms, recognising their unique access and opportunity to identify and support vulnerable children facing violence;
 - Supporting parents' home-based education efforts and promotion of continued education;
 - Promoting social cohesion, addressing fear, stigma and false information, and combatting xenophobia in the midst of the pandemic and afterwards; and
 - Advocate for family preservation and reunification, effective child protection mechanisms, and an end to child detention and violence against children in all its forms.

Faith-based organizations complement, enhance and sustain the work of multilateral organizations through long-term, trusted relationships with communities on the move, a shared language and values that connect with the 84% of the world's citizens who are people of faith and a track record for effective spiritual support for children on the move.