LESSONS LEARNED:

FAITH-BASED COVID-19 RESPONSE

How do adaptations to COVID-19 inform strategies for enhancing local faith leadership in health and development?

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT

- The challenges and change brought by COVID-19 released creativity and innovation as faith actors responded in diverse ways and worked on gaps the pandemic exposed.

- COVID exposed a disconnect frequently felt between global north 'expertise' and realities on the ground. Many of the most effective faith actor responses to COVID-19 emerged when local faith groups felt able to take the initiative and responded quickly and relevantly, using their assets.

- While COVID sparked increased faith engagement from international agencies, there were mixed views about the quality of these partnerships. Some participants felt many still missed the full potential of faith engagement, feeling instrumentalised in times of crisis times instead of experiencing long-term, equitable partnerships.

- Faith actors call on humanitarian and development agencies to value their complementary capacities and set up long-term structures for cross-sectoral engagement and flexible funding mechanisms that allow a focus on resilience and asset-based approaches, rather than short-term, crisis-oriented engagements.

- COVID highlighted the need for pre-existing, trusted partnerships at all levels - especially for tackling misinformation with local faith actors. Global and regional faith actors identified the need to focus on building and sustaining trusted relationships with their local faith partners to increase their resilience and lead responses in their context.

Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities
Strengthening Evidence-Based Faith Engagement

INTRODUCTION

The changes COVID-19 imposed on faith actors' ways of working, while challenging, also released creativity and innovation. It opened new avenues for partnership with governments and international agencies, such as UN agencies, who recognised the importance of engaging faith actors. Yet many of these agencies missed the full potential of faith engagement, seeing it mainly as a gateway to influence communities in the short-term but not exploring deeper and more equitable partnerships with faith actors. With the evolving nature of the pandemic over the last two years, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) was aware that many of the experiences and lessons from faith actors were not being documented. In the light of this, JLI partnered with eight faith actors to learn together what worked and what remains to be done in terms of faith responses to COVID-19 to support better preparedness and improved partnerships in the future.

> ### OBJECTIVES OF THE LEARNING PROCESS
>
> - Understand efforts made by faith actors to work with faith communities in response to COVID-19 - including vaccine rollout - in 2020-2021.
> - Create a learning exchange process where faith actors can learn from each other about how faith communities have been mobilised for COVID-19 response.
> - Consolidate learnings to share with external partners to strengthen faith engagement in COVID response and beyond.

JLI coordinated a collaborative learning engagement process through which participating faith actors shared learning and developed joint lessons learned for the wider sector. It began with a document review and semi-structured interviews with 30 key informants affiliated with eight faith actors, some at global level and some from local partners and national teams: World Evangelical Alliance; World Council of Churches; Anglican Alliance; Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation; Islamic Relief Worldwide; Humanitarian Forum Indonesia; Soka Gakkai International; and Corus International with the Africa Christian Health Associations Platform. Interview transcripts and documents were coded using qualitative data software (Atlas.ti) to identify emerging patterns. Quantitative figures reflect the average frequency with which each code was mentioned during the qualitative data coding. A strict consent procedure was followed.

JLI shared the key themes emerging with each faith actor through internal feedback sessions in September 2021, facilitating participatory activities and dialogue to reflect on their learning and identify areas of interest. The second round of feedback took place in December 2021 where representatives from all eight faith actors and some partners came together virtually to share ideas and craft lessons learned for external audiences.

FINDINGS

Three strong themes emerged across the eight organisations, with one or two focus areas under each:

→ **Partnerships** (particularly faith engagement involving the eight faith actors and various local and international partners; COVID-19 misinformation and partnerships with faith communities to tackle it).

→ **Balancing power and localisation** (focusing on who has decision-making control, space for local solutions and how that supports resilience; the influence of technology on that power balance).

→ **Reflecting, learning and innovating** (the gaps COVID-19 exposed and the creativity it catalysed).

The shared learning was enriched by faith actors' often different experiences and the diverse solutions they found to common issues.

Programs and impact

The eight faith actors engaged in a variety of types of programs in response to COVID-19, some led from their headquarters, some initiated by local faith groups. Activities that can be broadly categorised as Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC, e.g. messaging, sensitisation, awareness raising on public health measures) around COVID-19 were an important constituent of all responses, demonstrating the influence of faith communities in this area.
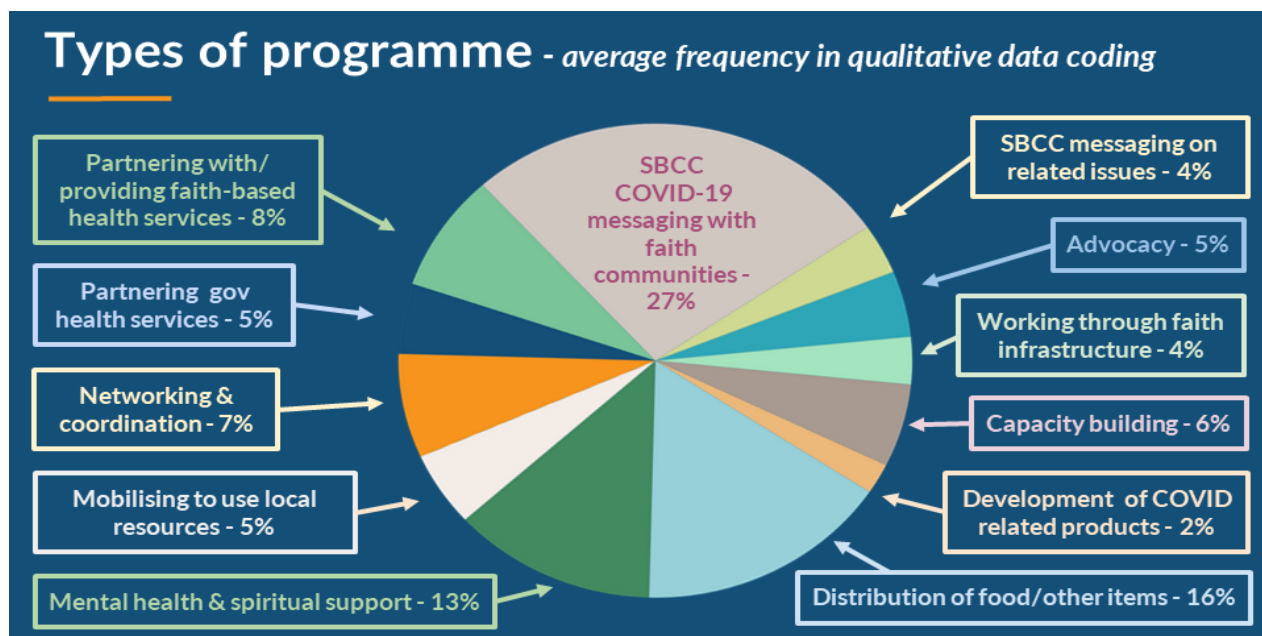

Figure 1: Types of programmes implemented by faith actors in their COVID-19 responses

Various impacts were targeted through these programs, reflected in Figure 2. While there was some variety among faith actors in outcomes sought, most targeted a balance between short-term (such as meeting immediate needs) with long-term goals (such as diversified livelihoods).
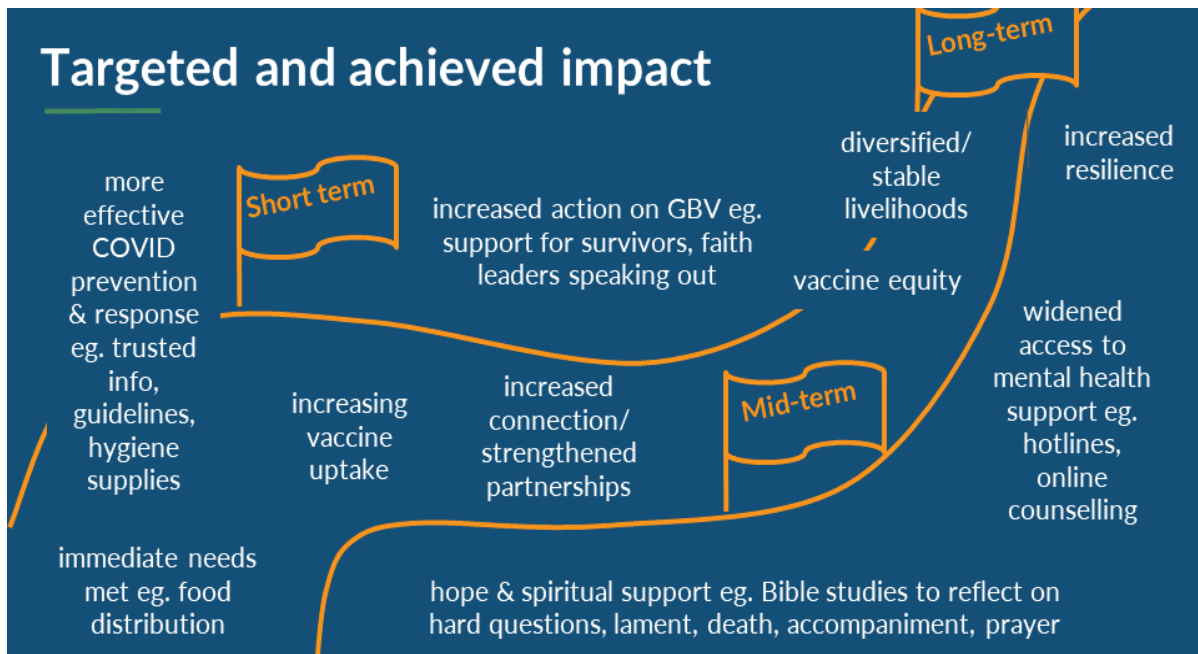

Figure 2: Impacts of the faith-based COVID-19 responses

However, there was little evidence about the extent to which they were achieved. For example, almost every faith actor produced or collated guidance material on COVID-19. Yet the evidence of its impact was largely anecdotal, with only one faith actor bringing people together for focused reflection on how they were using the guidance that had been developed.

Finances during COVID-19

Almost every organisation met challenges and opportunities with funding during COVID-19. Many found new opportunities, from the private sector, government partnerships, development agencies or their faith communities. However, these were mostly inadequate. Additionally, important funding for other areas of work decreased. The research highlighted the value of different funding sources. Much institutional funding had tight restrictions and was tied to tangible COVID-specific outcomes. Funding from within faith groups was more flexible - pre-existing donations could be more easily moved around, and individuals and institutions responded generously to the crisis.

"[donors] want very tangible outcomes... not how we can help the community for a very long time." *National FBO staff*

Opportunities and Challenges

Much of the learning in the following sections emerged from the opportunities and challenges encountered by the faith actors in the COVID-19 response, most related to the external situation to which they were responding.

Figure 3 shows the relative frequency with which different challenges and opportunities were mentioned. The greatest opportunities were felt in the stimulus that COVID gave to connect in new and different ways, creating space for locally led agenda setting and shared learning, despite the downsides explored later in this brief. Every faith actor faced challenges in their COVID response related to misinformation, lack of national coordination, low access to technology, inadequate medical supplies, restricted movement, and rising problems with mental health.
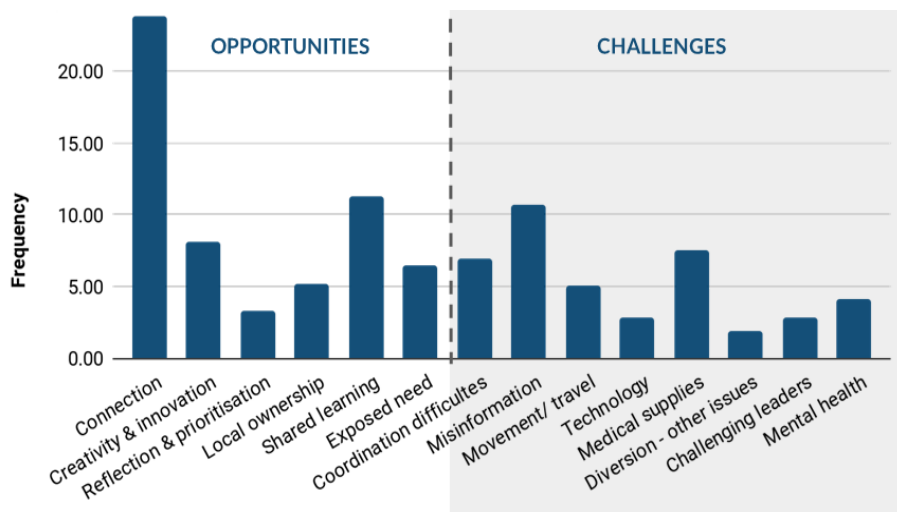

Figure 3: Opportunities and challenges experience by faith actors in COVID-19 response

Partnerships

New and continued partnerships were vital to faith actor responses: with other faith actors, donor agencies, governments, and the private sector. Most of the eight faith actors connected to some partners within each category, although to different extents.

Faith engagement - with local and international partners

COVID-19 highlighted the need for pre-existing, trusted partnerships at all levels. In the words of one interviewee, "trust isn't something you can easily build during the crisis." Existing partnerships were often strengthened, as support was seen as vital, and opportunities emerged for strategic collaboration. One interviewee explained that "organisations we met once a year... [instead, we] took time in the early days [of the pandemic] to have weekly meetings."
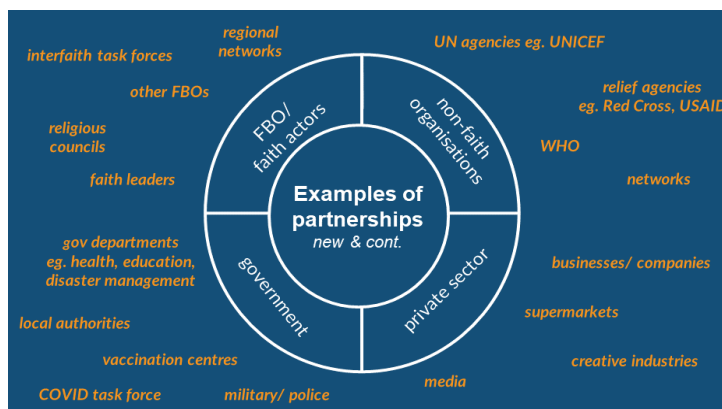

Figure 4: Faith actors' partners in COVID-19 response

COVID-19 also brought significant opportunities for new partnerships due to the scale of need and shared purpose. One interviewee pointed out how shared values across faith actors facilitated partnership and understanding: "through the core values of faith, it was easy to communicate." COVID-19 created new avenues for government partnerships too. As one interviewee pointed out: "with COVID continuing to become a challenging intervention for governments, they started to include faith." However, there were varying levels of coordination, leading to wasted resources and duplication of efforts. One interviewee felt their "biggest challenge is working with the Ministry of Health... we don't get what they will be doing." One faith actor had a unique relationship with a political party, giving a channel to influence policy, while others focused on global advocacy.

> "[the] situation is so bad... we need everyone's help to be able to go into the communities." *National FBO staff*

> "donors [have] not really that much appetite to work on the faith-based COVID response. But they see that we have a strong network, we have many resources..." *National FBO*

The eight faith actors held mixed opinions about the quality of partnerships with non-faith international agencies such as the UN. Most felt that, while these agencies recognise the need for faith engagement, they often miss its full potential as partners with their own values, capacities, and unique ways of working. Some faith actors saw improvement through the pandemic, one interviewee stating: "early on... faith leaders [were used] as channels distributing UNICEF & WHO expertise... [now] beginning to see faith groups as partners & co-developers." However, other faith actors disagreed, with another interviewee still recognising that "there's a lot of instrumentalization of us... we are doing something for them without really that feeling of cooperation, partnership and respect." The varied level of optimism reflected the length of time the faith actors had engaged with these agencies: faith actors with years of engagement held greater scepticism about a rush to engagement during the pandemic; whereas faith actors with new engagements with UN agencies felt hopeful about the future of the engagement.

Misinformation and faith communities

Faith actors commented how colonial exploitation has left deep mistrust of Western 'experts' in many places. Creative approaches to counter misinformation were required, particularly involving faith leaders. Approaches varied, but faith actors agreed that effective programming with faith communities to counter misinformation requires either: a) ongoing investment from skilled staff to build close relationships; or b) support for actors already trusted by local groups. As one interviewee pointed out: "these communities.... don't accept a lot of outsiders... So, we find a lot of local faith partners to be able to support us in that area..." Otherwise, where relationships with faith leaders did not exist, countering misinformation was challenging. Another interviewee noted there was "no compulsion amongst faith leaders to automatically pick up our messages" as "we do not have any theological or religious authority."

> "[The] Islamic community... will hear religious leaders if they talk about COVID-19... [&] follow the ideas." *National FBO staff*

Another approach acknowledged how spiritual reflection can redirect anxiety into positive activity. Some faith actors recognised how misinformation flourishes in fear, finding that spiritual support calmed people. An interviewee described how:

> **"people are scared so they tend to listen to whatever... [faith brings] that sense of peace... They can hear this information and not get overly worried, actually be able to analyse and to understand which information is correct..."**

A final approach was to create further guidance material that established objective standards for trustworthy information, empowering people to find accurate sources.

Balancing Power and Localisation

Decision-making control and local solutions

COVID-19 revealed the essentialness of localised approaches that recognise communities' learning. Many faith actors felt a disconnect between global

> **"I received emails from people [saying] 'how do we 'save Africa'... so frustrated... people think that they have the solutions for us."** *Regional FBO staff*

north 'expertise' and their realities, one interviewee pointing out that "lockdowns and social distancing [were] out of touch with the way of life within those impoverished communities." COVID-19 diverted attention from priority issues, including ongoing conflict, disasters, or health issues such as HIV. Conversely, where local faith groups felt able to take the initiative, responses were quick and relevant. An interviewee witnessed how "communities... didn't have to wait for manna from above. They just went into action." This was especially true where faith groups were trained and already engaging communities in asset-based approaches.

Faith actors approached opportunities for localisation to different extents and in different ways. For some, COVID catalysed or accelerated the localisation of decision-making control, although other factors were also at play. One faith actor disbanded their expert team in favour of regional hubs. An interviewee saw significant shifts within their organisational decision-making:

> **"[We] rapidly had to develop the capacity of our colleagues in-country.**
> **Some of them already had that, they were now just being afforded the opportunity."**

Other faith actors saw little change or were unsure about the practicalities of further shifting decision-making control, with an interviewee noting how the control of funding remained "very much centralised." A few faith actors were theoretically committed to greater localisation but acknowledged that their current structures made it difficult. In the words of one interviewee: "philosophically, we should probably be more balanced. But I think we've got a way to go on that." Most felt that balance was required, empowering local responses but with shared values.

Technology & connection

Technology was seen as a double-edged sword, with the potential to enable greater connection, yet also to exclude. It supported mental health, especially where structured channels for connection were set up, such as hotlines or chains of contact. One interviewee explained how their meetings were "always relational as well as functional," allowing people around the world to "draw strength from each other." Technology facilitated the shift to shared or decentralised decision-making and increased access to online resources. Many faith actors found that it transformed internal relationships, allowing people around the world to be heard. An interviewee described it as: "equalising for us as an organisation - we all meet and none of us are in a hub." However, there were significant concerns about further marginalisation through digital inequality. In the words of one interviewee: "[We] can't take things for granted: connectivity, internet... the smallest voice can come to these tables, [but] who actually comes?" Disabilities create a further barrier for some, if not actively included. Many also noted a generational divide, with older members finding it hard to connect.

> "members... who can't hear are now struggling with having online meetings - they need... sign language interpreters."
> *International FBO staff*

Faith actors came up with ideas to increase digital accessibility, including sending money for airtime; setting up WhatsApp groups for ideas and audio recordings (less bandwidth than Zoom), or creating hubs where several people could join online meetings together. One faith actor taught elderly members to use the internet. Nonetheless, proactive innovation is still needed to reach the most vulnerable.

Reflecting, Learning, Innovating

COVID-19 created space for reflection, forced prioritisation and raised existential questions - for one interviewee, "Maybe we are redundant? What are we doing here?" It also exposed gaps.

> "We had collected a lot of projects... but some of them were stopped due to the pandemic... time to reflect on what we should continue... the essence of our organization's work." *International FBO staff*

Firstly, in disaster preparedness and local capacity development. Secondly, the need for structures, finances, and staff specifically for monitoring and learning. While some used past experiences in HIV and Ebola to respond effectively to COVID-19, others failed to integrate learning, reinventing the wheel, and overburdening those not heard on the global stage. A key informant shared this example: "home-based care became the... way to deal with the overwhelmed health system. Women and children... are left to take care..." This exacerbation of gender inequality was known from responses to HIV/AIDS, yet the same thing happened during COVID-19. Conversely,

> "For the first time in many countries... the health sector has been seen as an investment, not as an expense... we can seize this momentum." *International FBO staff*

where approaches of faith engagement through scripture reflection, dialogue and asset-based participatory planning were adapted from Ebola and HIV to be used during COVID-19, local responses were effective, relevant, and timely. Finally, it exposed the impossibility of faith groups ignoring health issues. As one interviewee said: "COVID has connected the dots." This created a window for advocacy to governments to improve services and

> "We want profoundly to be shaped by this experience... we do not want to go back to normal... It would be a tragedy if everyone just got on with that." *International FBO staff*

encouragement to faith groups to integrate health issues into their mission, especially mental health and pastoral care.

The space for reflecting and learning catalysed creative new approaches. Organisations held reflective conversations about their future, wanting to tackle root injustices exposed by the pandemic and build green transitions into the recovery.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

By enforcing sudden and significant changes in approaches, COVID-19 catalysed adaptations that can inform general strategies for faith actors and partners to increase leadership from the front lines. Between the eight faith actors who participated in the research and the local faith communities with whom they engage, pre-existing relationships of trust were shown to be paramount, in addition to a pattern of partnership that built their resilience and confidence to develop responses in their context. Many of the most effective faith actor responses to COVID-19 emerged when local faith actors felt able to take the initiative and responded quickly, using their assets. The mistrust of the global north 'expertise' and its irrelevance to realities on the ground made tackling misinformation without this long-term engagement very complex.

While COVID strengthened the interest of international agencies in faith engagement, faith actors held mixed opinions about the quality of these partnerships. While many appreciated the way approaches had improved during COVID-19, from one-way information dissemination to dialogue and some joint planning, others felt these short-term, issue-based partnerships still missed the full potential of faith engagement and the unique capabilities of faith actors in their values and approaches. They felt instrumentalised in times of crisis, instead of being long-term, equal partners working on shared priorities.

Reflection on the approach

Facilitating a learning review process instead of carrying out more traditional research ensured that outcomes were shaped by the eight participating faith actors and their local partners, recommendations were co-created through reflection and self-discovery, and the review's areas of interest shifted in response to their priorities. Moreover, the diversity in approaches strengthened the validity of conclusions, triangulating evidence from documentation and semi-structured interviews through virtual sessions involving participatory activities and facilitated dialogue.

However, the approach also brought its limitations. Firstly, the choice of interviewees lay largely with each faith actor - fewer interviews resulted in fewer opportunities for insight into their response. Moreover, although a few local partners or national staff were selected, most interviews were at the global or regional level. Secondly, the virtual process limited the extent to which key informants in areas of poor internet could take part. Despite deliberate space made in the sessions to reflect on power imbalances within the virtual room and how to counterbalance them, those unused to speaking out in international fora still spoke less. Nevertheless, participants included a range of faiths and both international and local actors. For those who are interested in effective faith engagement, the co-creation of these recommendations should carry significant weight.

Recommendations

Through a process of participatory reflection, participants explored how they could contribute to building and sustaining trusted relationships that enable local faith actors to increase their resilience and lead responses effectively in their context. These were based on their learning from COVID-19 but designed to apply more generally to effective faith engagement.

In terms of internal changes to their structures and processes, faith actors identified the need to:

- focus on capacity development of
  - a) country office staff of faith actors (to have the confidence to work with local faith actors on complex social and theological issues, establish trusted relationships and work together on long-term shared goals);
  - b) around risk compliance required by donors to enable local faith actors to be partners without layers of intermediaries);
  - c) local faith leaders (so they have the confidence to act and support their communities on health-related issues);
  - d) faith communities (to respond to issues using the assets that they have).
- find ways to listen deeply to marginalised voices through supporting local advocacy fora; building closer relationships with a wider range of local faith actors so they can speak out; valuing the skills of the young; establishing hubs in areas without internet so groups can use one laptop; and specifically accounting for those with disabilities.

For relief and development agencies to build effective faith partnerships, faith actors recommended:

- Set up long-term structures for cross-sectoral engagement - not just *ad hoc* and at times of crisis. Support faith group disaster preparedness and develop relationships and capacity before a crisis rather than during.
- Set up funding mechanisms that give flexibility for local faith actors to invest in relationships, develop local capacity to increase resilience and fully mobilise local resources. Focus funding on ensuring long-term sustainability, not just immediate goals.
- Recognise the role of international and national faith actors as a bridge between the most local faith communities and secular global agencies.
- Meet with faith actors to understand how they work, their capacities, and their priorities. Understand your complementary capacities and work to build equitable relationships. Ensure any meetings are convened at local and national levels, not just global, and with the involvement of other key stakeholders such as relevant ministries.

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