

# Bridging Voices Policy Brief

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## Religion and Social Justice for Refugees: Insights from Cameroon, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia and Mexico



Workshop participants, Jordan

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### Executive Summary

Systematic studies across six settings of displacement documented how: faith compels local acts of support for refugees; mutual support amongst refugees emerges even in contexts marked by hostility; actors in the public sphere are commonly blind to private dimensions of faith-based response; and religious and institutional responses to refugees intersect in widely different ways across different contexts.

We recommend that:

- Practitioners and policymakers recognise that faith is a powerful driver of solidarity and social justice, so that faith narratives and religious practices are factored into humanitarian interventions;
- While remaining vigilant to coercive religious practices, donor and international partners make explicit efforts not to marginalise non-technical language and local community action;

### Background

This policy brief is based upon findings from the Bridging Voices project *Religion and Social Justice for Refugees: Supporting Local Faith-based Responses to Displacement*, conducted by investigators from UCL, Yale, and partner institutions between 2018 and 2020. The project involved fieldwork in six contexts of refugee displacement: Cameroon, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, and the US-Mexico border. Over 300 in-depth interviews were conducted with members of refugee and host communities and with service providers. We assessed how faith-based and other organisations assist refugees with material support and access to legal or public services.

- Practitioners and policy makers recognise where faith teachings are compatible with secular approaches and draw upon them to more effectively coordinate local response;
- Humanitarian practitioners engage with religious values to broaden the scope of humanitarian assistance and ensure dignity in life and death.

## Overview

Our research demonstrates that faith prompts diverse forms of support for migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers around the world. This support includes humanitarian assistance, advocacy, activism, and acts of solidarity, in social and political contexts that are often hazardous. We noted the powerful roles that faith narratives and practices play in framing responses to destitution, insecurity, and threats to human rights. For example, many forcibly-displaced people routinely draw upon their faith and religious practices to make sense of life experiences, sustain hope, and strengthen endurance. Many refugees and service providers draw on a common language - emphasizing humanity, hospitality, and dignity - to secure basic needs and human rights in times of crisis. Religion – the practice of which is protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – thus impacts both individual experiences and collective responses to forced displacement.



Women faith leaders discuss protection issues, West Africa

Policy makers and assistance providers, however, are often reluctant or ill-equipped to recognise the powerful roles that faith and religion play in fighting for social justice. This situation arises for a number of reasons: barriers in the religious literacy of decision-makers; state restrictions on the public funding of religious activities; limited channels of accountability on the part of faith-based organisations; and fears that religion can be a driver of persecution, proselytisation, or discrimination. It is essential that policy makers and practitioners be more attentive to those aspects of religion that can further social justice for refugees. To this end, we summarize key findings, then offer four concrete steps to secure more effective and appropriate programmatic engagement.



A view from the road, Jordan



The mosque in Jebel Al-Baddawi, Lebanon

## Key findings

### (1) Faith compels local acts of support for refugees.

Locally-based actors are often key responders in situations of displacement - this includes communities, families, and individuals for whom faith provides a significant frame for collective action. Religious communities are often important sources of support and comfort for refugees, offering practical assistance to the living and dignified burial of the dead. The support is often remarkably varied – assisting with food, shelter, health, education, employment or citizenship – and in the degree to which their infrastructures operate independently from the state. This raises questions about the role state and non-state actors might play in supporting local faith-based infrastructures. There are many tensions to negotiate; at times, displaced communities may find themselves cut off from vital religious resources and constrained in religious practice, as reported in Malaysia by many Rohingya and Afghan respondents.

*It is vital that religious communities and faith-based customs are not undermined by global humanitarian programming.*

### (2) Mutual support amongst refugees emerges even in contexts marked by hostility.

Solidarity often stems from a sense of religiously-motivated compassion and respect for human dignity. While there is evidence of violence and social exclusion in contexts of forced displacements, there is also evidence of community-based acts of solidarity with migrants in need, including efforts to foster social justice and social inclusion. On the US-Mexico border, for example, government policies have produced a regime of exclusion and deportation that is hostile to forcibly-displaced migrants.

Amidst intense fear and mistrust, faith-based organizations have stepped-in to provide physical, psychosocial, practical, or legal assistance for migrants, linking themselves to a coalition for the defence of migrants. Migrants themselves reported effective help from faith-based shelters, neighbours, and other migrants, in response to detention, theft, or other forms of violence.

*This mutuality of support, embedded in faith, was often observed. One limitation is that local support, included faith-based support, may be differentially enacted along dimensions of age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.*



### (3) Actors in the public sphere are often blind to private dimensions of faith-based response.

In the humanitarian sphere, community-based acts of kindness are often viewed as private acts, especially when implicitly rooted in faith. In Jordan, religious values were seldom acknowledged in public discussion – many humanitarian organisations detached religious language from the secular language of technical and professional assistance.

*This raises issues regarding the ability of humanitarian actors to appropriately grasp the important roles that faith can play in motivating effective support for refugees.*



Mural, US-Mexico border

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### (4) Religious and institutional responses to refugees intersect – but in different ways in different contexts.

We documented the ways that government and civic institutions may adopt, impose, reject, or navigate multi-faceted religious responses to refugees. In some contexts, such as the US-Mexico border, faith-based organisations are playing important roles in challenging negative discourses pertaining to migrants and unjust migrant detention policies.

*Faith-based organisations often intersect with the state, multinational institutions, and other NGOs - in the pursuit of social justice for refugees.*



Places of worship can provide space for community engagement

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## Recommendations

Four concrete steps are recommended to secure more effective and appropriate engagement with faith-based responses:

### (a) Faith narratives and religious practices should be intelligently factored into humanitarian interventions.

It can help fight structural barriers that lead to human rights violation and the social exclusion of refugees.

Practitioners and policy makers must recognise that faith is a powerful driver of solidarity and social justice. It can help fight structural barriers that lead to human rights violation and the social exclusion of refugees. Policy-makers can effectively partner with a broad range of community-based organisations, including faith-based organisations, to extend a lifeline for refugees, provide effective local responses, and sustain efforts to foster social justice.

### (b) Donors and international partners should ensure that they do not marginalise non-technical language or dismiss non-professional local action.

Whilst it is appropriate that international donors and partners are vigilant regarding coercive practices of religious actors and others, they risk obscuring or devaluing the important work that faith-based communities undertake to valorise hospitality, dignity, and humanity in the pursuit of social justice.

### (c) Practitioners and policy makers must recognise how faith teachings relating to the rights and dignity of refugees are compatible with international secular values.

Drawing on faith-based traditions rooted in social justice will enable humanitarian organisations to more effectively coordinate a local response, understand needs, and address injustices affecting the lives of refugees.

### (d) Humanitarian practitioners need to engage with religious values in order to broaden the scope of humanitarian assistance, provide dignity in life and death, and move from crisis to resilience programming.

Humanitarian engagement with faith must, however, recognise how religious identities are complicated by other markers of identity, such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity, in non-straightforward ways.

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