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Engaging religious actors in addressing famine emergencies

Katherine Marshall, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Cole Durham, Manoj Kurian, Ulrich Nitschke, Arnhild Spence, and Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp

Abstract

The United Nations in February 2017 declared a famine emergency in light of the imminent danger of starvation facing an estimated 20 million people in four countries, and appealed urgently for US\$4 billion to meet immediate needs. Other countries face grave food shortages that present urgent humanitarian needs and undermine long term prospects for peace and development. A feature of contemporary hunger crises is their tight links to conflicts. Religious institutions and leaders are actively involved in the immediate and specific famine situation affecting African nations and Yemen and in efforts to end the conflicts that are the primary cause of famine. More broadly, religious leaders are acting to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, Zero Hunger, by 2030. The imperative to act on hunger is shared across religious divides, and the common purpose that binds different religious communities portends well for peacebuilding and progress in the affected areas. Religious actors should thus be an integral part of the international response to famine emergencies as well as to the Zero Hunger challenge. The urgent crises are pertinent for G20 members and should be prominent on G20 agendas. G20 attention and support to religious roles could enhance responses to the famine and peacebuilding in affected areas and thus contribute to unlocking the potential of the affected countries. Interfaith and intrafaith action on SDG 2, highlighted as part of the global agenda, can speed progress towards Zero Hunger.

(Submitted as [Global Solutions Paper](#))

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Keywords Famine; Sustainable Development Goals; Zero Hunger; starvation; Catholic; Muslim; South Sudan; Nigeria; Somalia; Yemen; Myanmar; Rohingya; interfaith

Authors

Katherine Marshall, ✉ World Faiths Development Dialogue, Washington, D.C., USA, km398@georgetown.edu

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, King Abdullah bin Aziz Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), Vienna, Austria

Cole Durham, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Manoj Kurian, World Council of Churches (WCC)

Ulrich Nitschke, Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Germany

Arnhild Spence, World Food Programme (WFP)

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, Jacob Soetendorp Institute for Human Values, The Hague, The Netherlands

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It is our prophetic witness to overcome hunger, to sustain peace, justice and the care for creation, in the Horn of Africa and in all places. We pray that God grants us the faith, hope and love to follow through with this Call to Action! May peace and justice prevail on Earth! World Council of Churches, ACT Alliance, All Africa Council of Churches, June 2017

The Challenge

Engaging religious institutions, teachings, and leadership more purposefully in global efforts to address issues of famine and hunger could enhance global, national, and community responses. Tight links between hunger and conflict are increasingly apparent and, again, highlight the importance of purposeful efforts to engage religious actors in peacebuilding work. G20 attention to these dimensions of hunger challenges could enhance efforts to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030.

Eradicating hunger and malnutrition is one of the great challenges of our time (FAO et al. 2017). Not enough – or the wrong – food causes suffering and poor health and slows progress in other areas of development like education and employment. Some 815 million people – one in nine – go to bed on an empty stomach each night and many more suffer from some form of malnutrition. In 2016 stunting affected one out of four children under the age of five years, or 155 million children. In some regions, stunting affects one-third of children under five. Wasting threatens the lives of almost 52 million children (8 percent) (FAO et al. 2017). Thus the aim of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) is Zero Hunger by 2030.

The year 2017 saw sharp increases in concerns about famine and hunger in different world regions and these disappointing trends and specific crises threaten to continue through 2018. The UN in February 2017 signaled the need for urgent action to avert catastrophic famine in parts of South Sudan and Somalia by declaring an “L3” or level 3 emergency. L3 responses are activated in the most complex and challenging humanitarian emergencies, requiring the highest level of mobilization across the humanitarian system, to ensure that the right capacities and systems are in place to meet needs. The UN leadership warned that the situation in adjoining areas of the horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Burundi, Kenya, and Uganda, was (and continues to be) fragile and very concerning. Parts of Nigeria face famine and Yemen faces a particularly grave and complex emergency with millions at risk of imminent starvation. Other emergencies include the situation faced by Bangladesh with some 700,000 new refugees from Myanmar in 2017. Yet resources, public and private, to provide food aid are manifestly insufficient: urgent needs were estimated at US\$4 billion and they are far from met. Humanitarian agencies lack sufficient funds to respond even to minimal critical food needs. A result is sub-par rations, if rations are available at all.

The links between conflict and hunger became far more evident in 2017. The World Food Programme’s Executive Director, David Beasley, has argued forcefully that unless armed conflicts are resolved and development takes root, “we will not succeed in ending hunger by 2030. There is no humanitarian solution to conflict, and humanitarian relief cannot replace political peace efforts.” (WFP 2017). Hunger fuels longstanding grievances and disputes over land, livestock, and other assets. Food crises are estimated to have led to the displacement of

over 15 million people in 2016. In contrast, investing in food security and nutrition can help prevent conflict, foster stable societies, promote reconciliation, and sustain peace. Food assistance can also help prevent recruitment into non-state armed groups and play a role in offering meaningful incentives to fighters to disarm and resume peaceful livelihoods.

Religious entities are directly involved in addressing both the famine emergency and the broader global challenge involved in working towards Zero Hunger (World Faiths Development Dialogue 2016). Perhaps most significant (if the most poorly documented) responses are “first responder” efforts by faith communities both to feed people where crises mean widespread hunger and in addressing the hunger linked to chronic, everyday poverty, even in the wealthiest communities. Religious institutions and ecumenical and interreligious bodies build on core teachings about feeding the hungry (WFP 2016; Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, World Council of Churches 2016; G20 Interfaith Summit 2016). The result is an extraordinary array of varied programs that address needs in countless ways (World Faiths Development Dialogue 2016). Religious actors are among the most effective and prominent advocates for policy and programmatic action.

Religious leaders from many traditions and the world’s leading interreligious and ecumenical organizations endorse the Global 2030 agenda Zero Hunger objective (WFP 2016) and seek ways to be more directly involved in broader efforts to address hunger and poverty. Organizations like Caritas Internationalis, World Vision, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and Tzu Chi provide food relief and support food security policies including nutrition and smallholder farmer programs. Bread for the World, a US faith-inspired coalition, is a powerful advocate for action against hunger. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) give priority to food and nutrition issues in their global action programs; for example they organized an emergency meeting in Nairobi in June 2017 specifically to identify areas for action to address the African famine crises (WCC). They also organized a global Day of Prayer and Action on May 21, 2017, that drew the attention of millions of world citizens to the problem of hunger and more specifically the risk of famine. There are actual and potential common efforts through interreligious (for example Religions for Peace, KAICIID –King Abdallal Al Aziz Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) and intrafaith organizations to build on shared teachings and commitments to meeting the needs of the hungry.

The WCC/ACC/ACT alliance Nairobi June 2017 meeting highlighted the potential array of direct links between religious action and advocacy and broader global goals, building on a nuanced appreciation for the complex causes of conflict and hunger. The meeting declaration (WCC) committed leaders (mostly Christian in this instance) to: advocate for peace and preach a transformed narrative, from war to peace; enhance listening skills and work against a culture of violence and prejudice; address and prevent land and water grabbing and address the complexities of land tenures; promote proper land use plans (such as between agriculturalists and pastorals) and overall principles of stewardship and caring for the earth; target inequity and injustice, address historical injustices and encourage confession, healing of memories, reconciliation, justice and transformation; strengthen conflict resolution skills and peacemaking capacity; prepare safe spaces where we can have dialogue and enhance understanding of living with the other; invest in the formation and education of youth in theological and secular schools

and colleges against radicalization and hate speech; and call on media to confront, change and avoid the dissemination of stereotypes and biased images as well as to promote better understanding between different cultures and religions, while uplifting the resilience of people.

The World Food Programme (WFP), the leading global humanitarian organization fighting hunger worldwide, delivers food assistance in emergencies, and works with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience. WFP has identified strengthening strategic partnerships with religious institutions as a priority in the effort to achieve Zero Hunger. Pope Francis spoke to WFP's Executive Board, management, and staff in June 2016, emphasizing the importance of cooperation across secular and religious boundaries. WFP is engaged in an interreligious initiative to further this goal, with support from religious leaders from a wide range of traditions. The strength of religious commitment is reflected in statements by 25 leaders supporting the June 2016 interreligious event at WFP (WFP 2016). A widely diverse range of religiously linked operational programs work offer the potential to address hunger in widely different ways. An example "in action" is work in the Central African Republic linking peacebuilding and conflict resolution with food support, to sustain the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process. There, a WFP and the Community of Sant'Egidio project ties food assistance to a broader DDR initiative led by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

Proposals

Religious actors support food programs and policies in communities across the globe but play especially critical roles in countries threatened by famines linked to protracted conflicts. South Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria offer vivid examples of situations where religious actors are actively engaged in peace negotiations and famine relief and where interreligious cooperation has the potential to assure access to vulnerable populations and to support community resilience. This potential is only partially realized and G20 recognition of the positive potential for interreligious cooperation to address both immediate needs and long-term solutions could highlight new paths for action by relevant global bodies.

Urgent and sustained action by G20 leaders could: (a) signal the gravity of the famine situation in Africa and Yemen with strong statements and commitments to action; (b) assure adequate and timely financing for food aid; and (c) link famine relief to resolute action to assure access to affected populations. This follows from the 2017 G20 framework: "More than ever, joint action by the world community is needed in order to address acute global challenges: geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, famine, natural disasters, climate and health catastrophes, migration and displacement, as well as social inequality." This has echoes in the emerging 2018 G20 agenda, led by Argentina. Religious institutions (formal and informal) are critical partners in the challenge.

Support to religious leader action on peacebuilding, especially for South Sudan and Nigeria, have particular importance. The interreligious focus on the famine crisis and local faith initiatives are indicative of actual and potential religious roles. Religious actors are involved in

the three key pathways to addressing famine and hunger crises linked to conflict: prevention of food insecurity resulting from or contributing to conflict; compliance with and accountability within legal frameworks; and working towards a comprehensive and coordinated operational response. However, the full potential for harmonized efforts is limited by weak institutional links among relevant agencies that limit communications and partnerships. To that end, the international community, including in the G20 framework, should build on existing mechanisms, initiatives and previous successes while looking for innovative ways to respond to the immediate and long-term needs of communities affected by conflict and hunger. G20 recognition of the priority for religious engagement can help unlock this potential.

The G20 should link their support for action to UN resolutions. A request for quarterly reporting on progress of engagement of religious institutions and leaders could help chart the future course of engagement and ensure rigor in following up on Summit commitments.

The G20 can also support the global efforts to advance progress towards SDG2: Zero Hunger by 2030 through explicit support for the global agendas for food security including food production and distribution and nutrition.

Success towards these objectives requires: (i) Full engagement of religious leaders at senior levels in highlighting the ethical issues at stake in the famine emergency, building on the teachings of religious traditions, individually and collectively; (ii) specific engagement of religious leaders in efforts to negotiate access to areas acutely affected by famine; and (iii) cooperative (track two) peacemaking efforts with religious communities in famine affected areas.

Resources

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