

## Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations

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### Abstract

*This article examines the role of faith-based organizations, particularly Christian organizations, in humanitarian assistance within the broader context of the NGO world. Following an overview of the historical development of these organizations, the article examines the current context in which faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations operate. The different roles played by these organizations are explored, as are some of the difficulties they encounter. The article suggests that much more work is needed in the area of capacity-building of local humanitarian organizations and in the coordination of NGO programmatic work.*



Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations have a long history of responding to people in need and today are important players in the international community's response to emergencies. As Ian Smillie and Larry Minear say, "Government officials are now aware that the world's largest NGOs actually provide more aid than do some donor governments. NGOs are active in more countries than many governments, and they carry more credibility with taxpayers than do government aid agencies. Indeed, some individual NGOs have country programmes with larger budgets than the government ministries to which they relate."<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the world has witnessed the phenomenal growth of civil society and, within civil society, the proliferation of NGOs. As *the Economist*

explains, “[t]he end of communism, the spread of democracy in poor countries, technological change and economic integration — globalisation in short — has created fertile soil for the rise of NGOs.”<sup>2</sup>

According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, there were about 26,000 international NGOs by the year 2000, compared with 6,000 in 1990. The US alone has about 2 million NGOs, 70% of which are more than 30 years old. India has about 1 million grassroots groups, while more than 100,000 NGOs sprang up in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1995. “As a group, NGOs now deliver more aid than the whole United Nations system.”<sup>3</sup> Some observers estimate that the total funding channelled through NGOs worldwide is in excess of US\$ 8.5 billion per year.<sup>4</sup>

The growing number of humanitarian organizations or NGOs<sup>5</sup> and their incredible variety makes generalizations impossible. Refugee-serving NGOs include small organizations staffed by volunteers and housed in church basements as well as organizations with annual budgets close to US\$ 1 billion per year — about the same as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some NGOs, particularly faith-based organizations, have large constituencies numbering in the hundreds of millions. Others are membership organizations whose members contribute funds and volunteer their time. Like many of their secular counterparts, most faith-based organizations are involved in a wide range of activities, including long-term development and advocacy for justice as well as humanitarian assistance.

This article examines the role of faith-based organizations, particularly Christian organizations, in humanitarian assistance within the broader context of the NGO world. While there is no generally accepted definition of faith-based organizations, they are characterized by having one or more of the following: affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious beliefs or affiliation and/or decision-making processes based on religious values. Within

1 Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, *The Charity of Nations*, Kumarian Press, Inc, Bloomfield, USA, 2004.

2 *The Economist*, “The non-governmental order,” 11 December 1999, p. 20.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

4 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of the World's Refugees*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000a, p. 194.

5 The inadequacy of the term “non-governmental organization” has long been recognized by NGOs and academics (see e.g. John Clark, *Democratizing Development: the Role of Voluntary Organizations*, Earthscan, London, 1991; David Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, Kumarian Press, West Hartford, 1990; and Graham Hancock, *Lords of Poverty*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1989, for a particularly critical assessment). Within the NGO community, some prefer a term with a more positive connotation, such as voluntary agency, rather than a term that defines an organization by what it is not. Critics have questioned whether agencies receiving substantial amounts of government funding can be considered *non-governmental*. A range of alternative terms have been proposed, from *volag* (for voluntary agency) to community-based development organization. Churches which are involved in humanitarian assistance often reject being called NGOs, preferring to see themselves as part of civil society. While recognizing the inadequacies of the terminology, this paper nevertheless uses the term “NGO” to refer to organizations which have been established by individuals and groups to promote public welfare and which are not formally a part of government, including those which are formally associated with churches.

the Christian community, there are differences between organizations which are formally linked to churches, such as the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Norwegian Church Aid, and Christian Care Zimbabwe, and those whose values are explicitly Christian but which are not formally related to established churches or church-related organizations.<sup>6</sup> While numerous faith-based organizations concentrate their activities on the local level, many represent significant contributions to the international humanitarian community. For example, the church-related agencies associated with the World Council of Churches mobilize over US\$ 1 billion per year<sup>7</sup> for relief and development and the members of the Caritas Internationalis family, in 162 countries, mobilize at least that amount.

Faith-based organizations share many characteristics with their secular counterparts and this article identifies some of these similarities as well as some of the differences. It also highlights some of the differences within the faith-based community, particularly between Christian organizations involved in humanitarian assistance.

## A brief history of faith-based and secular NGO involvement in humanitarian work

Long before international humanitarian law was formalized in treaty law, individuals and faith communities provided assistance to those afflicted by natural disaster, persecution, uprooting and war. The theme of justice for the poor, the marginalized and the alien is central to the Hebrew scriptures. The persecuted often sought sanctuary in temples and cities of refuge and, in the later medieval period, monasteries were often places of refuge and hospitality for strangers. Catholic orders were established to provide charity to the poor, medical care to the sick, education for children and hospitality to strangers. In the Orthodox and Protestant traditions, a special category of lay ministry, the diaconate was established to carry out Christian service (Greek word *diakonia*) which continues to be viewed as central to the mission of the church. This service to others was based not only on Christian values of charity and mercy but was also rooted in the belief in the absolute value of the human person.

6 See e.g. the report on the findings of Helen Rose Ebaugh for the Coalition Ministries and Congregations Study, in "Faith and public life" <[www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/ebaugh\\_orlando.php](http://www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/ebaugh_orlando.php)> (last visited 25 April 2005). The 2003 AmeriCorps (US government-supported volunteer service programme) Guidance provides the following definition for faith-based organizations: a religious congregation (church, mosque, synagogue or temple); an organization, programme or project sponsored/hosted by a religious congregation; a non-profit organization founded by a religious congregation or religiously-motivated incorporators and board members that clearly states in its name, incorporation or mission statement that it is a religiously motivated institution; a collaboration of organizations that clearly and explicitly includes organizations from the previously described categories.

7 *Ecumenical Partners Survey*, WCC, Geneva, 2003. However, because these funds are mobilized through national church-related organizations, each with its own name, this contribution is less visible than that of many other "families" of agencies (e.g. Oxfam, World Vision, Médecins Sans Frontières). For more information on church-related organizations, see Act: <<http://www.act-intl.org>>, Caritas Internationalis: <<http://www.caritas.org>>, World Vision: <<http://www.wvi.org/wvi/home.htm>>, World Council of Churches: <<http://www.wcc-coe.org>> (last visited 25 April 2005).

Mission societies which flourished in Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought to evangelize in distant continents, but provided humanitarian assistance too. They also raised awareness in their home countries of humanitarian needs elsewhere, and individual congregations therefore often sponsored missionaries, sending money and relief items in response to the needs they reported.

While several major secular organizations were formed in the nineteenth century, notably the Red Cross movement and anti-slavery organizations, their numbers increased in the early part of the twentieth century. Save the Children was established in 1919 and Oxfam during World War II. In the period between the two world wars voluntary agencies took the lead in responding to famine in the Soviet Union and caring for war victims in the Balkans and victims of genocide in Armenia. In the latter case, a consortium of agencies organized the Armenian Committee for Relief in the Near East, known as Near East Relief, which raised US\$ 20 million, sent relief teams into affected areas, fed an average of 300,000 people per day, established and administered all hospital services for Armenia and took charge of over 75,000 orphans.<sup>8</sup>

But the activities of the early NGOs were not limited to the charitable provision of relief. From the beginning, many were also involved in lobbying and advocacy activities. For example, in 1911 the American Jewish Committee lobbied the US government with regard to the Russian treatment of US Jews applying for Russian visas,<sup>9</sup> thereby forcing the US Congress to overturn an 80-year-old treaty regulating US commercial ties to Russia. Moreover, their assistance activities brought issues to the public's attention, stimulated international awareness and created pressures for governmental response. Michael Marrus describes how hundreds of thousands of refugees were kept alive by NGOs in the period between the end of World War I and the establishment of the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees in 1921. "By keeping so many alive, the private organizations helped to elicit a response from governments and from the international agencies set in place after the First World War."<sup>10</sup> In the immediate post-World War II period, there was a dramatic increase in the number of secular and Christian organizations that were created to respond to humanitarian need. Care International, Christian Aid and Church World Service all had their roots in the interwar period but grew rapidly in the years following World War II. The World Council of Churches (WCC) was formed in 1948 as a fellowship of churches, but much of its programmatic work in its early years was concerned with responding to humanitarian need, particularly the needs of Europe's displaced millions. Similarly, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

8 J. Bruce Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Refugee Work and US Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, pp. 32-33; Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, pp. 83-84; Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First Fifty Years*, Oxfam, Oxford, 1992; Randolph C. Kent, *Anatomy of Disaster Relief: The International Network in Action*, Pinter Publishers, London, 1987, pp. 21-41.

9 Nichols, *Ibid.*

10 Marrus, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 83.

was founded in 1947 and focused much of its early work on responding to the needs of Lutherans displaced by the war. LWF now works in 37 countries with 60 international staff, 5,800 local staff and a budget of US\$ 73 million for development and relief.

NGOs, and particularly churches, lobbied for the establishment of the United Nations and took the initiative to press for the inclusion of human rights references in the United Nations Charter. The Federal Council of Churches<sup>11</sup> was instrumental in actually drafting text for the charter and passing it on to US representatives on the drafting committee. Over 1,200 NGOs attended the San Francisco Conference which finalized the UN Charter. “Some authors claim that the NGOs were directly responsible for the existence of the Charter’s provisions on human rights.”<sup>12</sup>

Faith-based NGOs often took the lead in encouraging NGOs to come together in broad coalitions. At the national level, coordination mechanisms for NGOs were established in North America and Europe even before the end of World War II. In June 1948, the Standing Committee of Voluntary Agencies (SCVA) was formed at the international level with 37 national and international agencies “to provide for joint representation in discussions with competent organisations or governments on refugee problems” and to facilitate joint consultation among the voluntary agencies concerning needs of refugees, conditions of work, etc.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, NGOs, particularly faith-based organizations, continued to provide substantial relief and were essential to the functioning of the refugee-serving community. One 1953 analysis found that fully 90% of post-war relief was provided by religious agencies.<sup>14</sup> But NGOs also took the lead in lobbying for resettlement opportunities and in providing the resources needed for resettlement of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian refugees fleeing Soviet intervention in 1956. Over the years, Northern church-based organizations channelled millions of dollars to churches and related organizations in the South through what was known as “inter-church aid” in support of local church work with the poor and with victims of wars and other disasters.

In 1962, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) was formed, largely as a result of the initiative of faith-based organizations, and by 1965, as many as 65 agencies had become members of ICVA. ICVA played, and

11 This was the precursor of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States.

12 Peter Willetts, “Pressure groups as transnational actors,” Peter Willetts (ed.), *Pressure Groups in the Global System*, Frances Pinter Publishers, London, 1982, p. 10. For descriptions of the role of NGOs in the development of human rights standards, see also Lowell W. Livezy, “PVOs, human rights and the humanitarian task,” in Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher (eds.), *The Moral Nation: Humanitarianism and US Foreign Policy Today*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1989, pp. 192-209; Eya C. M. Nchama, “The role of non-governmental organizations in the promotion and protection of human rights,” *Bulletin of Human Rights*, 90/1, 1991, p. 50. Henry J. Stein, *Diverse Partners: Non-governmental Organizations in the Human Rights Movement*, Harvard College, Cambridge, 1991.

13 Louise Holborn, *Refugees: A Problem of Our Time. The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951-1972*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1975, p. 125.

14 Cited by Bruce Nichols, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 68.

continues to play, a unique role as a coalition of both Southern and Northern NGOs active in the fields of development and humanitarian relief.<sup>15</sup> From the early 1960s to the early 1980s NGOs grew in size and range of activities, but their expansion did not keep pace with the growth in intergovernmental organizations, particularly that of UNHCR. The steady expansion of the latter's mandate, especially with the adoption of the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees which removed the geographical restrictions,<sup>16</sup> meant that UNHCR became active in situations from which it had previously been excluded.

By the 1980s the proliferation of NGOs, the growth of indigenous NGOs in developing countries and changing understandings of development meant that secular and faith-based international organizations came under increasing pressure to decrease their direct involvement in provision of services abroad and instead to support the development of local institutions. Institution-building and empowerment replaced concepts of community organizing which had largely been carried out by expatriate staff in the 1960s and 1970s. The emphasis placed on capacity-building of local NGOs continues to be a major theme — and often a source of tension — within both the secular and faith-based humanitarian organizations. For example, local NGOs may view the deployment of expatriate staff by international NGOs in their countries with some concern, particularly when they compare the cost of expatriate salaries with their own running costs.

## Faith-based organizations

Faith-based humanitarian organizations share many characteristics with their secular counterparts and are influenced by the same political, social and economic contexts. However, there are two characteristics which set faith-based humanitarian organizations apart from most secular humanitarian organizations: they are motivated by their faith and they have a constituency which is broader than humanitarian concerns. For believers, to be a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian implies a duty to respond to the needs of the poor and the marginalized. The expression of this faith takes different forms in different religious traditions but is a powerful motivation for humanitarian action.

The long Christian missionary tradition, although often faulted today for its complicity in colonialism, left a legacy of church involvement in social services in all regions, particularly in the areas of education and health. As William Headley of Catholic Relief Services states, “the principal agents of human development in the world have been or continue to be faith-based organizations. In the US, the Catholic Church is the largest non-public provider of human services to poor families. One-third of all AIDS patients in the world

15 By 2005, the number had increased to about 75, most of which were coalitions or umbrella organizations themselves.

16 When UNHCR was established in 1951, its mandate was restricted to working with those displaced by World War II and to the immediate post-war period.

are served through the auspices of the Catholic Church (...). Come with me to any African country. Gather the president and his ministers together, ask where he or his or her children are educated. You need not worry about what the individual's religion is. You will find that an inordinate number of them have been educated in Protestant and Catholic schools."<sup>17</sup>

Christian NGOs are active in virtually every country in the world. While Jewish and Islamic NGOs primarily serve members of their own religious communities, Christian organizations tend to have a more global outreach: to assist those in need regardless of their religious affiliation. Within the world of Christian organizations, there are sharp differences between those — primarily with Catholic and mainstream Protestant traditions — which separate assistance and evangelization and those which, as primarily evangelical groups, see their humanitarian work as an integral part of their missionary activities. For this and other reasons discussed below, the humanitarian work of some evangelical groups is frequently criticized by traditional faith-based organizations which are committed to respecting the religious beliefs of those whom they assist. The activities of evangelical groups which combine assistance with a missionary message can have repercussions on all faith-based humanitarian organizations.

### **The context in which faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations operate**

Secular and faith-based humanitarian organizations are affected by the evolving context in which humanitarian assistance is offered. Trends in overseas development assistance (ODA) indicate that an increasing percentage of assistance is directed towards emergency response. And in emergency assistance in particular, the proportion of overseas development assistance being channelled through NGOs has increased dramatically in the past 15 years. "It is governments, rather than individual donors, that are most responsible for the recent increase in NGO funding. In 1970, public sector funding accounted for a mere 1.5 percent of NGO budgets. By the mid-1990s, it had risen to 40 percent and was still increasing."<sup>18</sup> This increasing reliance on government funding raises questions about the extent to which NGOs are really *non-governmental*. Some large international NGOs receive over 90% of their funding from government sources; others have imposed limits on the percentage of government funds which they will accept. Thus, for example, 70% of funds for *Action contre la Faim* in France came from official sources, while World Vision USA received only 23% of its income from the government in 2001. Oxfam GB received 28% from the government and the Lutheran World Federation just 20%.<sup>19</sup>

17 "International faith-based initiatives: Can they work?"; available at <[www.georgetown.edu/centers/woodstock/report/r-fea77a.htm](http://www.georgetown.edu/centers/woodstock/report/r-fea77a.htm)> (last visited 4 March 2005).

18 UNHCR 2000a, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 194.

19 Cited in Smillie and Minear, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 15.

The impact of increasing governmental resources, the shift toward emergency response, the expanding role of the media in shaping humanitarian response, and the proliferation of NGOs has accentuated competition between NGOs. The emergence of new NGOs in response to a particular emergency situation (including the so-called “briefcase NGOs” which show up only in high-visibility emergencies and GONGOs or government-organized NGOs) makes generalizations difficult, but has clearly created a more competitive environment for all NGOs, including faith-based organizations. Before 1989, for example, churches in Central and Eastern Europe were one of the few expressions of civil society. Rooted in the local context, they provided humanitarian assistance to people in need and were supported by church-related agencies from abroad as well as by their own constituencies. With the proliferation of NGOs in the following decade, their unique position was challenged. New and often more professional NGOs were set up to respond to particular social needs. For example, many new Romanian NGOs were created after 1990 to provide services to orphans and street children. Faith-based Romanian organizations which had worked for years with children now found themselves competing with those new NGOs for foreign funds.

At the same time, greater media attention to emergencies coupled with growing donor requirements for accountability has stepped up the pressure on international NGOs to implement more professional programmes. For Northern church-related agencies, this meant that it was no longer enough for a local humanitarian organization to be church-related; it had to be able to deliver measurable results and fulfil increasingly stringent reporting requirements. Northern church-related agencies are choosing more and more to work with local secular and inter-faith NGOs rather than churches, leading to questions from many local churches and church-related organizations which had relied on their support for many years.

Within the broader NGO world, the difference between local NGOs<sup>20</sup> which operate in only one country and international NGOs which are largely based in the North, is a particularly important issue. The fact is that while many international NGOs have the capacity and the willingness to respond immediately, visibly and often effectively to large-scale humanitarian emergencies, many of them will leave the country or significantly reduce their operations once the immediate crisis is past. They will move on to the next large-scale media emergency, whereas the indigenous NGOs will remain in the country for the long term. Relations between Northern and Southern NGOs are thus a key theme in today’s world of humanitarian organizations. And these tensions are also played out in the Christian NGO community. Many churches in the South are concerned when Northern church-related agencies provide financial support to local secular NGOs. They are upset when Northern church-related agencies send expatriate staff to carry out operations in their countries, often

20 The terms local, indigenous, national and Southern NGOs are often used interchangeably.



without consulting them. A fifty-year tradition of “inter-church aid” is being replaced in many quarters by professional programmes to eradicate poverty and respond to emergencies.

Coupled with growing media reports on NGO activity and multi-donor evaluations of emergency response, pressure has increased for NGOs to become more accountable for their activities. In 1994 the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) developed the NGO/Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Work. In 1997, the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, known as the Sphere Project, was launched with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and to make the humanitarian agencies more accountable. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International seeks to take the question of accountability a step further by including beneficiaries in the process of evaluating delivery of humanitarian assistance. In the aftermath of the 2002 West African case of sexual exploitation of beneficiaries, the SCHR initiated a process of peer review between its nine members to assess the organizations’ policies and procedures to prevent such sexual exploitation.

Many church-based humanitarian organizations have signed on to the NGO/Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Work. However, as Smillie and Minear note, “Many faith-based groups embrace a justice agenda and, while not necessarily choosing sides in a given conflict, do not make the principle of neutrality their first and great commandment.”<sup>21</sup> Thus some Christian organizations providing relief assistance in Sudan were also involved in supporting southern Sudan’s quest for greater autonomy in the peace process.

For church-related organizations questions of accountability between Northern and Southern organizations have been a major issue. In the 1980s, for example, there was great concern within the network of church-related agencies with links to the WCC about the concept of “ecumenical discipline”<sup>22</sup> — a common understanding about relations between churches and church-related agencies that was especially focused on solidarity and mutual accountability. In a process of consultation attempts were made to develop guidelines for mutual relations between Northern and Southern churches and related organizations that would respect the central role of local organizations. However, the pressures of professionalism and the competitive marketplace were such that implementation of these guidelines has never got very far. European Union institutions, for example, provide significant funding for humanitarian work by large European church-related organizations. Often a condition of this funding is the presence of expatriate staff in a given country, which means that a church-related organization receiving such funds is under pressure to send out expatriate staff rather than channel those funds through a local partner.

21 Smillie and Minear, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 20.

22 World Consultation on Ecumenical Sharing of Resources at El Escorial, WCC, Geneva, 1987.

Action by Churches Together (ACT) was formed in 1995 as a unique North-South alliance of churches and their related organizations to channel emergency assistance. Founded by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, ACT seeks to build the capacity of local church-related organizations to respond to emergencies in their own countries. In spite of this capacity-building component for local organizations, approximately two-thirds of the US\$ 80 million or so allocated every year for emergencies is channelled through Northern church-related agencies. The need for comprehensive and timely reports, particularly when government funds are mobilized, means that Northern church-related donors often prefer working through large professional organizations.

## Roles of NGOs in humanitarian assistance

Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations play many roles in responding to crises. Reports both from local organizations and from staff of Northern agencies often serve as an early warning of potential humanitarian emergencies, although they are rarely given the attention they warrant. For example, in 1983 Dutch Interchurch Aid warned of a coming famine in Ethiopia. Over the course of the next year the organization became increasingly alarmed about the deteriorating conditions and therefore organized visits to the capitals of seven European countries, urging early action to prevent a large-scale tragedy. No action was taken until the famine reached catastrophic proportions. It was only after the BBC broadcasted a dramatic report in late 1994 that a large-scale response was mobilized. Today, reports from local church partners and church-related organizations such as Jesuit Refugee Service and local councils of churches provide a wealth of information on impending emergencies. However, they rarely result in adequate measures being taken to prevent catastrophic situations because it is difficult for faith-based and secular organizations (as well as for UN agencies) to mobilize sufficient resources to respond to the so-called “forgotten” emergencies.

Within the international NGO community, a sharp difference has traditionally been seen in the roles played by human rights NGOs and humanitarian NGOs. Human rights NGOs seek to protect victims of conflict and persecution by denouncing human rights violations, monitoring ongoing situations and publicly naming governments which fail to protect people under their care. On the other hand, humanitarian NGOs have traditionally seen their primary role as assisting victims of conflicts and natural disasters and have been reluctant to publicly denounce human rights violations for fear of having their assistance activities curtailed. Instead, humanitarian NGOs maintain that they use so-called “quiet” interventions as appropriate to raise concerns about human rights abuses with the relevant public officials or armed groups.<sup>23</sup> These distinctions

23 Larry Minear, “Partnerships in the protection of refugees and other people at risk: Emerging issues and work in progress,” *UNHCR Working Paper No. 13*, UNHCR, Geneva, 1999.

do not hold up very well for faith-based organizations, which usually engage in both human rights and humanitarian work. Many Northern faith-based organizations have different departments for human rights or advocacy and for humanitarian assistance. However, local organizations rarely draw such clear lines and see advocacy and assistance as part of a holistic response. At the same time, it is important to note that informal arrangements for sharing information have always existed between secular and faith-based humanitarian agencies which are operational in a given area and others which have more freedom to denounce human rights abuses. In practice, it is not possible to entirely separate the work of humanitarian and human rights NGOs, as they often overlap. Faith-based organizations, with their commitment to justice, tend to further blur the distinctions.

Secular and faith-based organizations continue to play an important role in bringing issues based on reports from their constituents to the international policy agenda. Thus in 1988, the World Council of Churches and the Friends World Committee for Consultation made a joint submission to the UN Human Rights Commission on the particular needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs). For the next decade, church groups and other NGOs lobbied for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on IDPs and for more attention to be given to IDPs.

In many parts of the world, the assistance provided by NGOs serves to protect people. In Egypt, the Joint Relief Ministry not only provides Sudanese refugees with medical and educational assistance, but also registers the Sudanese and issues them with identity cards. Although neither the registration nor the identity card is legally valid, there have been many cases where the refugees have extricated themselves from difficult situations by producing the official-looking card. In some countries, staff of church-related organizations visit detainees and provide assistance as part of their recognized prison ministries. For example, in Lebanon the Middle East Council of Churches regularly visits detained refugees and migrants. These regular visits are intended not only to provide assistance to the detainees, but also to remind prison officials that there are organizations which are observing the treatment of detained migrants and refugees.

NGOs that provide traditional assistance, such as delivering food, may be drawn into providing protection in a more direct fashion. For example, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) was tasked with providing assistance to vulnerable groups in Kosovo after the NATO intervention. Most of the vulnerable caseload were Serbs, many of whom were isolated and afraid to go out of their barricaded homes. ICMC staff found themselves not only delivering food, but also escorting the Serbs to doctors, informing Kosovo Force about their presence and trying to secure necessary protection. In other situations, the fact that local NGOs are rooted in their communities provides them with greater security than their international counterparts. For example, today most international NGOs have withdrawn their expatriate staff from Iraq because of the dangerous security environment. Yet local NGOs, such as the Middle East Council of Churches, are able to continue their operations.

Indigenous NGOs may be the only providers of protection in war-torn countries when the international community withdraws. In East Timor, the forceful expulsion or the withdrawal of most humanitarian agencies and the international community in the face of escalating violence following the referendum for independence meant that local NGOs, and particularly churches, were the only organizations providing protection to endangered people. People fled to churches and convents and in some cases remained hidden there for weeks. The withdrawal of nearly the entire international community from Sierra Leone in 2000 largely abandoned the population to competing armed groups. But indigenous NGOs, churches, inter-religious organizations and the Sierra Leone Red Cross stayed behind and continued, to the best of their ability, to provide assistance.

Many NGOs and churches play important public education roles in raising awareness of humanitarian situations. Thus for almost 40 years African churches have drawn attention to the needs of refugees and internally displaced people on Refugee Sundays. Church networks are also able to catalyse inter-regional collaboration on advocacy. For instance, European Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox church networks seek to coordinate their advocacy vis-à-vis the European Union on humanitarian and development issues. Global networks, supported by umbrella organizations such as the World Council of Churches, Caritas Internationalis and World Vision, likewise offer an opportunity for coordinated advocacy at the national, regional and international level.

NGOs also play a vital role in advocacy vis-à-vis the international system of humanitarian response. Thus three NGO networks of both secular and faith-based humanitarian organizations (ICVA, InterAction, and SCHR) participate regularly in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and its working groups which seek to improve emergency response coordination within the international humanitarian community. These networks have devoted substantial energy in recent years, for example, to analysis and guidelines for working with the military in humanitarian situations.

One of the weaknesses of secular and faith-based humanitarian organizations is the difficulty in coordinating programmatic work. The fact is that coordination of NGO work implies a loss of the “sovereignty” which most NGOs are reluctant to give up. In view of the competitive environment for raising funds, it is important for international NGOs to demonstrate their presence in a given emergency — even when it might be more cost-effective to channel funds through an already operational partner. While there have been some good examples of NGO coordination of programmatic work on the local level and increasingly effective efforts at joint activity, coordination of that work is more difficult at the global level. Even within the Christian umbrella organizations, it has proved far from easy to coordinate programmatic responses to emergency situations. For example, church-related organizations, like their secular counterparts, mobilized tremendous resources to respond to areas affected by the December 2004 tsunami and have worked hard to coordinate their actions and to support local faith-based organizations. But coordination takes time and sometimes NGOs find that it is simpler to act on one’s own.

## Humanitarianism under challenge

The attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 have challenged the NGO community in new ways. While governments have long used humanitarian assistance as an instrument of foreign policy, the war on terrorism has intensified this trend. Thus in May 2003, USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios “roundly scolded NGOs for not clearly and consistently identifying their aid activities in Afghanistan as funded by the US government, and admonished them that they needed to demonstrate measurable results if they wanted to continue to receive USAID funding in the future.”<sup>24</sup> The expectation that US-funded NGOs will see their humanitarian work as supporting US political objectives in Afghanistan, and also in Iraq, has led many US NGOs to decline US financial support for their programmes there. The role of military forces in providing humanitarian assistance in those two countries has also increased pressure on NGOs to think more carefully on what humanitarian action means in such situations. The emergence of new “for profit” humanitarian players is a relatively new factor in the humanitarian community, with implications for secular and faith-based organizations working in the field. Even before the fighting had stopped in Iraq, USAID awarded US\$ 900 million to private companies to undertake reconstruction activities, including activities in public health and education where NGOs have traditionally been active. Thus NGOs are now competing not only with each other for government funding of their humanitarian assistance activities, but also with military forces and private contractors.

For the faith-based humanitarian community, the increasing visibility of fundamentalist or evangelical Christians in humanitarian assistance is a challenge because the evangelizing aspects of their humanitarian work often affect all Christian organizations. In early 2005, press reports in Indonesia that evangelical groups were trying to bring the Gospel as well as relief to Muslims affected by the tsunami led to questioning and criticism of the work of all Christians. For this reason, the Council of Churches in Indonesia issued a strong statement, dissociating itself from evangelical groups working in tsunami-affected areas and emphasizing its respect for the religious beliefs of all those assisted. Local churches often find that they are identified with the activities of evangelical Christians and that some evangelical groups have many more resources than they do. In the case of the United States, “[t]he widespread practice among evangelicals of tithing (giving 10% of income to church-sponsored charity) makes them a potentially much more lucrative source of private relief and development funding than the average US private donor, who directs only roughly one percent of donations to foreign causes.”<sup>25</sup> In Iraq, indigenous churches whose roots date back to the early days of Christianity have found themselves targets of anti-Christian sentiment which is itself a reaction to the actions of foreign

24 Abby Stoddard, *With Us or Against Us? NGO Neutrality on the Line*, Humanitarian Practice Network, December 2003.

25 *Ibid.*

evangelical groups. Although evangelical and traditional Christian organizations share a common faith tradition, they often work in different ways.

Relations between Christian and Islamic NGOs have a mixed record. According to Serge Duss of World Vision, “in some non-Christian countries, Christian identification has enhanced our ability to work with local communities and national governments. Unlike Western society, which separates the spiritual from the physical, Islamic societies in particular integrate the spiritual into every aspect of their lives. Both Christians and Muslims believe that ‘there’s a witness of faith through charity that is a way of life and expression of obedience to God.’”<sup>26</sup> This theme is echoed by Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, who reports that Islamic NGOs “do not understand (or do not accept) that a humanitarian gesture, whatever its origin, could be made outside the scope of religious values, considering that religion is the guarantor of morals, charity, good behaviour and virtue. Islamists cannot conceive of self-respecting Western humanitarian NGOs as anything other than religiously inspired.”<sup>27</sup> Thus Christian and Muslim NGOs share a common commitment whereby their humanitarian actions are based on their religious beliefs. At the same time, however, the activities of evangelical Christian groups in traditionally Islamic societies have had a negative impact on inter-faith relations. As noted above, in the aftermath of the tsunami, for example, media reports on the activities of evangelical groups gave rise to fears that these groups were seeking to Christianize the population as well as provide relief.

In some European countries, governments have a long tradition of working through church-based organizations in providing humanitarian assistance. Even in largely secular European countries, church-based organizations are seen as positive instruments in channelling needed relief to people in other countries. Multi-year “framework agreements” indicate governmental commitment to the work of church-based agencies and recognize the unique constituencies and networks which churches provide. In some countries, such as Germany, Catholic and Protestant church-related organizations supply many of the social services for the national population. In the United States, which has a strong tradition of separation between church and State, the Bush administration is seeking to work more closely with churches and other faith communities. As Linda Shovlain of the Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives of the State Department’s USAID explains, faith-based organizations are “usually the people on the front lines of need and human assistance. They go there motivated purely out of love for their human brothers and sisters (...). The faith-based mechanism is a lot of times the easiest mechanism for the government to use to reach those people who are not usually reached, and, therefore, more in need.”<sup>28</sup>

26 “International faith-based initiatives: Can they work?”, *op. cit.* (note 17).

27 Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, “Humanitarianism, Islam and the West: Contest or cooperation?”, Humanitarian Practice Network, available at <[www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2582](http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2582)> (last visited 4 March 2005).

28 “International faith-based initiatives: Can they work?”, *op. cit.* (note 17).

## Concluding thoughts

Faith-based organizations are unique players in the international humanitarian community in that they are rooted in their local communities and yet have global reach. Their large constituencies give faith-based organizations the potential to play a powerful role in advocacy and public awareness. With their presence on the ground, in the most remote parts of every country, they are well-positioned to take action when emergencies arise. As illustrated most recently in the tsunami emergency, local faith communities are among the first to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of affected people — long before international organizations are able to move relief assistance in. However, the efforts of local organizations, whether faith-based or secular, seldom receive the media attention given to the United Nations or to international NGOs.

In order for faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations to realize their full potential, three particular areas need further attention. Strengthening relationships between local and international NGOs is essential to improve the international system of humanitarian response. Existing NGO coalitions which bring together Northern and Southern NGOs should be enhanced as fora for reflection and joint advocacy. Secondly, while it has become quite fashionable to talk about capacity-building within the NGO world, much more needs to be done to translate this principle into reality. Southern NGOs are uniquely placed to respond to the needs in their communities and need support in their institutional development. Finally, while the need for greater coordination of NGOs' programmatic work is widely recognized, it has been difficult in practice for NGOs to relinquish their independence of action. Local coordination mechanisms, often facilitated by UN agencies, have proved to be useful steps in this direction.