

Between international donors and local faith communities: Intermediaries in humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon

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This paper explores the crucial part that faith-based organisations (FBOs) play in acting as intermediaries between international donors and local faith communities (LFCs) implementing humanitarian relief projects for Syrian refugees. Humanitarian responses to the mounting Syrian refugee crisis have coincided with greater collaboration between international donors and LFCs. This cooperation often is facilitated by a complex web of non-state intermediaries at the international, national, and local level. This study probes the breadth of roles of these intermediaries, drawing on primary data from case studies of two Christian intermediaries supporting Christian LFCs as they deliver aid primarily to Muslim Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. The results of the study are connected to the wider literature on LFCs in humanitarian response, revealing how intermediaries address issues of accountability, capacity-building, impartiality, neutrality, and professionalism. The paper concludes by offering suggestions for further research on intermediaries as key actors in the localisation of humanitarian assistance.

Keywords: capacity-building, disaster relief, faith, faith-based aid, humanitarian principles, intermediaries, Jordan, Lebanon, localisation, Syrian refugees

Introduction

This paper explores the breadth of the roles played by humanitarian intermediaries using case studies of two Christian organisations supporting local faith communities (LFCs)¹ working with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. The ongoing civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, and its accompanying refugee crisis have captured the attention of the world. The

¹ The term faith-based organisation is understood differently in different contexts. It is employed here as a broad label to describe all registered organisations that engage in humanitarian work with a faith motivation, either international or local (Clarke, 2007). In contrast, local faith communities are places or communities of worship that may also participate in humanitarian action (Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager, 2015).

violence has created what Antonio Guterres, then head of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), described in 2015 as the ‘biggest refugee population from a single population in a generation’ (Clayton, 2015). More than one-half of all Syrians fled their homes between 2011 and 2015, and in excess of four million sought refuge in neighbouring countries, primarily Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Clayton, 2015).

To respond to the massive needs presented by the crisis, a humanitarian aid infrastructure grew quickly, with international organisations establishing offices in the region, new local humanitarian entities being created, and already established charities scaling up or redefining their missions. The combined funding appeal for 2016 alone amounted to USD 4.5 billion, for the provision of support to refugees and to the communities hosting them in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; a further USD 3.2 billion was requested for humanitarian aid inside Syria (UNHCR, 2017; UNOCHA, 2017). Most of the official funding was designated either for bilateral aid to host governments or for international aid providers, including agencies of the United Nations (UN) and large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as CARE and Save the Children.

The large-scale humanitarian response has included a network of many types of humanitarian actors: governmental and private donors; international humanitarian agencies; national governments; and national and local organisations. The Syria Refugee Regional Response section of UNHCR’s Operational Portal lists more than 100 official humanitarian bodies that are partnering UNHCR in delivering aid to Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2017). These include international faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as Caritas, Islamic Relief, and World Vision.² Many of these humanitarian actors, however, have also partnered with national NGOs or other members of local civil society. Since the outset of the crisis, many Muslim and Christian international FBOs have been providing assistance to Syrian refugees and to host communities in Jordan and Lebanon, and not all of these have engaged in some way or to some extent with international humanitarian actors (El Nakib and Ager, 2015).

This mobilisation is taking place in a wider context of a renewed focus on the ‘localisation’ of humanitarian aid. The call for localisation springs from recognition that the humanitarian system is not fit for purpose, that is, to meet the challenges presented by complex crises (Bennett, Donini, and Maxwell, 2016), owing in part to its top-down and

² It is difficult to gauge accurately the extent of the contribution of FBOs (international and local) to the humanitarian system, but it is significant (Gingerich, Moore, and Beriont, 2017). Many international FBOs raise funds outside of the formal humanitarian system, and much of the funding for international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is passed to international and local FBOs (Cohen and Gingerich, 2015, p. 16).

internationally-led structure (Cohen and Gingerich, 2015). During the consultation period for the UN World Humanitarian Summit 2016, several aid organisations drafted an initiative, called Charter for Change, ‘to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response’ (Charter4Change, 2015). One of its commitments is to pass on 20 per cent of all humanitarian funding to local and national organisations by 2018. At the World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain document, signed by major governmental and non-governmental humanitarian donors, committed to 25 per cent of aid being transferred to local actors by 2020 (Australian Aid et al., 2016). This promised shift raises questions about the boundaries between international and local, as well as how the humanitarian system can be more attuned to local priorities and building local capacity while leveraging funds from international donors.

Increasingly, humanitarian agencies are seeing religious communities, including international and local FBOs and LFCs, which fit the description of local actors, as important partners.³ There is an expanding body of literature outlining the nature of faith-based humanitarianism, highlighting the advantages that LFCs enjoy in delivering aid. As they are already established in affected communities at the commencement of a crisis, and have strong local relationships, they are able to mobilise an assistance programme quickly, often demonstrating a deep cultural awareness and integrating a spiritual dimension into their activities (Gaillard and Texier, 2010, p. 82; Wisner, 2010, p. 129; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013, p. 4). LFCs may have access to funding streams other than those of the institutional donors on which many other humanitarian actors depend (Wuthnow and Offutt, 2008). Such funds commonly are extremely flexible, which helps LFCs to act swiftly and in accordance with the priorities that they identify rather than those that may have been set by a donor on another continent that is unfamiliar with the context (Clarke, 2007; James, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Kirmani, 2012).

Local FBOs, and in particular LFCs, have been found to rely more on local staff who are not as costly as expatriate personnel. More importantly, local actors often share cultural proximity with recipients of aid. Their location can help them to develop more relevant and effective distribution mechanisms than international humanitarian organisations with limited experience of the local environment (Amarasiri de Silva, 2009, p. 258; De Cordier, 2009, p. 617). Research conducted in Sri Lanka by Amarasiri de Silva (2009) and Korf et al. (2010) in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami found that local faith-based actors could

³ See endnote one.

navigate local cultural complexities better than international humanitarian organisations new to the scene. Beyond other local grassroots NGOs, LFCs frequently are an integral part of a community's social structure, and may have existed for decades or even generations in the same location in a highly visible facility. This integration into the fibre of affected communities positions them well for engaging in humanitarian work when a crisis happens.

At the same time, the developing relationship between international donors and local groups comes with a range of challenges with respect to donor pressure, funding restrictions, and motivation. There is suspicion among members of the international humanitarian community that LFCs will not adhere to humanitarian principles, particularly those of impartiality and neutrality.⁴ Furthermore, these principles are understood differently by different actors. As Zaman (2012, p. S135) notes, 'international humanitarian organisations, including the United Nations (UN) agencies, simply do not share a common "script" with certain local faith-based aid providers'. What is more, their cultural embeddedness may make it difficult for local faith-motivated actors to make decisions based on need rather than on local power dynamics (De Cordier, 2009, p. 619; Korf et al., 2010, p. S70).

There is also concern that local FBOs, including LFCs, may choose their beneficiaries selectively, prioritising members of their own faith community (Ferris, 2005; Clarke, 2007; Orji, 2011), or engage in proselytisation, that is, taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of their beneficiaries to entice them into certain behaviour or action, such as a change in religion (Jayasinghe, 2007; James, 2011). Indeed, research on the topic has emphasised increasingly that the concept of 'disaster evangelism' is highly contested and complex (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011, pp. 534–535) and that the intentions of the faith-based aid provider and the perceptions of the recipient may differ (Korf et al., 2010, p. S70). Furthermore, the local complexities of the context in which aid is provided mean that sometimes preferential selection of beneficiaries may be inevitable (De Cordier, 2009, p. 614). Nonetheless, members of the international humanitarian community regularly cite these accusations as key concerns regarding the work of faith-based actors (Ahmed, 2005; Bush, Fountain, and Feener, 2015; Lynch and Schwarz, 2016).

Apropos donor relations, there is some concern that LFCs may not honour the wishes

⁴ The four principles of humanity, impartiality, independence, and neutrality have guided international humanitarian action for several decades. They are enshrined in documents such as *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief* (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1994), and the more recent 2017 *Humanitarian Charter*, which is part of The Sphere Project's standards for humanitarian action (see <http://www.sphereproject.org/> (last accessed on 16 April 2018)).

of their donors for humanitarian accountability,⁵ either through neglect or because of conflicting priorities (Kirmani, 2012; Leurs, 2012), although other scholars have suggested that this may be better understood as LFCs' higher commitment to comprehending and meeting the needs of the affected communities than to the specific expectations of donors' (De Cordier, 2009; Korf et al., 2010; Zaman, 2012). In a further complication, donors may not always distinguish LFCs from other types of FBOs (Jeavons, 2004), while in highly religious settings, as in much of the developing world, community members may not distinguish FBOs from secular organisations (Sparre and Petersen, 2007; Leurs, 2012). These factors make it difficult to measure the actual impact of different types of FBOs (Ferris, 2011, p. 610).

As the war in Syria increased in intensity, most Syrian refugees migrated to neighbouring countries in the Middle East, with the largest numbers leaving in 2013. Most (91 per cent as of 31 December 2017) live not in UN-administered camps, but in local communities (UNHCR, 2017), creating opportunities for LFCs to become directly involved in delivering services. Donors are eager to channel funds through local institutions, but the complex dynamics outlined above challenge effective action. To augment donor engagement with LFCs, a set of individuals, organisations, and networks has emerged to play the part of intermediary.

While the concept of a non-state intermediary is commonly understood in humanitarian parlance as an entity that somehow brokers a relationship between affected communities, and aid providers or donors (Korf et al., 2010), there has been limited scholarly investigation into the varying roles of intermediaries. Indeed, there is not even a common shared definition of an 'intermediary'. In the literature on humanitarian aid, common themes are their crucial involvement in humanitarian supply chains (Oloruntoba and Gray, 2006; Overstreet et al., 2011), their function in ensuring the security of international aid workers (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver, 2006), and their influence on the outcomes of humanitarian aid, that is, towards or, more often, away from sustainable development (Lewis, 1998; Lewis

⁵ The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (Core Humanitarian Standard, 2014) provides benchmarks as a means of improving accountability to recipients of assistance. The nine quality criterion are: humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant; resources are managed and used responsibly for their intended purpose; humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve; humanitarian response is coordinated and complementary; complaints are welcomed and addressed; humanitarian response is based on communication, participation, and feedback; humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects; staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably; and humanitarian response is effective and timely.

and Mosse, 2006) or political stability (Okumu, 2003; Amarasiri de Silva, 2009; Menkhaus, 2010). These discussions often focus on state actors, and do not analyse the roles of intermediaries as potential assets for or barriers to localising humanitarian assistance.

By choosing to support the local delivery of humanitarian aid rather than supply it themselves, these intermediaries play a crucial part in scaling up the localisation of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. To explore the breadth of roles of intermediaries, two case studies were selected of intermediary organisations supporting Christian LFCs working with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. The study begins by detailing the methods employed for them, and reporting on the results of interviews with and observations of intermediaries and LFCs. The paper goes on to discuss how these findings apply to the wider literature on LFCs, and concludes by offering recommendations for further research on intermediaries as key actors in between the priorities of international donors and local implementers in the humanitarian system.

Methods

To probe the roles of intermediaries in facilitating humanitarian aid to refugees, two case studies were selected of organisations that have chosen to work with local LFCs rather than implement programmes directly themselves. To identify them, the authors focused on the two countries with the largest ratio of Syrian refugee populations: Lebanon and Jordan. As of mid-2017, approximately one million Syrians were registered as refugees in Lebanon, all of whom were living outside of formal camps, either in informal tented settlements (ITSs) or within host communities. Around 660,000 were in Jordan, of whom 140,000 were in formal camps; the majority were living among host communities (UNHCR, 2017). In addition, an unknown number of unregistered refugees had fled to these countries. In Lebanon, this represents an increase of nearly 25 per cent on its pre-crisis population, and in Jordan, a rise of about 10 per cent (UNHCR, 2017). The Lebanese and Jordanian economies have suffered owing to the strain of such rapid population growth, and these nations are overwhelmed by the enormous needs of the refugees, many of whom arrived with little other than the clothing in which they stood.

Although there are many examples of Christian and Muslim faith communities supplying aid to refugees (El Nakib and Ager, 2015), this study is limited to Christian intermediaries. This permits an exploration of the unique challenges raised by Western donors from historically Christian countries in providing funding to local Middle Eastern Christians, who are offering aid primarily to Muslim refugees. Established Christian communities in

Lebanon and Jordan have a long history of humanitarian support for refugees, both Christian and Muslim. For instance, the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches has been in operation since 1952, and currently supports Iraqi, Palestinian, and Syrian refugees in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, and Lebanon. Owing to their religious ties to Christian-majority countries, many FBOs in the Middle East access funds managed by large Christian international NGOs in Australia, Canada, Europe, or the United States. Although many of these international NGOs access institutional donor funds, frequently they rely most heavily on private individual donations raised through religious networks.

One organisation was selected in Jordan and Lebanon that explicitly supports Christian FBOs and LFCs in providing humanitarian assistance to refugees, mostly Syrian and Muslim.⁶ The Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) is a national faith-based organisation working directly with Christian LFCs in the country. The Jordan Syria Lebanon Sub-regional Forum (JSL) is a large international network of churches and church-related organisations (FBOs and LFCs) in Jordan operating under the umbrella of the ACT Alliance, a global Christian membership-led organisation that coordinates its members' aid, development, and advocacy activities.

The LSESD, an NGO established by the Baptist Society, has a relief and development division that has partnered with 18 churches to provide food and other types of aid to Syrian refugees, with funding from institutional donors.⁷ LSESD staff saw themselves as mediating between donors and local Lebanese churches. Many implementing church partners were based in neighbourhoods where the presence of larger humanitarian actors was limited, thus filling an important gap in aid provision. The data for this paper were collected in tandem with an external programmatic evaluation, conducted in August 2014 for the LSESD. This was at the peak of its response programme, when the LSESD was beginning to think of commencing some early recovery activities in addition to providing emergency aid. Six of its partners were visited, and interviews were held with a total of 13 Lebanese church pastors or members involved in refugee assistance, 7 donor representatives, and 9 LSESD staff members.

⁶ Although exact figures were not available, the LFCs in both case studies also supported Palestinian refugees (especially when Syrian refugees settled in Palestinian camps), and some of the LFCs in Jordan also supported Iraqi refugees (primarily Christian) fleeing territories captured by the so-called Islamic State.

⁷ The LSESD expanded its work with refugees under a programme entitled MERATH (Middle East Revive and Thrive) in 2017.

The JSL was set up in 2012 to coordinate the response of its member churches and church-related organisations delivering aid to Syrian refugees. It brings together member organisations in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, including national churches and national and regional FBOs, and connects them with its international members to fund the work of members and their partners that are implementing humanitarian responses in these three countries. JSL members are also members of the ACT Alliance. All members of the ACT Alliance are affiliated with the World Council of Churches or the Lutheran World Federation. The organisation is administered by a global secretariat with offices in El Salvador, Jordan, Kenya, Switzerland, Thailand, and the US.

Although it coordinates regional responses, the JSL meets regularly in Amman, and the research was conducted with partners in Jordan. The data from JSL were collected between September and November 2015, after a couple of years of intense humanitarian programming as part of the Syria response. The wide portfolio of projects included the provision of education and psychosocial support, food vouchers, healthcare, and shelter rehabilitation. The data are based on interviews with four of the JSL's implementing partners, two ACT Alliance secretariat staff, three donor representatives, and two site visits to local aid distribution centres. All participants agreed to take part in the study on the condition that it would only mention the name of the intermediary, and not the names of specific donors or local partners.

Results

Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development

The LSESD's funding came primarily from Christian NGOs based in countries from the Global North, including Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the US, as well as from limited direct donations from churches around the world. Many of its donors expected the LSESD to adhere to internationally recognised humanitarian principles. LSESD staff wrote all proposals and project reports on behalf of local partners, and with the exception of one implementing partner, the LSESD managed all financial transactions directly. In practice, this meant that the LSESD signed contracts with local supermarket vendors and then gave food vouchers to churches for distribution.

The LSESD issued churches with clear guidelines on beneficiary selection, using vulnerability criteria, distribution procedures, and verification of voucher use, emphasising in particular the concept of 'non-conditionality', that is, impartial aid provision to the most vulnerable without any conditions imposed, such as church attendance. Within these

parameters, churches were expected to develop their own projects and distribution mechanisms. LSESD staff regularly engaged in capacity-building and in the mentoring of church leaders and volunteers, as well as in LSESD-sponsored training events for partners on topics such as child protection, humanitarian principles, and project management.

Overall, LSESD staff maintained that their role was to bear the administrative and bureaucratic load of humanitarian operations in order to, in the words of the then director, 'let the church be the church'. They saw their role principally as assuming the burden of management and ensuring humanitarian programming quality, so that churches could provide aid directly to beneficiaries in a way that fit their identity as churches.

An LSESD donor highlighted that this role was mutually beneficial, not only for local communities but also for Christian donors in other countries:

I see LSESD as a facilitator of local churches, as a conduit of global resources to local churches, and of local church resources to the global church: bringing learning from the suffering church to the affluent church (LSESD donor, 2014).

One LSESD staff member referred to his role as that of 'marriage broker', helping to match donors to projects, but, perhaps more crucially, matching partners with donors who shared their values. For example, some local churches placed a higher emphasis on their religious activities than others, and similarly, some donors were looking for more explicitly 'Christian' programming than others; the LSESD helped to broker a relationship between such partners. Furthermore, the LSESD targeted donors who were more likely to be committed to long-term programming: since local churches typically are engaged in their communities over the long term, most were looking for donors that would maintain a relationship beyond the immediate humanitarian response.

To facilitate this relationship-building, the LSESD held meetings for all of its implementing partners and invited them to centralised training events. One LSESD staff member observed that she saw this as a key part of the organisation's role: '[w]e keep saying that churches should be churches, not NGOs. We are the NGO. So the onus should be on us to connect them better'. The LSESD facilitated this coordination between partners because they were a trusted intermediary. For instance, while churches often were reticent to share beneficiary lists with one another, they did so regularly with the LSESD. Consequently, the organisation was developing a means by which it could crosscheck beneficiaries itself.

LSESD partners often found that they were the first port of call for aid seekers. One

church volunteer reported that when he hears of protection needs:

I try to help. There is [the Lebanese NGO] Himaya . . . [and] UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund]. With some families they intervened . . . but some families won't let groups like Himaya or UNICEF in. They just want us, the church, people that they know (local church volunteer, 2014).

As a result, it was advantageous for the partner to have connections to the wider humanitarian community through the LSESD.

The LSESD itself demonstrated limited engagement with UNHCR and other international humanitarian coordination mechanisms, believing that, as a small NGO in Lebanon, participation in these mechanisms at the national level was time-consuming and yielded limited benefit for its programme. Nonetheless, LSESD staff members encouraged local partners to reach out to UNHCR at the local level, and they supported local partners in identifying refugees not benefiting from UNHCR assistance and in encouraging official registration as refugees.

One repeated theme in the research with the LSESD was that its partners highlighted how the body invested in them on a personal level:

They trust us, come and listen, and get our vision. We are not an organisation; we are a team in a church. LSESD and [the director] checked our work. We appreciate his trust. He didn't let on to any doubt about our ability to do our work; he just encouraged us (local church leader, 2014).

Another partner commented that the LSESD had gradually increased its food voucher allotment as the church proved its ability to implement the project.

Taking responsibility for the administrative burden of humanitarian assistance was particularly important for the LSESD, as few of its local partners had any experience of the processes associated with humanitarian aid. LSESD staff, for their part, took great pride in freeing up churches to implement activities without being encumbered by donor requirements. The LSESD assumed responsibility for all proposal writing, reporting, financial management, and donor liaising connected to its funded projects. Programme personnel worked hard to write and revise reports according to donor requirements. When partners sent them materials that were considered poor by donor standards, they wrote, rewrote, and hunted down additional information. Some donors, in turn, expressed their appreciation of the high-quality data analysis and detailed financial reporting submitted by the LSESD.

Yet, the LSESD itself had only three years' experience of implementing donor-funded projects at the time of this study, and so was still developing its own internal capacity and understanding of humanitarian expectations and language. Since LSESD staff expressed a strong desire to implement effective humanitarian programming, some donors were working with them to strengthen their management capacity in line with the standards of the humanitarian sphere.

Even with this support in place, church partners, who were not accustomed to the procedures considered as normal in most donor-funded humanitarian programmes, frequently found the LSESD's reporting requirements onerous. One church leader, for instance, complained about the need to maintain receipts and copies of all cheques, and to follow rules pertaining to signatures on distribution sheets and vouchers. He felt that this demonstrated a lack of trust and of understanding on the part of the LSESD with regard to the capacity of churches to follow these procedures, without acknowledging that these are considered to be bare minimum requirements in the commodified process of donor-funded humanitarian work.

Other partners recognised and appreciated that the LSESD shouldered most of the procedural responsibility on behalf of its church partners. Despite working with 18 churches, the LSESD only identified one of them as having the capacity to and interest in engaging directly with donors; the LSESD was slowly transferring responsibility to that church. This model freed up church members, almost all of whom were working as volunteers, to dedicate more time to beneficiary coordination, distribution, and home visits. Commenting on the tendency of local partners to work tirelessly, risking burnout at times, one of the LSESD's donors noted:

If one person [working for the local partner] can't manage the work well enough because of the issue of boundaries, maybe LSESD should scale down the project, or negotiate with the pastor to delegate duties (LSESD donor, 2014).

Indeed, the LSESD has earned the respect of some of its donors by refusing funding, explaining that the partners' capacity was not appropriate or sufficient for the terms of the grant. They suggested that they were quite protective of their partners, not wanting them to take on more responsibility than they could handle, or spread their capacities too thin. Church partners appreciated and struggled with this; they expressed a strong desire to be able to serve more people who came to them in need, while also wanting to provide high-quality holistic services to their beneficiaries with a limited number of volunteers.

Another reason why donors have been open to working with the LSESD, with its network of mostly evangelical churches as implementing partners, was the humanitarian expertise of some LSESD personnel who had worked for respected international NGOs in the past. ‘This intrigued me from the start and has kept me engaged’, explained one donor representative. He continued:

Increasingly, it is important to be able to speak ‘humanitarian’ language and also live [out] the Kingdom of Christ. It is a challenge with local [community-based organisations]—they don’t understand the language. Some have told stories of conversion and evangelisation in a way that could really get us in trouble (LSESD donor, 2014).

To address such concerns, the LSESD invested time in creating a ‘theology’ of humanitarian assistance, and increasingly was reframing humanitarian training content in overtly religious terms that would seem more relevant to church members than content typically delivered to NGO staff. The then director of the LSESD’s relief division, an experienced humanitarian with a background in international NGOs, had theological training and was working with pastors to develop ways of explaining humanitarian values in a way that would resonate with church leaders and members. One LSESD staff member said that, after facilitating some training events for church partners, she learned that:

I can’t establish the faith bit [justification for the training topic], then revert to the [humanitarian] standards. I need to stay in the faith realm throughout the training. The standards are more like the legal protection, while the faith values guide choices (LSESD staff member, 2014).

She reframed her training to use Biblical references and Christian values throughout to demonstrate the importance of adhering to humanitarian standards. Interestingly, there was little indication that the LSESD was systematically seeking to educate secular humanitarians or to teach its donors about religious literacy (Gingerich, Moore, and Beriont, 2017), although it did try to help raise their awareness of and enhance their sensitivity to differences in ways of thinking between their church partners and their other humanitarian partners. The head of one of the LSESD’s evangelical church partners commented on this stance:

We can’t work, that is, partner, with someone who doesn’t know who I am. God is our audience. And if they start doubting our work, or putting conditions on us, we will stop the partnership (local pastor, 2014).

One of the LSESD's donors said that they subsume humanitarian work into their understanding of Christian ministry, using the motto:

If Christ is Lord, then nothing is secular. Being Christian impacts all areas of life; we don't just have one agenda: we should serve food with integrity, and be good partners (LSESD donor, 2014).

In fact, among the LSESD and its partners, many felt that they were adding an additional layer of quality to their adherence of humanitarian principles, by building relationships with beneficiaries and not simply providing them with aid. LSESD partners often emphasised the importance of spending time listening to refugees and generating relationships of trust. One partner described this approach as different from that of larger organisations, which are sometimes perceived as less respectful:

We treat beneficiaries with respect. When they come in to the centre, we stand up, shake their hands, offer them a seat. This is different from the UN and their partners, who even refer to the refugees as 'animals' (local church worker, 2014).

Another way in which the LSESD sought to ensure the dignity of beneficiaries was by ensuring ethical treatment of beneficiaries and promoting mutual respect during donor and media visits. One LSESD staff member described the process of putting together a promotional booklet:

I sent staff back to request consent of every person whose picture we used. We, Lebanese, have been displaced, too. I don't want my pictures used! So I get the importance . . . [but] a write-up, depending on what is written, can cause harm (LSESD staff member, 2014).

Many LSESD and partner staff similarly emphasised their commitment to preserving the dignity of beneficiaries.

The ACT Alliance's Jordan Syria Lebanon Sub-regional Forum

Since 2012, the JSL has coordinated an annual appeal (USD 7 million in 2014) to its partners in donor countries, most of whom are Christian churches and FBOs. The appeal matches donor members with field-based members who are delivering humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. Local members work with church structures, other FBOs (Christian and of other

faiths), and community leaders in collaboration with national governments to distribute aid to affected populations without distinction based on political or religious affiliation, or other status. JSL members meet monthly to harmonise their responses and to share relevant information. As the Forum has developed, member organisations have increased the level of cooperation with each other, from sharing responsibilities for stakeholder meetings with the Government of Jordan and UNHCR, to the geographical coordination of aid distribution.

The JSL's main intermediary role was, therefore, to network FBOs of varying sizes and mandates, and to assist them in complementing one another's capacities to maximise the implementation abilities of Christian aid providers in Jordan. It created a wide-reaching network where international donors and local providers could jointly establish, fund, and instigate humanitarian projects to support refugees.

Partners and JSL coordinators reported that participating in consortia projects funded by institutional donors strengthened their credibility and programmatic stability, both as ACT Alliance and as member organisations. Since many ACT Alliance members were also donors from the Global North, they contributed to the appeal and sought funds themselves from other members of the Alliance and outside donors. Importantly, these consortia could access funds not available to individual members, owing to minimum funding requirements as well as the need for knowledge of donor procedures. For instance, the JSL was able to apply to a large European Union (EU) fund for which many of the local partners would not be eligible. Although this initial bid was unsuccessful, the positive experience of shared proposal writing led to the members agreeing to pursue EU money in the future.

Through such endeavours, the JSL brought together faith-based humanitarian actors (working side-by-side in Jordan) who previously had minimal contact with one another, and also facilitated networking among organisations new to the context. One JSL partner described this connecting process:

[The JSL] has given us the opportunity to become closer to other [ACT member organisations] in the region. For organisations that are more newly arrived, having organisations with [a] longer-term presence helps (JSL implementing member, 2015).

Numerous JSL partners commented on how coming together for joint programming began a process of closer coordination and collaboration between the various members. A JSL partner described one project:

We each took a geographical area, but we shared our beneficiary lists to ensure that there was no overlap. This encourages us to work together physically, not just with meetings (JSL implementing member, 2015).

The Forum also facilitated partnerships beyond the ACT Alliance network itself. One partner reported that they had worked together to introduce a new model for partnering with the Jordanian government to subsidise food distribution at UNHCR and UN World Food Programme coordination meetings. Their idea was adopted by other humanitarian agencies as well as by other JSL members. This engagement in coordination at various levels helped to ensure that best practices were shared more widely than would be the case without intermediaries. Another partner reported that they organised their distribution of aid through local committees composed of Jordanian, Palestinian, and Syrian women. The committees identified specific needs in the local community and then organised the distribution of aid based on that local knowledge.

In addition, the JSL supported its partners through training, actively identifying such needs via its members, and developing accordingly a capacity-building programme. It also helped to arrange specific training events based on requests from partners. One JSL member explained:

We are strong in some interventions and others are strong in other interventions. In these cases, we train each other's staff on areas of expertise (JSL implementing member, 2015).

The JSL also facilitated joint monitoring activities and coordinated the evaluations of all participants in the annual appeal process. As waves of Iraqi and Syrian refugees fled towards Jordan, the JSL immediately conducted or facilitated rapid needs assessments, using its local contacts with government officials and other humanitarian actors to acquire a broad understanding of requirements on the ground, and then worked with implementing partners to design programming according to identified priorities. In Jordan, ACT Alliance members liaised regularly with government ministries to maintain good knowledge of projects that were likely to receive governmental approval. One JSL donor member sent a proposal writer to develop an appeal on behalf of all of its partners in a timely fashion, and in compliance with the expectations of the humanitarian community.

The JSL tried to avoid setting onerous prerequisites for implementing partners when possible, although increasing requirements often were difficult to avoid owing to shifting

donor expectations. One donor, an alliance member, said that sometimes:

We have to contact the partner and ask for more information. It doesn't feel right because we don't want to be a burden. We would like to see a mechanism where everything was in there because they only have to do it once without the extra burden (JSL donor, 2015).

The JSL also coordinated visits of photographers on behalf of donors and the media, and accompanied them to make sure that they were aware of local sensitivities.

Many local partner staff members received training in accountability processes and humanitarian guidelines from the JLSF. According to one donor, this was important because 'it would hurt us so much' if local partners were to fail to demonstrate respect for humanitarian values in the language used to describe their projects. She added:

Then, on the other hand, I think this is something that we go and worry about a lot, maybe too much. We get this pressure from Europe where people are secular and suspicious towards you because you are a church and they immediately check and control you more than maybe [a secular organisation] . . . which is something that they should do for everyone. It's not just the churches. Of course there are risks. But then I think that for many of the local churches, this is not an issue. It's in their sort of minds and the way they work to include everyone in their work (JSL donor, 2015).

In the interviews conducted for this research, JSL partners spoke about their respect for humanitarian values, including the contentious issue of impartiality. One partner explained the concept of impartiality using Christian language:

My aim is to positively contribute to changing the vulnerable lives regardless of their background, religion, race, colour, or nationality. We are here to respond to the call of our Lord through helping others to reach a better life, assist them to overcome their poverty and suffering, empower the oppressed and the overlooked human being. Jesus said, 'Whatever you have done to my humble brothers, you did to Me' (JSL implementing member, 2015).

Furthermore, the JSL and its partners felt that their Christian values added an additional degree of depth to their ability to adhere to humanitarian principles. As one JSL member stated:

Donors' language is more materialistic, but with our Christian-humanitarian language, we can convert this materialistic concept into more humanitarian and development language (JSL implementing

member, 2015).

A partner suggested that, as Christians, they had in fact gained a reputation among the wider community, most of whom are Muslim, as humanitarians:

Whenever you go to [refugee] camps it is common to hear . . . ‘these Christians are honest’ . . . they trust us because we are going to come back . . . so this changes the idea [preconception of Christians] and makes us more acceptable for the people. And for us it is good because I am working for the presence for my children [in the region in the future] (JSL implementing member, 2015).

JSL partners frequently referred to their concern to improve inter-communal relations, such as between Christians and Muslims, as well as between Jordanians, Palestinians, and Syrians, in the areas where they work.

Discussion

The interviews and observations of the work of the LSESD and JSL unearthed key themes about the scope and roles that intermediaries play. Within the flows of humanitarian aid from donors to Syrian refugees, there exists a complex web of intermediaries at multiple levels. The LSESD appears to fulfil a simpler role than the JSL as a broker between a specific set of LFCs (Christian churches in Lebanon) and Western private donors. Yet, each of these donors regularly is an intermediary as well, raising money from their respective donors, and many LFCs also receive funding from other donors, which adds to the number of intermediaries for each local church.

Rather than a simple donor–intermediary–recipient relationship as often depicted in the humanitarian literature (Korf et al., 2010, p. S72), there is a complicated network of intermediaries operating in a liminal space (Heathershaw, 2016) at the international, national, and local level. In this middle space, intermediaries play a vital part in determining the quantity and quality of humanitarian assistance. For example, the JSL interacts with Western and Middle Eastern church donors, and with international FBOs, national FBOs, and national church bodies, to channel funds to local partner LFCs and community organisations. Some of the donor organisations are European churches, which received funding from governments, accompanied by additional layers of accountability.

Returning to the literature on the LFCs, it is interesting to reflect on how the intermediaries in this study are involved in navigating humanitarian challenges. Within the

complex humanitarian system, intermediaries such as the JSL and the LSESD enhance connections between donors and implementers. The LSESD acted as a marriage broker, pairing international donors with suitable LFCs that had the capacity and desire to deliver aid to refugees in their communities. With its broader network, the JSL could streamline the aid delivery process, moving from multiple organisations with separate sets of donors and local partners to a shared hub for joint funding bids.

At the national and local level, the JSL and the LSESD increased collaborative responses by helping local partners to build relationships that enabled them to share learning and to cooperate in aid delivery. Through coordination, they augmented their geographic coverage and minimised beneficiary duplication. These local and relational links in turn facilitated the delivery of aid to vulnerable populations that potentially could be missed by other providers. Furthermore, activating these joint responses also boosted local partners' external coordination with other humanitarian actors. The JSL and the LSESD chose to encourage their local partners to coordinate with other humanitarian actors directly rather than be their representatives, and support them in doing so, helping to improve relational ties between local actors. These connecting actions can increase accountability and decrease duplication of services at the local level, a major challenge in humanitarian programmes (Bush, Fountain, and Feener, 2015, p. 20).

To address concerns about the limited capacity of LFCs (Ferris, 2005; Jayasinghe, 2007), both intermediaries invested heavily in capacity-building. Formal training was combined with informal mentoring, often through relational investment by mentoring, regular visits, and an assortment of personal interactions. Rather than giving unconditional approval, they developed trust by investing in relations that enabled mentoring and ongoing capacity-building. Donors are rightly concerned about a lack of professionalism of local actors (Ferris, 2011; Paras and Stein, 2012), and for many of the LFCs in this study, the expectations of international humanitarian donors were difficult to understand and meet. The LSESD and the JSL helped to normalise these expectations by taking partial responsibility for the administrative burden of humanitarian assistance, and helping local partners to incorporate processes of accountability, and increase their fluency in donor and humanitarian languages.

These intermediaries used their position in the middle to maintain an understanding of each donor's specific requirements, and they communicated these requirements regularly to implementing partners in a way that resonated with the capacity of the partners. Hence, they helped partners gradually to develop their capacity to operate in the humanitarian sphere. It is doubtful whether, in most cases, the local churches or community organisations could have

run grant-funded projects without the direct support of intermediaries, but, in isolated instances, some were in fact developing that capability.

There is a tender balance to be drawn, however, between perceived professionalisation to activate local capacity and the instrumentalisation of local communities (Baker and Miles-Watson, 2010; Baker, 2012; Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager, 2015). This study identified a tension between capacity-building and 'letting the church be the church'. If LFCs and other local groups become professional humanitarian actors, will they cease to function as institutions with wider aims, serving others beyond refugees (Korf et al., 2010)? Many participants in this research felt that it would be inappropriate to expect churches to develop as aid providers because their primary function, that is, their reason for existence, is worship and offering moral support to their members and the wider community. For instance, if a pastor manages a humanitarian response, he/she may have less time to teach or mentor congregants; if a church facility is being used as a distribution centre or as a school for refugees, it may not be available for religious teaching or choir practise.

Many churches saw this crisis as a specific moment in history and were willing to prioritise humanitarian objectives for a season, but not all church members wanted to support the humanitarian work, and most church leaders were aware that they were appointed to offer religious teaching and guidance, not aid provision. Furthermore, the influx of finances altered the operating budgets of churches significantly, and intermediaries were concerned that they not restructure entirely in response to a temporary rise. Thus, in some cases, attempts to normalise funding requirements added another layer of bureaucracy rather than streamlining the process. This bureaucracy may necessitate adjusting financial management systems, creating or modifying bank accounts, hiring administrative staff, and a host of other labour-intensive systematic changes with the potential to transform LFCs with grassroots community structures into something resembling NGOs.

Adhering to the principle of neutrality often looks different at the local community level in Jordan and Lebanon than it may to donors in Geneva, Switzerland, and New York, US. With their affiliation to a specific faith community, especially in confessional societies where politics and religion have interacted with one another in a variety of ways throughout the course of history, it could be argued that LFCs are not neutral actors. However, neutrality is complex, and faith-based actors may contend conversely that they are more neutral than institutionally-funded aid providers because they are able to maintain financial independence from governmental and political entities. Furthermore, owing to their religious orientation, LFCs tend to express their aims and motivations using religious language, which secular

donors may interpret as a marker of partiality, that is, associating assistance with a religious agenda, while this may simply be the language that LFCs employ. These linguistic differences are an example of the different ‘scripts’ used by secular humanitarian donors and LFCs (Fiddyman-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Zaman, 2012).

As intermediaries, LSESD and JSL staff members seemed fluent in discourses such as those of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) and The Sphere Project (standards for humanitarian aid), and grounded in the Christian concepts used by LFCs such as the Great Commission and integral mission. For local partners, it was essential that any use of humanitarian language take into consideration, and be incorporated in, their religious language. As intermediaries, LSESD and JSL personnel transitioned seamlessly between a discourse full of religious terminology and ideas, and one more familiar to the humanitarian realm. Consequently, they could help local religious actors to understand better what was expected of them in humanitarian terms and equip them to engage with other humanitarians. They also helped donors to comprehend the ways in which local faith-motivated actors were respecting humanitarian principles, or at least attempting to do so, albeit framing the principles using different terms.

Fluent translators may obscure the differences in actions as well as function, potentially allowing LFCs to pursue unethical practices under the guise of cultural embeddedness (De Cordier, 2009). That churches might use the opportunity provided by aid to Muslim refugees for proselytisation (Jayasinghe, 2007; James, 2011) was a concern that arose frequently in interviews with intermediaries. In its mentoring and training with LFCs, the LSESD stressed that just as donors wield power over them, LFCs have the potential to wield power over their beneficiaries, and the humanitarian principles exist to mitigate such dynamics. Through training and mentoring they helped local partners to value increasingly ‘impartiality’, which the LSESD referred to as ‘non-conditionality’, by not placing any conditions on the behaviour of vulnerable beneficiaries to access aid, such as church attendance.

Interestingly, when studying Christian LFCs serving mostly Muslims, other aspects of liability and risk did not emerge as issues of great concern in Jordan and Lebanon, although there was frequent mention of the potential liability of partner organisations in providing aid inside Syria. This may be because proselytisation draws so much attention that it obscures other dangers; it may also be due in part to the religious affinity between Christian aid providers and their Western donors.

Proselytisation is not solely an issue for religious groups, however, as donors can use

their relative power to force LFCs to adopt or encourage practices that are not in keeping with the priorities of local communities, something that Lynch and Schwarz (2016, pp. 6–7) call ‘donor proselytism’. During the daily delivery of aid, the JSL and the LSESD sought to act as buffers between donors and implementing partners, balancing the inherent power dynamics entailed in those relationships. As the source of funds, donors potentially wield a great deal of power over their local partners. The JSL and the LSESD addressed this imbalance by defending local implementers’ limited capacity for documentation and reporting, and by offering alternative reporting systems that could satisfy partner capacity and donor requirements. In addition, they educated donors regularly in the context on the ground and in cultural sensitivity while on donor visits, and helped donors to understand the contextual reasons behind strategic decisions made by implementing partners.

In one central illustration of this buffering role, seeking to ensure a balance between the priorities of human dignity and professionalism, JSL and LSESD staff highlighted concerns about visits from donors, especially when photographs were involved. They comprehended the importance of imagery in fundraising and the desire to facilitate these visits, but also highlighted that photography is a sensitive activity among local partners and displaced families in the Middle East.

Related to this discussion of differing priorities is the challenge of accountability. How do LFCs balance accountability to recipients of aid, their constituents, and donors? Churches in Jordan and Lebanon have a set of values and priorities that frequently differ from those of humanitarian donors, and many said that those values needed to take priority. Intermediaries helped to negotiate between these differences in values (Ager and Ager, 2011; Kirmani, 2012; Leurs, 2012). A starting point for the LSESD’s local church partners was affirming the importance of local religious values; however, some Christian donors and larger Christian NGOs, like some JSL members, framed their work in slightly different terms that sought to reconcile Christian values with humanistic values, while still prioritising Christian values. The JSL and the LSESD thus helped local partners to frame their support for refugees in a way that aligned Christian and humanitarian values, and by so doing challenged LFCs to broaden their understanding of their role as Christians in their communities.

The LFCs in this study demonstrated different priorities that made their Christian identity highly visible. There is a recognition among faith-based actors in the Middle East that for them, as representatives of a minority religion, the Syrian refugee crisis has afforded them an opportunity to show solidarity with Muslims and to demonstrate their place in the community. Interviewees spoke about how their actions reflected on the reputation of the

entire Christian community, and they had a keen awareness of and concern for the impact of refugees and local responses on wider community relations. In this case, the awareness of local power dynamics (De Cordier, 2009, p. 619) enabled them to respond to the crisis with an eye towards sustainable community relations, an aspect that is easily overlooked in humanitarian responses (Amarasiri de Silva, 2009; Menkhaus, 2010).

Conclusion

This research explored the roles of intermediaries in the humanitarian aid system using two case studies in different contexts: (i) a national faith-based organisation working directly with LFCs in Lebanon; and (ii) an international network of FBOs and LFCs in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, cooperating on advocacy, aid, and development. During the interviews with staff members, local partners, and donors, numerous ways in which intermediaries influence directly the language, quality, scope, and shape of refugee assistance at the community level became apparent.

The findings of the study are limited by the extensiveness and the fuzzy boundaries of the humanitarian landscape. It is based on two case studies and it is restricted to mediation between international Western and local Middle Eastern Christian communities. Many local Muslim community-based organisations are deeply involved in humanitarian assistance in Jordan and Lebanon, and often they are recipients of funding from faith-based and secular donors (El Nakib and Ager, 2015). Studies that map a large proportion of humanitarian actors could explore the scale of intermediary-facilitated aid in a particular context of refugee response, and could analyse the makeup and structure of networks that channel large funding streams towards refugees. This research revealed principally examples of the potentially positive role that intermediaries can play, owing to the primary data being drawn from interviews with the actors themselves and their immediate donors and partners. Work that analyses the impact of intermediaries along the humanitarian aid chain would help to paint a more nuanced picture of the ways in which intermediaries influence the effectiveness of humanitarian projects.

This study raises two key questions about the localisation of humanitarian aid, one about definition and one about location. First, by paying attention to intermediaries at multiple levels, one may rightly ask who or what can be defined as 'local'. The localisation conversation has centred on transferring resources and building capacity at the national level (Charter4Change, 2015; Australian Aid et al., 2016). Organisations operating in capital cities are closer to local communities than are international organisations, but they may not be

better attuned to needs at the community level. Community-based organisations and LFCs are by definition based at the community level, but as they participate increasingly in large-scale humanitarian work, they may become more familiar with the priorities of humanitarian donors than with those of the recipients of aid. Alternatively, local actors may become more focused on meeting the needs of recipients of aid than on fulfilling other important community functions (Korf et al., 2010). By analysing the capabilities and roles of intermediaries, humanitarian actors and scholars can comprehend better the needs and priorities of donors and recipients of aid as they are negotiated in the spaces in-between.

The second key question raised by the study is where to locate debates on humanitarian principles. From the extreme ends of the humanitarian chain, the principles of impartiality and neutrality may be applied in such different ways as to seem incompatible. Shifting the discussion towards the middle spaces, where intermediaries facilitate flows of ideas and resources, could enable a better quality of dialogue about humanitarian values. In the massive refugee migration sparked by the Syrian war, the global humanitarian response will only be as effective as its local implementation in communities where refugees settle and sojourn. People who occupy the middle space between international donors and local implementers are crucial to a global response that can be effective in, and beneficial to, local communities.

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