

## Islamic Relief: Faith and identity in practice

Inspired by his Islamic faith, Dr Hany El Banna, an Egyptian immigrant, founded Islamic Relief (IR) in the UK in 1984. IR is a faith-based organisation (FBO) and the largest Muslim humanitarian aid organisation in the West<sup>1</sup>. Faith is a major factor in shaping its identity as well as its values and choices. Islam indicates that each individual has a duty to care for the poor and is accountable for his or her deeds on earth. Therefore, it is important that the organisation abides by Islamic principles and values while contributing to fighting poverty. Faith defines the organisation's identity; it influences its performance, choices and actions. In practice, IR's fundraising on the one hand, and projects on the other hand, demonstrate the spirit of its Islamic humanitarian work.

### Sources of support

The organisation receives donations from multilateral and bilateral institutions and individual donors. It has entered into partnerships and cooperation agreements with Christian FBOs, such as CAFOD, as well as secular organisations. Likewise, IR's individual donors include both Muslims and non-Muslims. Many Muslim donors prefer to pay their donations according to Islamic traditions and rituals. The principles of charitable giving are established in Islamic teaching through the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) and as such, they are more than 1400 years old. Muslims are obliged to provide for the poor, marginalised and vulnerable through *zakat*, or almsgivings. In addition, Muslims are also encouraged to make voluntary contributions, or *sadaqah*, to help the poor and needy, or to contribute to other social welfare purposes such as orphans' sponsorships. *Waqf* or charitable endowments constitute another mechanism for the provision of services to the public.

IR has developed specific processes and systems to cater for these traditions of giving, which take into account the different types of faith-based donations. For example, during Ramadhan (the month of fasting) IR undertakes specific feeding programmes (as do many Islamic FBOs). The organisation makes sure that it

<sup>1</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) headquarters is based in the UK. IR has 12 partner offices, and has field offices and work in 26 countries



Group discussion at a conference on Islam and HIV/AIDS organised by Islamic Relief

uses such donations according to Islamic guidance, while at the same time abiding by the standards of the international humanitarian sector in the way it delivers the service to its beneficiaries.

### How faith identity is reflected in activities

The ways in which faith identity is reflected in Muslim FBOs' activities are diverse. The traditional focus of Muslim charities, including IR, has been largely on satisfying the basic needs of poor and vulnerable people; providing food parcels, clothing, shelter, and sponsorship for orphans. However, the organisation also focuses on tackling the causes of poverty, such as conflicts, exclusion and environmental degradation. This is all in line with the Islamic moral framework on development and sustainability.

Besides areas that have adopted a general faith-based approach to social development, such as IR's work in reproductive health, education, and conflict transformation, the organisation's faith identity is illustrated through concrete projects and initiatives. One example is IR's microcredit projects. IR gives beneficiaries interest-free loans, which is a faith-compliant approach inspired by Islamic economic principles. Likewise, the faith of the organisation has shaped its approach to HIV/AIDS. In 2007, IR organised a conference on Islam and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. The goal of this was to consult with others to formulate and promote an Islamic approach outlining how Muslims can contribute to the international effort to fight the disease. Finally, IR's contributions to the Jubilee Debt Campaign on international debt relief and the United Nations Convention against Corruption campaign are further examples of Islamic

teachings inspiring IR's work in tackling the causes of poverty.

IR works with Muslim and non-Muslim beneficiaries. According to Islam, charitable work should be free from any expected return on the beneficiaries' side. There should be no discrimination against beneficiaries based on ethnicity, religion or colour. Therefore, humanitarian aid and charity cannot be conditioned on religious affiliation. *Da'wa*, or inviting others to Islam, is obligatory for each Muslim, always through reasoning rather than luring and coercion. But *da'wa* has very little to do with international development and should remain a separate activity from humanitarian work. Therefore, while it is important for IR to demonstrate and maintain its faith identity and meet the expectation of its religious donors, the primary focus of the organisation will always be the needs of the poor and vulnerable.

In conclusion, Islamic Relief's vision, mission and practice are inspired by Islamic teaching and values. The organisation demonstrates its faith identity through its activities which cater for faith-based donations, its faith-based approach to social development, its faith-compliant and -inspired projects, and finally by promoting Islamic perspectives on international development issues such as international debt, governance and HIV/AIDS. It seeks to be both true to its faith and at the same time adhere to international humanitarian and accountability standards. It intentionally and explicitly integrates Islam's perspectives with professional relief and development.

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