

Since 2015, over 5 million refugees from Syria have sought safety and protection in cities, towns and camps across Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Key responders have included local faith communities, whose members have provided material and spiritual support alike to those displaced from Syria, as well as to other communities affected by protracted displacement, including Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese, and Kurds: these people and communities, are themselves also often hosts.ⁱ From Orthodox churches in Istanbul organising clothes donations for newly arrived Syrians, to Palestinian refugees in Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon preparing iftar baskets during Ramadan for camp residents (irrespective of their nationality), the Refugee Hosts project has evidenced the significant role that religion plays in local responses to displacement.

Engaging with local faith communities (LFCs) provides opportunities to:

- (i) work sustainably with local communities;ⁱⁱ
- (ii) maximise dignity and justice for refugee and local host communities;ⁱⁱⁱ
- (iii) build relational responses to displacement that are not about aid alone and do not look only at material outcomes;^{iv}
- (iv) build collaborative and participatory responses to displacement in which refugees and local communities have genuine agency in the choices that are made and the solutions that are pursued;^v
- (v) to keep psychosocial care and meaning-making on the agenda.^{vi}

However, misunderstandings and challenges continue to limit the ability of secular humanitarian agencies to engage with LFCs effectively and sustainably. Below we outline these challenges and propose the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Humanitarian engagements with LFCs should be context-led, **recognising the thick social solidarities that underscore LFC responses**, and how these provide opportunities for rapid, effective local responses.

Communities that have been affected by displacement need **integrated community responses**. Engaging with LFCs is crucial, as they can provide long-term solutions, rooted in long-term relationships, in situations of protracted displacement and hosting.

LFCs can offer a route to doing things *with* people, not *to* them, as well as pathways to dialogue, trust, and enduring solutions. In many contexts this agenda for dignity, relationship and autonomy involves meaningfully engaging with LFCs.

Humanitarian actors should aim to build trust with LFCs, and involve them appropriately in planning responses, **but without instrumentalising them**. LFCs express a desire for more cooperative and collaborative modes of response.

Humanitarian interventions should **recognise and, where appropriate, challenge the power imbalances that exist between hosting communities, LFCs and international responders**.

Good humanitarian practice is marked by a capacity to negotiate humanitarian values in practice with **real historical and contextual consciousness about religious and secular identities in organisational and operational contexts**. Self-reflexivity about values and beliefs will assist in the development of a shared language and mutual understanding between 'secular' and faith-based humanitarian agencies.

Identifying and supporting hospitable spaces will help to **build sustainable relationships over time such that a language of mutual understanding and religious literacy emerges** that is specific to each local response or emergency.

Understanding LFCs

Religion is often mistrusted by formal humanitarian actors. Engaging with religion is seen to detract from primary material need. This picture needs to change. Faith and religion constitute an important primary need for many people experiencing and responding to displacement. However, significant fear and distrust remains that prevents more meaningful engagement with LFCs, and with religion more broadly.^{vii} Assumptions around gender equality and religious conversion play an important role in building mistrust, in part because of poor religious literacy, and a lack of fine-tuned analysis of gendered and faith dynamics in specific local contexts.^{viii} These misunderstandings also lead to the politicisation and racialisation of LFCs by secular humanitarian responses, especially when they are contrasted with a representation of 'neutral' secular humanitarianism defined by values of impartiality, liberalism and accountability.

LFCs as Humanitarian Actors

What is not properly understood across the humanitarian sector is that LFCs often have deep narratives of humanitarianism and humanitarian values.^{ix} LFCs are interested in human purpose, human meaning, human responsiveness, responsibilities and obligations, and duties of mutual care. LFCs have vibrant narratives about risk, suffering and survival. They are humanitarian actors in that they combine a belief system and a set of actions around those principles, much like formal humanitarian actors.^x

“As we are a religious authority, so the faith within us increases the responsibility that is upon us. This is not negotiable, ever.”

(LFC representative, Hamra, Beirut, 2018)

“Assisting refugees or any vulnerable people is our religious duty [...] assisting the vulnerable is one of the offerings we give to God to achieve His blessings. We aid the suffering of others not as a favour to them but because of our faith in God.”

(LFC leader, Irbid, Jordan, 2018)

Recognising this requires an appropriate degree of self-reflexivity on the part of formal humanitarian actors. This operates on at least two levels: Every organisation has values and a worldview, no-one is neutral. Secular agencies come to the table with values that need to be negotiated as much as LFCs do. This is not often noted. Equally, the relevance and meaning of religious and secular ideals change with context.

Challenges faced by LFCs

“We are a humanitarian organization. Religion has no part in it [...] We are monitored in everything and provide invoices for everything. There is no room for the manipulation of funds.” *(Representative of a local women’s NGO, Irbid, Jordan, 2018)*

LFCs can be reluctant to engage with formal humanitarian actors for fear of being misunderstood, and this limits possibilities for engagement and capacity building. They can be concerned that their work will be seen as being inferior to formal humanitarianism, and that they will be overlooked or side-lined as a result. There is also a fear that LFCs will be bureaucratised or instrumentalised, which will detract from their work and purpose.^{xi} For those that do engage with formal humanitarian actors, there is a sense that they have to distance themselves from religion in order to be credible partners. This highlights a mutual inability to make engagements work along both the formal/informal and faith/secular divides. LFCs and formal humanitarian actors lack a common language, a way to speak to and with each other meaningfully: this undermines engagement and cooperation in humanitarian responses.



*A charity donation point in Hamra, Beirut
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Understanding the roles of LFCs

A detailed body of evidence documents the roles played by LFCs in contexts of displacement.^{xii} However, LFCs’ roles are often poorly engaged with in formal humanitarian settings, undermining meaningful cooperation and effective responsiveness in local contexts. Humanitarian actors should seek to complement these roles and engage with LFCs where opportunities arise.

Reception:

LFCs play a role in hosting refugees and displaced people, providing material and bodily care, but also psycho-social care that is linked to identity-based processes of engagement. This helps to build relationships of trust that can lead to more cohesive and multidimensional responses.

Response:

LFCs are collectively responsible for significant levels of emergency response. Their presence in local communities is often stable and enduring, with their response enduring throughout an emergency. LFCs are present before, during, and after an emergency, which also increases their capacity throughout different stages of response.

Informality of care:

LFCs' positioning as informal responders enables forms of dignity, including through practices of accompaniment, spiritual sanctuary and support otherwise not evidenced in more formal, bureaucratic responses. LFC responses can feel less bureaucratic and less contractual, which can help to build more humane, dignifying responses. Examples from our research include what Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has described as the "Poetics of Undisclosed Care," where discrete modes of support emerge that are grounded in religious belief and practice such as offering sanctuary or giving financial aid.^{xiii} Engaging with such forms of support requires respecting qualities of discretion, in contrast to formal humanitarian interventions which emphasise visibility and logos. Likewise, our research has also identified the informal but crucially important role of religious rituals around burial and death. These recognise the importance of dignity both in life and in death, and should be recognised as a significant form of support.

Space for dialogue:

LFCs are often connected to established spaces in neighbourhoods, towns and cities, such as mosques and churches, that can enable dialogue between different groups of people and in turn lead to the collective identification of solutions. This dialogue can help facilitate the 'buy in' of communities for certain forms of response. Engagement with these spaces provides an important context for dialogue.

Reach:

LFCs have reach and can bridge connections, both inward and outward. LFCs can reach inaccessible communities in comparison to larger actors which lack relationships of trust. LFCs are often also part of outward-facing international, regional, and cross border networks.

"A Syrian man who has lived in Baddawi camp since 2011 stated:

"Those people who offer assistance *without disclosing their names deserve respect.*"

And a Kurdish man from Syria living in Baddawi camp since 2012 shared the powerful saying:

"Be like the good tree that gives its fruits and *does not ask who took them.*"

This commitment to *discrete* modes of supporting refugees is as strongly grounded in religious belief and practice as it is a powerful counterpoint to the international humanitarian system's long-standing preference for hypervisible logos and public announcements of action."^{xiv}



The cemetery in Baddawi refugee camp, North Lebanon
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Masjid al-Quds – in the background – overlooks the cemetery in Baddawi
© E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Background

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Refugee Hosts Recommendations for Research and Practice Series

- #1: [Understanding Local Responses to Displacement](#)
- #2: [Engaging with Histories and Narratives of Displacement](#)
- #3: [Refugee-Host Relationality](#)
- #4: [Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement](#)
- #5: [Critical Approaches to Voice and Writing in Displacement](#)

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- ^{xiv} *Ibid*.