

IDENTITY– BASED GIVING: A CASE STUDY OF ISLAMIC RELIEF

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) is an independent humanitarian and development organisation present in over 40 countries around the globe. Inspired by the Islamic faith, IRW has helped millions of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people since receiving our first donation from a young Muslim boy in 1984. Our projects include responding to emergencies, most recently in Syria, Yemen and Nepal, and providing sustainable solutions to long-term development challenges, through our disaster preparedness, education, livelihoods, water and sanitation and healthcare projects. We also run a number of seasonal projects centred on key elements of the Islamic calendar, such as Ramadan and Eid.

Despite the financial pressures placed on civil society organisations (CSOs) in recent years, in a context of increasing need and squeezed resources, as fundraisers are met with donor fatigue and economic recession, IRW's income has continued to grow. In 2012, IRW was the fifth largest private humanitarian fundraising organisation in the world, following only Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).¹

Arguably, IRW's continued growth under challenging circumstances can be partly attributed to aspects of our Islamic identity, which have allowed: access to a growing Muslim donor base that sees charitable giving as a religious obligation; unique access to beneficiary communities in complex environments, which in turn enables us to be the partner of choice for

numerous donors agencies; and access to new donor markets in the Middle East.

INDIVIDUAL DONORS

Charitable giving – both obligatory and voluntary – has an honoured status within the Islamic tradition. The payment of *zakat*, a form of annual almsgiving that is obligatory for all Muslims possessing a certain

which are promoted, emphasised and even mandated upon Muslims, such as the annual *zakat* payment, the annual donation of meat to the poor on Eid (*qurbani*) and the sponsoring of orphans. Many Muslim-majority countries have formal or informal social financing mechanisms to enable their Muslim citizens to fulfil these charitable obligations.⁴ However, for Muslims living as religious minorities in regions such as Europe or North America, the lack of such mechanisms creates a demand for charities that can support them to fulfil their religious requirements. IRW conducts the majority of its individual fundraising in countries wit

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amount of wealth, is listed as the third of Islam’s five pillars,² following only faith and prayer. Throughout the Qur’an, Muslims are repeatedly exhorted to “establish regular prayer and to practise regular charity.”³ This constant coupling of charity (a social obligation) with prayer (a spiritual obligation) demonstrates the sacred and essential nature of charitable giving as an act of worship, one that is central to the role of a Muslim’s sense of self and their relationship with God.

Whilst all charitable giving is encouraged and rewarded within Islam, there are particular forms of giving

Muslim minorities, such as Australia, Canada, Germany, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Collectively the Muslim populations of these countries amount to approximately 15 million people (not including the Muslim majority countries where we fundraise, such as Malaysia or across the Middle East). In many of the countries in which we fundraise, we are one of the largest Islamic-inspired humanitarian and development charities, and thus play a critical role in providing an accessible and professionalised service to enable Muslims to fulfil their charitable obligations.

As a humanitarian and development agency, IRW abides by the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, and does not discriminate on the grounds of race, political affiliation, gender or belief - values which also find their roots in Islamic teachings. Nonetheless, our unequivocally clear Islamic identity, demonstrated by our name and logo (a mosque dome with two minarets), enables us to build a particular relationship with Muslims, through a sense of shared identity. This is further bolstered by a sense of shared belief, as IRW's organisational values draw directly from Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings: *ikhlas* (sincerity), *ihsan* (excellence), *rahma* (compassion), *'adl* (social justice) and *amana* (custodianship). Focus groups with communities who donate to us, as well as the anecdotal evidence of our own staff, have indicated that people who donate feel a greater degree of trust in IRW than in non-Muslim agencies, specifically due to shared identity, faith and values. Whilst in the past IRW has been hesitant about over-emphasising our Islamic values, recently we've found that our growing confidence in using faith reference points or faith-sensitive language has resonated strongly with our supporters. The theme of our UK Ramadan fundraising campaign last year, *Alhamdulillah* ('praise be to God') received overwhelmingly positive feedback from our supporters, who identified with the spiritual language of charitable giving.

Furthermore, IRW runs a number of projects and campaigns that directly correlate with the religious charitable obligations and preferences of Muslim communities, some of which are outlined below.

1. ZAKAT

As mentioned earlier, *zakat* is one of the fundamental pillars in Islam. As a compulsory method of redistributing wealth from the richest to the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, *zakat* is both an obligation for the donor, and a right of the recipient. As such, IRW plays a critical role as an intermediary, collecting *zakat* in wealthier countries and distributing it to the most vulnerable members of society across the world.

In 2013 alone, IRW collected approximately UK£20m of *zakat* (approx. US\$30m) across 11 of our global fundraising offices. IRW actively works to support Muslims in their efforts to pay *zakat*, by running visible fundraising campaigns, providing multiple channels through which *zakat* can be paid, and even disseminating educational resources, online and on paper, reminding Muslims of their responsibility to pay *zakat* and detailing how to calculate *zakat* correctly. In countries such as the UK, IRW also runs hotlines with scholars and trained staff throughout Ramadan, where donors can direct enquiries regarding how to calculate and spend *zakat* in accordance with Islamic guidelines.⁵ *Zakat* funds are subsequently spent in line with Islamic guidance, for example in addressing domestic poverty needs, such as in the USA, where *zakat* is utilised to provide emergency food and housing assistance to refugee, immigrant and low-income American families, or on IRW's global livelihoods, education, healthcare, nutrition and water projects.

IRW takes its role as custodian of *zakat* extremely seriously – through us, the duty of the donor is dispensed and the right of the recipient is fulfilled.

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To that end, IRW is currently developing a Global *Zakat* Policy to provide detailed guidance to our staff around the world on how to collect and distribute our *zakat* funds effectively. The aims of the policy are to ensure that our *zakat* activities are effective in alleviating poverty and suffering, and are fully in keeping with Islamic teachings, and to ensure transparency and accountability to our beneficiaries, donors, staff and supporters.

2. QURBANI

Qurbani is an annual donation of meat by all Muslims who can afford it to those in poverty, to enable them to commemorate Eid ul Adha, the celebration that marks the completion of the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*). Traditionally, a Muslim would be directly involved in selecting an animal and distributing the meat to those in need. However, for many Muslims living in urbanised, wealthy communities in the countries in which we fundraise, this is logistically impossible. As such, in 1986 IRW initiated the novel concept of overseas *qurbani*, which sees donors give IRW the funds to pay for their *qurbani*, and IRW carries out the slaughter and distribution of meat to communities in poverty around the world. For donors, this offers a vital service in allowing them to dispense their obligation to the poor; for communities in poverty, the *qurbani* meat they receive through IRW is a critical source of nutrition, and at times the only meat they may eat in a week, a month or a year. In 2013, IRW was able to distribute *qurbani* meat to over two million people from 30 different countries around the world.

3. ORPHAN SPONSORSHIP

Although not a religious requirement, Islam strongly emphasises the high status given to those who protect and provide for orphan children.⁶ IRW provides a model of orphan sponsorship that allows donors to strive towards fulfilling the teaching of Prophet Muhammad, combined with adherence to and promotion of strict child protection guidelines. Currently, IRW sponsors over 40,000 orphans in 24 countries around the world, providing shelter, education, healthcare and livelihoods opportunities for orphans living in poverty.

INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING

IRW has built strong relationships with institutional funders over the past three decades. In recent years, we have received funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the European Commission (EC), the European Commission for Humanitarian Operations (ECHO), UNICEF, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR, the World Food Programme (UNWFP) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

Although these relationships have built up incrementally over many years, anecdotal evidence by staff indicates that there was a significant increase in interest in IRW following the conflicts in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Our experience has indicated that, as compared to secular agencies, IRW's overtly Islamic identity combined with our pure humanitarian mission can of-

ten assist and enable us to access beneficiary communities in complex environments, by gaining the trust of community gatekeepers. In Somalia, for example, IRW was able to make important in-roads in various sensitive regions, partly due to the trust engendered by our identity. As such, our Islamic identity may place us at an advantage compared to institutional donors, which recognise IRW's ability to access certain communities while still meeting relevant global standards on humanitarian principles, accountability and transparency, and financial conduct.

This privileged access also opens us up to funding partnerships with Christian or secular CSOs, which sometimes distribute their funds through IRW in places such as Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where they may face barriers in accessing communities themselves. It is worth noting, however, that IRW's identity can equally be a disadvantage in contexts such as the Central African Republic, Chechnya or South Sudan, where IRW may distribute its funding through non-Muslim partner agencies. This symbiotic relationship between faith agencies has enabled IRW to build formal and practical inter-faith partnerships with Christian agencies such as the Lutheran World Federation, leading to joint projects in Jordan and Kenya. Not only does such interfaith partnership pave the way for bridge-building in divided communities, but it also creates new funding opportunities for both organisations.

Beyond accessing institutional funding, IRW's faith identity and values have enabled us to build strong working relationships with various donor and partner agencies in the sphere of knowledge-sharing. There is growing interest within the humanitarian and development sector in the role of faith teachings and faith

organisations in helping to meet global development goals. IRW has been proactively involved in providing training and educational resources on Islamic approaches to development at both the UN and World Bank level,⁷ as well as through our engagements with various national governments.

NEW MARKETS

A third and critical way in which IRW's faith identity has enabled us to attract resources is through our access to new and emerging donor markets, particularly in the Middle East. In recent years, IRW has placed a particular emphasis on engaging with governments, institutions and individuals across the Middle East. Anecdotally we know that IRW is well-respected in the region, particularly for its unique position as an Islamic, faith-inspired agency that is based in Europe, which is subject to the scrutiny of UK charity legislation. In recent years, this respect has enabled us to access funding for relief and development work from the Bahrain Royal Charity Organisation, the Islamic Development Bank, Qatar Charity and the government of Saudi Arabia. However, once again our Islamic identity can prove to be a barrier in the highly complex and politicised context of the Middle East, and has occasionally undermined our ability to fundraise in some countries.

BEYOND IDENTITY

Whilst IRW's faith identity has undoubtedly played a critical role in our ability to access resources, individually and institutionally, discussions with staff have

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made clear that identity is only one aspect of why supporters remain loyal to IRW. In the UK, Muslim donors may initially be drawn to IRW due to our faith identity or values, but the subsequent realisation that IRW is a member of the UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) often plays an important role in gaining the trust and respect of donors, particularly when the Muslim charity sector is so saturated, as it is in the UK. Equally, although our Islamic identity may have initially gained the attention of institutional funders such as DFID or UNDP, IRW staff believe that it is our consistent track record for effective and efficient delivery, and the trust this has engendered, that now enable us to secure institutional funding continually. Finally, as hinted above, donors in the Middle East do not fund IRW solely due to our Islamic identity; rather, our positioning as a UK-based charity, and the reassurance that we are thus subjected to high standards of scrutiny and accountability, play a critical role in building our credibility and respect amongst Muslim donors in the Middle East.

Having a shared faith identity can often be crucial for developing relationships of trust with donors, and enabling faith-inspired organisations to capitalise on available resources. Yet in the experience of IRW, faith identity is not a silver bullet, and cannot (and should not) be relied upon to secure long-term and sustainable funding. Rather, our relative success has immensely relied upon our efforts to improve our efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability. Only then can the trust we engender move from being instinctive (and potentially short term) to evidence-based and long term. This approach not only authentically meets values of accountability and fairness, as prescribed within the Islamic faith and within IRW's own values, but also universalises our competitiveness as a world-class humanitarian and development CSO.

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1 Global Humanitarian Assistance, Humanitarian Assistance from Non-State Donors: What is it worth?, April 2014, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/report/humanitarian-assistance-non-state-donors>.

2 The Prophet Muhammad once stated that: "Islam is based on five: testifying that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; establishing the prayer; paying the zakat; the pilgrimage; and the fast of Ramadan."

3 Qur'an – see 98:5; 2:43; 2:83; 2:110; 2:277; 4:77; 5:12; 5:55; 9:71; 21:73; 22:41; 22:78; 24:37; 24:56; 27:3; 33:33; 35:29.

4 See the Islamic Social Finance Report 2014, <http://www.irti.org/English/Research/Documents/Report-2.pdf>, for a greater insight into this.

5 The Qur'an outlines the eight categories of people who are entitled to receive zakat: "Alms are meant only for the poor, the needy, those who administer them, those whose hearts need winning over, to free slaves, and

help those in debt, for God's cause, and for travellers in need. This is ordained by God; God is all knowing and wise." (Qur'an 9:60).

6 The Prophet Muhammad once raised his hand and placed his forefinger and middle finger together and said, "I and the guardian of an orphan will be in [Paradise] like these two," i.e. to be the guardian of an orphan is so blessed that one would attain closeness to the Prophet Muhammad.

7 For example, through sessions at the annual UN Staff College Training and

our recent joint statement with the World Bank and other faith groups: <http://www.islamic-relief.org/ending-extreme-poverty-a-moral-and-spiritual-imperative>.