



# Religion and Legitimacy in Development

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*A Case Study on Islamic Relief and its  
Comparative Advantage in Sudan*

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# Foreword

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Increasingly the discourse within the development sector is placing the onus on faith-based organisations to rationalise the presence of a faith perspective in their ethos for humanitarian work. This 'burden of proof' in value terms is giving rise to greater research interest from humanitarian agencies with a stake in the milieu or from interested researchers and authors as individuals, articulating their own faith perspective.

At Islamic Relief Academy, we are keenly engaged in exploring key issues around faith and development, with a view to informing the sector through empirical evidence and greater knowledge awareness, particularly in terms of construct within Islam and development, but also with a broader viewpoint on exploring the positive value faith adds to humanitarian and development interventions.

From a universal standpoint, two-thirds of the world's population identifies itself with a faith and one-quarter with Islam. Even in nominally secular states, religious viewpoints frequently permeate social and political speech and governance, either through historical precedence or through capturing broader public sentiment. Furthermore, there is a considerable relationship between the central tenets of world religions and key issues the development sector seeks to address. For example, compassion, mercy and social justice are among the values at the heart of Islamic Relief and like-minded humanitarian actors, which align strongly with development aspirations such as peace, equality and wellbeing.

At a community level also, faith often has a uniting influence, providing individual and collective spiritual nourishment as well as protecting the community from adversity. Within these settings, faith-based NGOs such as Islamic Relief have been working to build long-term relationships within deprived communities and have built knowledge, trust and understanding of the contexts and circumstances in which they are acting, leading to engagement within grassroots communities and among their leaders, many of whom can be wary of the intentions of secular NGOs, perhaps viewed as short-term focussed, detached or patronising.

In this paper, Faizan Polani begins by skilfully exploring the definitions and typologies of FBOs, discovering a nuanced spectrum of understanding and classification among academics and scholars and carefully differentiating their applied value and method of categorisation, going further to apply these meanings to Islamic Relief. He then goes on to contribute to the broader discourse of sacred authority in humanitarian environments through his research examining religion and legitimacy in development within a singular setting, namely Sudan. Using Islamic Relief's programmatic activities as a vehicle to access urban and rural development projects in the Sudan, Faizan has formulated this case study. Drawing on this field research, conducted with substantive support from Islamic Relief - Sudan, Faizan thus explored how the influence of religion within these communities carries authority in international development settings, both within rights-holder communities and among those in authority over those communities. His findings have the potential to build into broader geographical exploration across the developing world, in order to map the importance and value of religion and legitimacy in development.

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# Executive Summary

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This research study aimed to assess how different stakeholders perceive that religion influences the operations and interventions of Islamic Relief (IR) and whether IR has comparative advantages over secular NGOs in Sudan. The researcher undertook fieldwork in the UK and Sudan where he conducted interviews and focus group discussions with different stakeholder groups. The research findings indicate that while IR is a humanitarian and charitable organisation, the influence of religion on its operations and interventions varies - not only from one aspect of operations to another, but also from one project to another. Moreover, the way different stakeholders perceive this influence varies. Additionally, IR is distinct not only because of the faith-influenced projects it offers and implements, but also due to its emphasis on following *Shari'ah* principles. This emphasis on following *Shari'ah* - and its Muslim identity - provides it with greater access and acceptance in Sudan, owing to the positive stance the government takes towards Muslim FBOs and the trust that rights-holders place in the faith identity of IR.

# Introduction

Although faith-based organisations (FBOs) are the forerunners of modern-day development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in their commitment to humanitarian work, religion was traditionally a neglected area of study within the field of international development. However, in the last few decades, donors, governments and academics have begun to show interest in the role that religion and FBOs play in international development. This interest is based on the premise of their distinctiveness and comparative advantage over secular NGOs, owing to their association with faith. Subsequently, a discourse has also emerged that refutes generalised claims about the uniqueness and comparative advantage of FBOs and suggests that in order to evaluate whether a FBO has any advantage over a secular NGO, the organisation and the context in which it operates needs to be analysed.

This research study adopts a case study approach, using IR as the unit of analysis, to assess how - according to different stakeholders - faith influences IR's operations and interventions and whether IR is perceived to be distinctive and having a comparative advantage over secular NGOs in Sudan.

The key questions this research addressed were as follows:

1. In what ways does religion/faith influence FBOs and their interventions?
2. Are FBOs and their interventions perceived to be distinctive from secular NGOs?
3. Are FBOs perceived to have comparative advantages over secular NGOs?
4. In what ways does Islam influence IR and its interventions in Sudan?
5. Is IR perceived to have comparative advantages over secular NGOs?

# Literature Review

## *Defining FBOs*

FBO is a recently coined term, the origins of which can be traced back to the era of the Republican government of George W. Bush in the USA (2001-2009), during which concentrated efforts were made to get religious organisations involved in public life around the agendas of social cohesion and service delivery (Gibelman and Gelman, 2002: 49). As a result of what has been described as a global resurgence of religion (Tomalin, 2012: 690), there was increased interest in the role of religion in development and, in particular, the work of FBOs. This interest manifested itself not only in the form of increased funding for FBOs by multi/bi-lateral donors, but also in research being undertaken to explore the concept of FBOs, as well as the comparative advantages they provided over secular NGOs (Tomalin, 2012: 690; James, 2011: 114).

In the last few decades, public policy related scholarship has sought to define and categorise FBOs in different ways, using labels such as 'religious organisations', 'religious NGOs' and 'faith-related organisations', in addition to the term FBOs. Each of these definitions or labels tend to focus on a different aspect of these organisations, which has caused ambiguity and confusion about what constitutes a FBO.

For instance, Clarke and Jennings (2008: 6) define a FBO as "any organisation that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith." The focus in their definition of FBOs is on the influence that faith has on the activities of the organisation. Similarly, Berger (2003: 16), who prefers using the term 'religious NGOs', defines them as "formal organisations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teaching of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a non-profit independent,

voluntary basis to promote and realise collectively articulated ideas about public good at the national or international level." While reiterating the influence of faith on the organisation, which was pointed out by Clarke and Jennings (2008: 6), Berger (2003: 16) also defines the domain in which FBOs operate.

While both these definitions highlight faith-based features of FBOs, Leurs (2012: 707) points out that additionally, FBOs also display characteristics that Salamon, Sokolowski and List (2003:7-8) have associated with NGOs in general, i.e. they have some structure and regularity to their operations, are not part of the state apparatus, are not primarily commercial in purpose, have their own internal governance mechanisms and their membership or participation is not compulsory. Hence, while conceptualising FBOs, one not only has to consider their faith-based features - which set them apart from secular NGOs - but also the characteristics that make them similar to their secular counterparts.

## *Typologies of FBOs*

As evident from the discussion above, although a significant amount of time and resources have been invested in attempting to define FBOs, there is still a lack of consensus on an exact definition. This is due to the diverse nature of FBOs that "put their faith identity into practice in a variety of ways, with different strengths, through different partners, with different visibility and with different results" (James, 2011: 110). The resultant ambiguity in defining FBOs has caused confusion and inhibited public debate on issues affecting these organisations (Jeavons, 2004: 140). Given the great variation in claims about what should be included or excluded from the category of FBOs, such claims are looked at with suspicion, which makes public debates about FBOs more complicated and less helpful.

Smith and Sosin (2001) object to the use of the term 'faith-based' for such organisations, arguing that the term excludes organisations that have an implicit, as opposed to explicit, faith basis. They suggest that organisations that are closely aligned with faith have to operate in a secular world, while organisations that have a secular orientation cannot completely avoid the influence of religiosities. Therefore, they recommend that the term 'faith-related' should be used instead of 'faith-based', as it recognises that faith is manifest in a variety of ways in different organisations, in different places and for different reasons (Smith and Sosin, 2001: 653).

Similarly, Sider and Unruh (2004: 116) suggest that a simple categorisation of NGOs as either secular NGOs or FBOs is not possible because of the multidimensional faith nature of organisations, which require a range of types. Hence, they developed a typology that classifies organisations and programmes in terms of the degree to which faith is manifest in their work and places them in one of five categories: faith-permeated, faith-centred, faith-affiliated, faith-secular partnerships, and secular (Sider and Unruh, 2004).

In faith-permeated organisations, the connection with faith is obvious at all levels of the mission, staffing, governance and support. Faith-permeated programmes explicitly integrate religious content and the religious dimension is considered critical to the effectiveness of the programme; hence, participation in religious activities is often required.

Faith-centred organisations are formed to fulfil a religious purpose, are connected with the religious community through funding and affiliation and require the governing board and most staff members to share the faith commitment of the organisation. Moreover, religious content is explicitly incorporated into faith-centred programmes. However, unlike faith-permeated programmes, faith-centred programmes are designed

in a way that participants can opt out of explicitly religious activities, yet expect to benefit from the programme's activities.

Faith-affiliated organisations have religious founders and retain some of their influence but do not require staff to affirm religious beliefs or practices, with the possible exception of the leaders. Faith-affiliated programmes incorporate little or no explicitly religious content but they may affirm faith in a general way.

Faith-background organisations have historical ties to a specific faith tradition but look and act like their secular counterparts. Faith commitments are not considered in the recruitment and selection of staff. Faith-background programmes have no explicitly religious content, except perhaps their location in a religious setting, and they do not expect religious experience to contribute towards the programme outcomes.

Faith-secular partnerships are formed when a secular or faith-background organisation joins forces with an explicitly religious organisation. The resultant entity from such a partnership is secular in its administration but dependent on the religious partner for the provision of volunteer and in-kind support; this is because religious organisations are often perceived by their secular partners to be better at providing such support. The leader and staff of such organisations do not necessarily share the faith of their religious partners. While faith-secular partnership programmes incorporate no explicitly religious content, the faith of religious partners is considered a programme asset.

Secular organisations have no reference to religion in their founding history or mission and deem it inappropriate to let the religious commitments of their members influence hiring and governance decisions. Meanwhile, secular programmes include no religious content at all.

Clarke (2008: 32-33) believes that faith manifests itself in a variety of ways in different organisations, therefore applying the label 'FBOs' to all such organisations is an oversimplification. According to him, there is a need to differentiate between types of FBOs based on the role of faith in their work - as suggested by Sider and Unruh (2004) - by different organisational models and the impact they have in the development context. Therefore, he presents two different typologies.

Clarke distinguishes between FBOs in terms of the way in which they deploy faith through social or political engagement or link faith to development/humanitarian objectives and he then categorises them as passive, active, persuasive or exclusive.

The 'passive' category includes organisations that are guided by broad humanitarian principles and considerations, and in which religion plays a passive role as a motivation for action, mobilising staff and identifying beneficiaries and partners.

The 'active' category includes organisations in which faith is an explicit motivation for action, mobilising staff and identifying beneficiaries and partners.

The 'persuasive' category includes organisations that share the same characteristics as those belonging to the 'active' category but additionally, they try to advance the interest of their faith/sub-faith at the expense of others and bring in new converts.

Lastly, the 'exclusive' category includes organisations for which faith is the principal motivation for action and motivating staff and the sole consideration for the identification of beneficiaries. These organisations can be militant and even hostile towards other faiths.

It is noteworthy that despite the formulation of these typologies, classifying FBOs into a particular category is not always possible. The nature of their work varies

from one context to another, hence it is difficult to neatly place them in a single category. There is also significant overlap between the two typologies outlined above. For example, faith-background organisations that Sider and Unruh (2004: 119) describe are similar to those that Clarke (2008: 32) includes in the 'passive' category. Hence, FBOs can be analysed in light of both categories to get a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of faith on the organisation.

Furthermore, Clarke (2008: 25) also presents an alternative typology of FBOs that classifies them into five categories according to different organisational forms and the impact they have in the development context. These are: representative organisations or apex bodies; charity or development organisations; socio-political organisations; missionary organisations; and radical, illegal or terrorist organisations. Representative organisations or apex bodies, such as the World Council of Churches, rule on doctrinal matters, govern their followers and represent them in the national and international arena. Charitable or development organisations, such as Christian Aid, mobilise followers in support of a social cause and fund/manage programmes to tackle that cause. Socio-political organisations, such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, use faith as a political construct and pursue broader political objectives. Missionary organisations such as the Christian Union, spread key faith messages in an effort to promote their faith and win converts. Lastly, radical, illegal or terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, promote radical or militant forms of faith and engage in illegal activities based on faith beliefs. While it is often not possible to neatly place particular FBOs into one of these categories, the typology serves to enhance the understanding of the diversity that exists among them.

The fact that multiple definitions and typologies of FBOs have been formulated is indicative of their diversity in terms of the influence of faith on their activities and

organisational forms. Each of the definitions and typologies contributes towards a better understanding and conceptualisation of FBOs and hence should be utilised when understanding FBOs in general as well as when analysing different types.

## *Distinctiveness and comparative advantages of FBOs*

As mentioned earlier, recent years have witnessed a significant rise in funding for FBOs and subsequently, FBOs have proliferated considerably because of the perception that they have distinctive characteristics, and even comparative advantages, over secular NGOs (Lunn, 2009: 942; Berger, 2003: 18-19). Such views are held not only by FBOs themselves, believing that faith can contribute towards 'holistic' development, but also by some governments, international agencies, donors and academics (Tomalin, 2012: 697). For example, James (2011: 111) suggests that FBOs offer the potential to add value to development because they are capable of providing efficient development services, have greater access to the poorest communities compared to secular NGOs, have a sustainable presence at the grassroots level, are deemed as a legitimate development actor, are valued and trusted by the poorest communities, provide an alternative to the secular theory of development, promote civil society advocacy and motivate action better than secular NGOs. Moreover, various research studies make assertions about the distinctiveness and comparative advantage of FBOs on the basis of case studies of one or more organisations (see Hoksbergen, 2005; Marshall and Keough 2004).

However, Hefferan, Adkins and Occhipinti (2009: 6) argue that underlying most claims about the suggested distinctiveness and comparative advantages of FBOs is an assumption that FBOs can make international

development more efficient and effective. This assumption has been challenged by various academics. For example, Amirkhanyan, Kim and Lambright (2008: 2) point out that belief in the effectiveness and added value of FBOs is often faith-based rather than empirically tested. Tomalin (2012: 697) suggests that much of the literature that shares such a perception is arguably biased towards a positive view of FBOs.

As a result, a discourse has emerged that critically analyses assertions about the distinctiveness and comparative advantage of FBOs and refuses to simply assume that all FBOs - irrespective of the type of organisation, the extent to which religion influences them and the context in which they operate - have a comparative advantage over secular NGOs. For example, Green, Mercer and Mesaki (2012) undertook a research study about NGOs working in rural Tanzania and did not find FBOs to be distinct from secular NGOs. According to them, FBOs, just like secular NGOs, were working as contractors to provide public education campaigns and to support vulnerable children, and their activities were determined by the official development priorities and programmes of international donors (Green, Mercer and Mesaki, 2012: 731). While they found that the leaders, staff and volunteers of FBOs were influenced by religion, and some of the FBOs even maintained strong links with their parent faith bodies, this did not draw them closer to the poor, allow them to make a distinctive contribution or give them a comparative advantage over secular NGOs.

Moreover as Tomalin (2012: 698) suggests, several of the claims about the distinctiveness and comparative advantages of FBOs treat them as a homogenous category, ignoring both the great diversity among FBOs and the lack of consensus on how they should be defined. In light of this, researchers would do well to avoid generalised - and therefore erroneous - statements about FBOs and instead focus on specific conclusions that 'on balance' a particular group, or sub-group, outperforms another.

Furthermore, the characteristics that supposedly distinguish FBOs from their secular counterparts, and provide them with comparative advantages, are often found in secular NGOs too. This suggests that the influence of faith on an organisation may not be the cause of its effectiveness, or lack thereof, in comparison to another: other factors might be at play.

For instance, while advocates of FBOs (such as Bornstein, 2005; Occhipinti, 2005) suggest that FBOs promote an alternative or broader view of development than secular approaches, Tomalin (2012: 698) points out that secular organisations have also challenged the economic focus of mainstream development policy. Hence, promotion of a broader view of development cannot be considered a distinctive feature of FBOs.

Similarly, Leurs' (2012) research study in Nigeria found that while some FBOs had a wide reach and enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the local population, such was not the case across the board; secular NGOs also had extensive networks and were well-respected by local communities. The effectiveness of FBOs, according to Leurs (2012: 717), was dependent on the context in which they operate. For example, he found FBOs to be highly effective while working in the religious Kano State of Nigeria, where traditional leaders were also religious leaders, or when dealing with religiously sensitive issues, such as HIV/AIDS. However, FBOs did not hold any comparative advantage over secular NGOs while operating in other areas of Nigeria or while dealing with issues that were not religiously sensitive.

Additionally, some research studies have suggested that while FBOs might be more trusted than secular NGOs in the poorest communities, their legitimacy is eroded and their relationship with beneficiaries is compromised when they become more embedded in the donor driven development process (Nishimuko, 2008: 178). For instance, according to De Cordier (2008), Western-based Muslim FBOs offer added value while operating in predominantly Muslim regions and have a comparative advantage over

secular NGOs, because they are perceived by the local population to be in tune with their values and needs. However, they surrender their comparative advantage and become vulnerable to backlash if the local population starts to perceive them as subcontractors or buffers for non-Muslim organisations and donors (De Cordier, 2008: 623). Hence, the trust of the local population that FBOs enjoy may not be solely due to their association with a particular faith, but rather due to their distance from the non-Muslim, institutional donors of 'the West', who may be perceived to have their own political agendas.

Moreover, in some cases, FBOs are found to be the most trusted development actor owing to the absence of other actors. For instance, FBOs that provide education in post-conflict Sierra Leone are very effective because they are well-trusted by local populations, but according to Nishimuko (2008: 178), that is not due to any comparative advantage they have over secular NGOs; rather it is because of the absence of other providers. Therefore, while a quarter of parents interviewed by Nishimuko (2008: 176) cited religious reasons for selecting schools for their children, if they had another choice, they might have made a different decision. Hence, even in cases where FBOs are highly trusted by the local population owing to their affiliation with faith, one cannot assume that they have a comparative advantage over secular NGOs.

The findings of the research studies above indicate that assertions about the distinctive characteristics that are often attributed to FBOs, as well as the comparative advantages that they are believed to hold over secular NGOs, may not be true across the board. Rather, the comparative advantage of FBOs is dependent on the context in which they operate. Therefore, in order to evaluate whether a particular FBO is providing added value to the development of a particular region or community, one has to first analyse the FBO as an organisation, using the definitions and typologies discussed earlier, and then analyse the context in which it operates. Only then can the benefit of being a FBO be determined.



# Research Methodology

## Data Collection

Data was collected during visits to Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) head office in Birmingham (UK), IR offices in Khartoum and El Obeid (Sudan) and different localities within Khartoum and El Obeid where IR interventions were being implemented. In total the researcher spent twelve days on field sites in Sudan and three days with the IRW team in Birmingham. Additionally, the researcher conducted four interviews over a period of two days.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and direct observation as his data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with IR staff members, members of partner organisations and beneficiaries. The researcher decided to opt for semi-structured interviews because they provided a workable compromise between structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews tend to impose topics on the respondent and deny them the freedom to talk about issues that they consider being important, while unstructured interviews carry the risk of deviating off-topic and wasting valuable research time. Semi-structured interviews, however, provide the respondent with the liberty to discuss what they deem to be relevant within a loosely guided framework. The framework employed by the researcher took the form of a checklist that included the following topics:

- + Influence of religion on IR and its interventions
- + Distinctiveness or uniqueness of IR and its interventions
- + Comparative advantage, or disadvantage, held by IR owing to its association with Islam
- + Importance of the context in the realisation of those comparative advantages
- + Role of religion in helping IR gain the trust of different stakeholders

A typical semi-structured interview with staff members lasted one hour, while an interview with beneficiaries and members of partner organisations lasted 30 minutes on average. The researcher conducted 29 semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with beneficiaries and community members.<sup>1</sup> IR staff provided the researcher with a list of beneficiaries of IR's interventions in North Kordofan. The community members who were included in the second focus group discussion were members of local village committees, responsible for providing support to NGOs operating in the village. Once the researcher identified the beneficiaries, IR staff arranged their convening at a single location. The groups consisted of eight participants and each focus group discussion lasted 60 and 80 minutes respectively.

Through direct observation, the researcher took detailed notes of the way in which IR staff interacted with each other, with beneficiaries, with community members in the localities in which they were operating and with members of partner organisations. For example, the researcher accompanied IR staff members on one of their visits to a local hospital, where an orphan - a beneficiary of IR's Orphan Children Welfare Programme (OCWP) - was admitted, and he observed the interaction between staff and the beneficiary. The researcher also accompanied members of IR at an event conducted by the World Humanitarian Forum where he observed their interaction with members of numerous partner organisations. Moreover, the researcher attended IR staff team meetings in El Obeid. While the researcher did not plan to conduct direct observation, during the initial interviews several staff members highlighted that Islam had a significant influence on the way they interact with different stakeholders; therefore the researcher decided to conduct direct observations to assess whether such claims were true. The researcher tried to remain as

<sup>1</sup>. See Appendix for list of interviewees and participants.

unobtrusive as possible during these activities in order to avoid influencing the behaviour of the people who were being observed, while also trying to gain insights about the context in which IR was operating in Sudan.

## Data Analysis

After the culmination of the fieldwork, the researcher conducted a comprehensive analysis of all the data that was collected during the process. In order to analyse the data, the researcher first transcribed those interviews and focus group discussions that he was able to record using an audio recorder. After the transcripts were prepared, the researcher coded and categorised the data in order to highlight particular themes that were pertinent to achieving the research objective. The categories were related to the different study variables, such as influence of religion on IR, distinctiveness of interventions, and comparative advantages of IR. Moreover, the study variables were broken down further into more clearly defined sub-variables for further analyses. For example, the influence of religion on IR was divided into influence of religion in project identification, design and implementation. Through this coding and categorisation process, the researcher was able to examine the different relationships that exist between the various study variables and sub-variables, which helped him identify key themes and ideas from the data and achieve the research objective.

## Sampling Methods

A purposive sampling method, also known as a non-probability sampling method was adopted, where the researcher specifically targeted a group of forty-five individuals within the population of interest. The researcher opted for this sampling method, instead of random sampling methods, due to the limited time and resources available. The researcher conducted

strategic sampling, whereby those who were believed to provide the most useful information for addressing the research questions were the ones selected to be interviewed.

## Ethical Considerations

The interviewees have the right to anonymity and were made aware of this option. They are referred to by their stakeholder group and associated code.<sup>2</sup> Senior individuals of IRW have been mentioned by name/position where permissions were sought and granted.

<sup>2</sup>. Current or Former Staff Members (S-1, S-2...) Beneficiaries (B-1, B-2...) Community Members (C-1, C-2...) Representatives from Partner Organisations (P-1, P-2...).

# Research findings and analysis

## *Classifying Islamic Relief as a FBO*

IR describes itself as an independent humanitarian and development organisation that is working to fight poverty and injustice and that is inspired by Islam and guided by values of *Ikhlās* (sincerity), *Ihsan* (excellence), *Rahma* (compassion), *Adl* (social justice) and *Amana* (custodianship) that are derived from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*, or Prophetic life (Islamic-relief.org, 2014b). This description of IR not only neatly fits the definition of a FBO provided by Clarke and Jennings (2008: 6) and Berger (2003: 16), but also allows one to categorise IR as a charitable and development organisation, using the typology of FBOs formulated by Clarke (2008: 25).

This categorisation of IR as a charitable and development organisation is further justified by the comments of Dr. Hany El Banna, co-founder of IR, who described IR as a value-based organisation that uses Islamic values to undertake humanitarian and development work. He emphasised the fact that IR is part of the humanitarian movement and is striving to fulfil the humanitarian mandate. Moreover, it does not intend to influence the beliefs of the individuals it serves, or win any converts.

Similarly, Respondent S-3 stated that IR is a humanitarian organisation that has derived its values from the Islamic faith but at the same time, just like any other humanitarian organisation, it follows humanitarian principles and strives to meet humanitarian standards. Additionally, Respondent P-3 pointed out that while working in partnership with IR, he observed that despite being a FBO, IR does not have a component of *Dawah* (preaching of Islam) in its interventions, and that it solely focuses on achieving the development and humanitarian objectives that it has set for itself.

The beneficiaries also shared such views. For example Respondent B-5, one of the beneficiaries of the microfinance programme, said that while IR's intervention was in accordance with the rules of Islamic finance and that IR staff members informed her of it from the very beginning, at no point did she feel that the organisation or its representatives were trying to influence her religious beliefs in any way. She always felt that they were trying to help her in the best possible manner and by not charging interest (forbidden in Islamic law); they made it easy for her to repay the loan more quickly as her only alternative were private moneylenders who charge a significant amount of interest.

Hence IR's focus on achieving humanitarian and development goals, tackling poverty and social injustice - goals that are set by the organisation itself and supported by the testimonies of its stakeholders - places the organisation into the category of 'charitable or development organisations' within the typology formulated by Clarke (2008: 25). It is pertinent to mention that members of all the stakeholder groups stated that IR was a humanitarian and development organisation that worked solely to achieve humanitarian or development objectives. However, as explored earlier, since faith is manifest in a variety of ways in different FBOs, there is a need to understand the role it plays in IR and its interventions using the typologies of FBOs formulated by Sider and Unruh (2004) and Clarke (2008: 25, 32-33).

## *Influence of Religion on Islamic Relief Operations*

As mentioned earlier, IR undertakes humanitarian and development work underpinned by its Islamic values and this is reflected in its motto, 'faith inspired action' and its mission statement: "Islamic Relief envisages

a caring world where communities are empowered, social obligations are fulfilled and people respond as one to the suffering of others" (Islamic-relief.org, 2014b). Additionally, IR uses marketing and public relations material that explicitly positions it as a Muslim FBO. References to Islam in the self-descriptive texts and marketing material of IR are explicit, which is a characteristic of faith-permeated or faith-centred organisations, according to the typology presented by Sider and Unruh (2004: 112).

Moreover, IR was founded and has been driven by people like Dr. El Banna, a medical doctor by profession who has a humanitarian rationale for engaging in developmental and humanitarian work that is also infused by Islamic sentiments. On the operational side of affairs, at the executive and senior management level, IR has employed individuals who are development and humanitarian professionals, rather than specialists in Islamic philosophy or theology. Therefore, as a humanitarian relief organisation, IR has historically not been required to engage in theological or philosophical discussion, neither internally, nor externally with think tanks and scholars. Nevertheless, a group of Muslims who were driven by their Islamic outlook to undertake humanitarian work, which they perceived as a religious duty, founded IR. Given the religious intentions of the founders of IR, the organisation can be classified as either a faith-permeated, faith-centred, or a faith-affiliated organisation, using the typology presented by Sider and Unruh (2004: 112). However, an IRW manager pointed out that in the recent past, IR has become more conscious of its religious identity owing to the increased attention that Muslim FBOs are receiving from donors, government, media and academia and is subsequently trying to understand and consolidate how faith is actually inspiring its actions.

In terms of recruitment and selection of staff, there was consensus among all the respondents, who belonged to different faith groups, that there was

no discrimination based on faith commitment. Respondent S-4 stated that the recruitment process is merit-based and only focuses on whether the applicant possesses the requisite knowledge and skills for the job. Respondent S-14 pointed out that the only time IR's recruitment process differentiated based on religion was when there was a legitimate business justification, for example, in the case of recruitment for a mosque fundraiser. However, it was further suggested that there was a 'glass ceiling' for non-Muslims and as one moved to the higher echelons of the organisation, non-Muslim contribution diminished. However, he added that while IR would prefer to maintain its religious identity, it would not do so at the expense of merit. He also added that differentiation on the grounds of faith among FBOs might be attributed to wanting to maintain religious identity for its external value, such as donor support or acceptance and trust from some aid-receiving communities. He further pointed out that amongst FBOs, IR was still among the more inclusive organisations, so while they differentiated in some aspects, they were inclusive in others. Hence, while IR displayed characteristics of a faith organisation, there was negligible influence of religion in staff recruitment, though evidence of influence of religion in selection of senior staff is present but viewed as a normative characteristic of faith-centred organisations (Sider and Unruh, 2004: 112-113).

In terms of gender inequity, according to female Respondent S-15, men were favoured over women for operational assignment within conflict zones and in disaster response, citing safety reasons. She felt frustrated, as a female humanitarian aid worker, as she aspired for broader experience in order to progress further in her career. Moreover, Respondent S-17 concurred that since field experience was necessary for several positions, IR was confining the careers of female field operatives in this way.



In terms of IR charitable income, Respondent S-1 pointed out that IR's religious identity contributes towards it obtaining financial and voluntary support from the Muslim community. According to IR's Annual Report 2012, voluntary income, which includes income from regular giving, campaign and appeals, constitutes 68 percent of its total income (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2012). Respondent S-8 pointed out that being a Muslim FBO helps the organisation attract volunteers who consider volunteering for an organisation like IR to be a pious act or an act of worship; a finding that is similar to that of Wiktorowicz (2011: 85). Hence, not only does the religious identity of IR attract financial assistance from individual donors - which subsequently leads to financial and institutional independence that can stimulate humanitarian innovation (Khan and van Eekelen, 2008) - but it also attracts voluntary support from the communities it serves. As IR cultivates financial and voluntary support from the Muslim community, IR can be classified as a faith-centred organisation, using the typology presented by Sider and Unruh (2004: 113).

## *Influence of Religion on Project Identification*

Different stakeholders pointed out the influence of religion on various stages of the project cycle of IR's interventions. Dr. Hossam Said, the Managing Director of IR Academy and the former International Programmes Director at IRW, highlighted the influence of religion on project identification by pointing out the case of IR's OCWP, which allows donors from around the globe to sponsor the living expenses, education and medical costs of an orphan child. According to Dr. Said, while IR cares for all children who are in need and believes that they have a right to life with dignity, it realises that Muslims have a soft spot for orphans owing to the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was an orphan himself, and that the

*Qur'an* places special emphasis on caring for orphans. This focus on orphans is indicative of the active role of faith in the identification of projects and beneficiaries (Clarke 2008: 32) and is evident from the following verse from the *Qur'an*, which describes the attributes of the righteous:

*“And they feed, in spite of their love for wealth (or for the love of God), the poor, the orphan, and the captive.”* [Qur'an 76:8]

Hence, IR has established the OCWP in various parts of the world, including Sudan, where almost 2,500 orphan children are benefitting from it, according to Respondent S-2. The rationale behind this project, according to Dr. Said, is that some Muslim donors are particularly interested in providing for orphaned children because it is encouraged in Islam. Therefore, IR designed a project that takes the preferences of its donors into account whilst supporting vulnerable children and contributing to the organisation's overall mission of empowering the communities it works with.

Similarly, Respondent S-9 stated that IR undertakes two seasonal projects, Ramadan and *Qurbani*, every year. In the Ramadan project, food parcels are delivered to the most vulnerable people in the communities in which IR operates, including Sudan; while in the *Qurbani* project, IR provides meat to the poor for *Eid-ul-Adha* so that they are able to celebrate this religious festival. Just like the OCWP, these projects take into consideration the teachings of Islam; Muslims are encouraged to increase good deeds such as charity during the holy month of Ramadan and during the *Eid-ul-Adha* festival of sacrifice they are encouraged to donate a portion of meat to the poor. Hence, religion plays an active role in the identification of IR's Ramadan and *Qurbani* projects (Clarke, 2008: 32). However, it is pertinent to mention that these faith-inspired projects

are much smaller than other projects undertaken by IR. According to Respondent S-8, the combined budget for the Ramadan and *Qurbani* projects constituted merely nine percent of the total approved budget for IR Sudan's projects in Greater Kordofan in 2013.

## *Influence of Religion on Project Design*

Islam also influences the design of IR's projects but the extent of this influence varies from one programme to another. In some cases, faith has an active influence on project design while in others, faith influence is passive (Clarke, 2008: 32). Furthermore, perceptions of the extent to which Islam influences project design vary from one stakeholder to another. For example, Respondent S-10 pointed out that in the case of the microfinance programme, IR has to ensure that loans are provided in compliance Islamic finance rules, but also that the intervention contributes towards the empowerment of beneficiaries, as Islam discourages dependency on donations. Hence, IR provides assets and training to beneficiaries alongside the loans. In this example, the influence of Islam is not only restricted to following the letter of the law, i.e. adhering to Islamic rules and regulations, but extends to following the spirit of the law, i.e. upholding Islamic values. However, according to the Interim Head of the Global Microfinance Business Unit, while IR's rationale for not charging interest on microfinance loans is in line with Islamic finance principles, the fact that it provides training to beneficiaries in addition to providing loans is standard practice among NGOs. Therefore, the view that training is provided solely because of the emphasis placed on empowerment in Islam is idealistic. This difference highlights that perceptions of the influence of Islam on the project design varies among stakeholders, and that while some aspects of project design may be influenced by faith, other aspects may

be following standard humanitarian practice, followed by a post-hoc faith association, such as with religious references, for example supportive statements from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

Similarly, there are also different justifications for why IR integrates some of its programmes with others. For instance, in Sudan, several of the widows whose children were sponsored by the OCWP were also provided with microfinance loans. This helped increase the likelihood of the sponsorship money being used to fund education, health and provide food for the children - i.e. the purpose for which it was intended - rather than covering other household expenses. In addition, since the orphans only receive support from the OCWP until they reach the age of fourteen, providing microfinance loans to widows helped IR increase the likelihood of the family having a source of income through which the children could be fed, clothed and educated even after the OCWP sponsorship allowance ended. Respondent S-10 suggested that the rationale behind such integrated programming was that Islam emphasises empowering beneficiaries and helping them escape from the vicious cycle of poverty. The Interim Head of the Global Microfinance Business Unit at IRW was of the view that supplementing orphan sponsorship with microfinance loans is a pragmatic decision and not a faith-inspired one, based on the notion that orphan sponsorship alone is not sufficient to sustainably change the lives of beneficiaries. Hence, the integration of the microfinance programme with the OCWP is not necessarily due to the influence of faith; it can also be an example of practicing good targeting through well-integrated programming, with a notional faith-based justification.

Furthermore, a common element in almost all IR projects is that it consults members of the community in which it intends to implement a particular project and gets them involved in the project design process. However, just as in previous examples, there is a difference of

opinion among stakeholders as to the extent of faith influence that IR places on community consultation in project design. According to Respondent S-7, IR places emphasis on it because it contributes towards empowering communities. As mentioned earlier, this emphasis on empowering communities is derived from Islamic teachings as is evident in the following verse from the *Qur'an*:

*“God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”* [Qur'an 13:11]

Hence, consulting with community members means they are able to propose solutions to the problems they face; this in turn empowers them because they do not become dependent on IR for coming up with solutions to their problems. Instead, they propose solutions and IR supports them by providing the resources required to implement them. However, Respondent S-5, who previously worked in secular organisations, suggested that consulting beneficiaries and getting them involved in the project design process is an activity also undertaken by secular NGOs in order to develop the community's sense of ownership towards the project, which in turn helps make it sustainable. Hence, he believes that while consultation with beneficiaries leads to the empowerment of communities, which is important for creating social justice, - one of the faith-inspired values of IR - this element of project design is also practiced by secular NGOs.

Additionally, in some IR projects, the capacity-building component refers to Islamic teachings. Respondent S-10 pointed out that in the microfinance programme, those who received a loan were also educated about different types of *Shari'ah*-compliant financial transactions. This not only helped beneficiaries understand how the project worked but also educated those who were interested in the principles of Islamic

finance. Respondent B-13 pointed out that despite growing up in a Muslim household, she had never learnt about the principles of Islamic finance. However, following the training she received during the briefing for the IR microfinance programme, she can now differentiate between lawful and unlawful financial transactions in her everyday life. The fact that Islamic Relief made such religious knowledge available through its project design to those who sought it, is a characteristic of a faith-background programme (Sider and Unruh, 2004: 114).

## *Influence of Religion on Project Implementation*

According to Dr. El Banna, it is not sufficient for IR to be identified solely as a Muslim FBO or merely claim to have Islamic values; Muslim identity and values have to be reflected through practice. Moreover, he suggested that the onus of doing so is particularly on field staff, as they directly interact with beneficiaries. According to Respondent S-5, during the implementation phase the project plan is put into action and there is increased interaction between IR staff and beneficiaries. Hence, the influence of Islam, which is reflected in the attitudes, words and actions of field staff members, is active and particularly evident in project implementation (Clarke, 2008: 32).

For instance, Islam places great emphasis on treating the impoverished with dignity and not hurting them, as evident in the following verse from the *Qur'an*:

*“O you who have believed, do not void your donations with obliging (reproach) and hurt.”*  
[Qur'an 2: 264]

Therefore, there is increased emphasis on being compassionate and respectful towards beneficiaries. Respondent B-6 said that after she was selected as a beneficiary of the microfinance programme, IR field staff helped her decide the ideal project for her and once she decided on undertaking sheep fattening, they helped her find healthy sheep, got them vaccinated and provided her with relevant guidance. Throughout the process, she felt respected, supported and cared for. While such a compassionate and caring attitude is not unique to Muslim FBOs, in the case of IR Sudan employees, Islam certainly acted as a motivator. For example, Respondent S-6, while comparing his current experience of working for IR with his earlier experience of working for a secular NGO, said that he now felt extra motivation to do his best because he perceived it as an act of worship. He attributed this to the organisation's emphasis on Islamic principles and values. Similarly, Respondent S-12 stated that while working for IR he felt that he was not only accountable to his manager, but also to God. He added that he realised that even if he worked for a secular NGO he would be accountable to God for his actions, but the fact that he worked for a Muslim FBO made him feel as if he is undertaking a task that was assigned by God, therefore he was more conscious of it.

## *Distinctiveness and Comparative Advantages of Islamic Relief's Interventions*

Although many IR projects appear similar to those of secular NGOs - such as those in the fields of health and education - different stakeholders suggested that IR's projects were distinct due to their Islamic influence. Moreover, it was suggested that owing to IR's religious identity and the distinctiveness of its interventions, in

some contexts IR had a comparative advantage over secular NGOs.

Firstly, IR is distinctive because some of the projects it undertakes, such as *Qurbani* and Ramadan, are not undertaken by secular NGOs. Respondent S-13 pointed out that while some other FBOs also implemented *Qurbani* and Ramadan programmes, such projects were not offered by any of the secular NGOs.

Moreover, Respondent B-7, who has been a beneficiary of projects undertaken by IR and secular NGOs, suggested that IR was unique in its beneficiary selection process as it asked community members to come up with a definition of wealth. Based on the local definition of wealth, it worked with community members to identify the poorest of the poor, who were then selected as beneficiaries for their projects. Respondent B-9 added that such an approach was not only unique but also effective as it ensured that there were no conflicts afterwards on the selection of beneficiaries, as was often the case for projects implemented by secular NGOs.

Dr. Said pointed out that Muslim FBOs like IR that are working in the humanitarian aid and development sector are different from secular NGOs because of their particular focus on ensuring that they operate in a *Shari'ah* compliant way. Given that *Zakat*, the mandatory charity on all able Muslims, is a pillar of Islam, Muslims have an obligation to give charity in support of those across the globe who are in need. However, there are specific rules related for collecting and distributing *Zakat* and other forms of Islamic charity, such as *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity), which are specified in Islam and which IR follows in its operations. For many Muslims, especially those living in non-Muslim countries, Muslim FBOs like IR are the most convenient means of getting their donations to those most in need whilst being sure that their donations are handled in accordance with *Shari'ah*.

Moreover, different stakeholders believe that IR has a comparative advantage over secular NGOs in getting access to some Muslim areas and being accepted by local communities. Such views are in line with the affirmation of James (2011: 111) on comparative advantages of FBOs. Respondent S-3 pointed out that IR was one of the few NGOs permitted to operate in Blue Nile and Central Darfur by the Sudanese government. Respondent P-1, who is a government official, stated that in the past, the government had expelled some international NGOs because they were perceived to be following a hidden agenda; in contrast, IR is trusted by the government and even allowed to operate in some, more sensitive areas, despite also being an international NGO. He conceded that this trust is the outcome of IR's faith identity as well as through the working relationship it has developed with the government over many years.

Since the government had implemented *Shari'ah* and had a pro-Islam stance, it had an inclination towards Muslim FBOs. Respondent S-5 stated that while service delivery was what really mattered - as that was the criteria on which the government preferred one organisation over another - the government would prioritise its support for Muslim FBOs if service was of equal merit. When asked why the government is perceived to favour IR over secular NGOs, Respondent P-4 stated that in some communities people are more comfortable receiving aid from FBOs, hence in those cases if the government has a choice between two equally capable organisations, it favours the FBO.

When beneficiaries were asked whether they favoured IR over secular NGOs, and if so, what were their reasons; Respondent B-15 stated that they tend to be suspicious of the motives of any outside help from NGOs; however given that IR is a Muslim FBO they were inclined to believe that Muslim FBOs are working for the sake of God and therefore have no hidden agenda. Similarly, Respondent B-12 stated that since IR is a Muslim

FBO, which receives donations from Muslims around the world, they perceive it as their Muslim brethren helping them out. In fact, IR receives donations from Muslims and non-Muslims and has both Muslim and non-Muslim beneficiaries; it is merely perception of some stakeholders that the charity is exclusively about 'Muslims helping other Muslims'.

Hence, the affiliation with Islam made beneficiaries perceive IR as a legitimate development actor, a comparative advantage that was pointed out by James (2011: 111). Additionally, Respondent B-13 was of the view that if IR is distributing food to them, as is the case with Ramadan and *Qurbani* projects, they can be assured that the food is *Halal* (permissible for Muslims) which is not the perception when receiving food from secular NGOs. Moreover, Respondent S-13 said that various secular NGOs preferred partnering with IR because it was trusted by the government and local communities alike. He recalled that when the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) wanted to distribute seeds in Abu Kharshola, South Kordofan in 2013, it approached IR because it was one of the few NGOs that were accepted by local communities in that region. Discussing the benefits of greater access and acceptability owing to the religious identity of IR, Respondent S-8 added that it is particularly useful when implementing projects that require access to women and children, as men in the villages of North Kordofan do not allow employees of secular NGOs to interact with their families.

However, it is also pertinent to mention that these comparative advantages that IR enjoys are not applicable across all of Sudan and at all times, which is similar to the findings of Leurs (2012). Dr. El Banna pointed out that in the end it is good service delivery that matters, so even if the government or the people due to its religious identity trust IR initially, if service delivery is not professional or in line with Islamic principles then that trust is eroded quickly. Similarly,

Respondent S-10 pointed out that in parts of Sudan where rebel groups are active, any organisation that has an Islamic identity is mistrusted because of its assumed association with the government; hence, even IR finds it difficult to operate in those areas. Lastly, Dr El Banna stated that while IR Sudan did not have difficulties and had a comparative advantage because of the pro-FBO stance of the government; one cannot assume that such advantage will last forever. He added that this advantage was dependent on the elected government's orientation and stance towards FBOs, and if the elected government or its stance changed in the future, IR could lose its advantage.

# Conclusion

The research findings indicated that owing to the focus of IR on fighting poverty and injustice, it is classified as a charitable and development organisation (Clarke, 2008: 25). Moreover, it was suggested that the influence of religion on IR's operations and interventions varied considerably.

On the operations side, the explicit references to Islam that IR made in the self-descriptive texts, the religious purpose of its founders and the cultivation of financial and voluntary support from the Muslim community, made IR a faith-centred organisation. However, in terms of selection of staff, faith had a minimal role, which was characteristic of faith-background organisations. Additionally, while faith had minimal influence on staff selection, faith is more evident among the most senior levels of the organisation, which is also characteristic of faith-centred organisations (Sider and Unruh, 2004: 112-113).

Similarly, the influence of religion on project identification was significant for projects such as the OCWP, Ramadan and *Qurbani*, but faith-inspired projects were fewer and smaller compared to other projects undertaken by IR. Similarly, while in some aspects of project design (such as provision of interest-free loans) faith influence was active; in others (such as integrated programming and beneficiary consultation) it was argued that IR merely followed the standard practices of the wider sector, although a post-hoc Islamic justification was sometimes provided. In project implementation, though, Islam acted as a motivator and influenced the behaviour of staff members.

Moreover, IR was found to be distinctive because some of the projects it offered, such as *Qurbani* and Ramadan projects, were not offered by secular NGOs. Furthermore, IR's beneficiary selection process was found to be unique and extremely effective by beneficiaries. Additionally, IR's emphasis on following *Shari'ah* principles in collecting and distributing *Zakat*

made it distinct from secular NGOs. Lastly, IR had a comparative advantage over secular NGOs in getting access to and being accepted by local communities because of the positive stance of the Sudanese government towards Muslim FBOs and the trust that beneficiaries place in the faith identity of IR.

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# Appendix

## Interviewees

- Dr Hany El Banna, Co-Founder, IRW Birmingham, UK
- Dr Hossam Said Managing Director, IR Academy Birmingham, UK
- Dr Mohammad Kroessin Global Microfinance Advisor, IRW Birmingham, UK
- Elias Fon Regional Manager – West/Central Africa, IRW Birmingham, UK
- Shihab Mohammed Ali Emergency Coordinator, IR Sudan
- Abdel Aziz Khatir Osman Monitoring and Learning Coordinator, IR Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan
- Mohammed Yousif Ibrahim HR and Admin Manager, IR Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan
- Musa Ali Atroun Strategy Consultant, IR Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan
- Isam Mohamed Salih Orphan Children Welfare Programme Officer, IR Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan
- Ilham Mubarak Ahmed Programme Officer, IR Sudan, Khartoum, Sudan
- Gisiema Babay Ibrahim Programme Coordinator - North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Intisar El Sayir Mohamed Orphan Children Welfare Programme Officer – North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Hassan Faradi Fadul Microfinance Officer – North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan

- Hussein Hamid Hussein Education Officer – North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Mekki El Mahi Livelihood Officer – North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Mugahid Shuaib Mohamed Driller – North Kordofan, IR Sudan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Ismail Mekki Ismail Minister of Education – North Kordofan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Saied El Mahdi Director, National Rural Water Corporation – North Kordofan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Mussa Hurika Director, Social Affairs – Shikan Locality, North Kordofan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Hafiz Saad Deputy Director, Social Affairs – Shikan Locality, North Kordofan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Faraha Abu Rass Social Affairs Officer – Shikan Locality, North Kordofan, El Obeid, Sudan
- Huda Hamid Khidir Beneficiary, Orphans and Child Welfare Programme (OCWP) El Obeid, Sudan
- Sawakin Yousif Beneficiary, Orphans and Child Welfare Programme (OCWP) El Obeid, Sudan
- Sidieg Mohammed Ali Abdallah School Headmaster – Haseeb Basic School, Beneficiary, Education Project El Obeid, Sudan
- Manal Mustafa Mohammed School Headmistress – Al Khairasan Basic School, Beneficiary - Education, El Obeid, Sudan
- 4 Former IR employees interviewed via teleconference (Anonymous)



## *Participants in Focus Group Discussion*

Village Chief of Al Shaygiya Village, Sudan

Village Development Committee in Al Shaygiya Village, Sudan

6 Microfinance Beneficiaries in Al Mulbas Village, Sudan

6 Microfinance Beneficiaries in Al Shaygiya Village, Sudan

2 Village Development Organisation Members in Al Mulbas Village, Sudan

# Acknowledgements

### **The Author would like to thank the following for their support:**

Willem van Eekelen, Visiting Lecturer & Academic Supervisor, International Development Department, University of Birmingham.

Dr Hany El Banna, Co-Founder, IRW, Birmingham, UK

Dr Hossam Said, Managing Director, Islamic Relief Academy.

Mehdi Bin Mrad, Director of International Programmes Division, Islamic Relief Worldwide.

Elias Fon, Head of Region - West Africa, Islamic Relief Worldwide.

Elsadig Elnour Mohamed, Acting Country Director, Islamic Relief Sudan.

Islamic Relief Sudan.

Isabel Phillips, Regional Desk Coordinator, Islamic Relief Worldwide.

Dr Kasim Randeree, Head of Research & Development, Islamic Relief Academy.

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This research was undertaken with the support of Islamic Relief Worldwide, Islamic Relief-Sudan and Islamic Relief Academy.

This publication has been produced under the Islamic Relief Academy Postgraduate Fellows Programme.

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### Religion and Legitimacy in Development: A Case Study on Islamic Relief and its Comparative Advantage in Sudan

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Editor: Dr Kasim Randeree

Reviewers: Dr Kasim Randeree, Abdul Hamed Salem

Please use the following citation:

Polani, F. Z. (2015). *Religion and Legitimacy in Development: A Case Study on Islamic Relief and its Comparative Advantage in Sudan*, Islamic Relief Academy, Birmingham, UK.

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