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

Abstract

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

Introduction

This article explores the breadth of roles which humanitarian intermediaries play through case studies of two Christian intermediary organisations supporting local faith communities (LFCs)[1] working with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Since 2011 the ongoing war in Syria and its accompanying refugee crisis have captured the attention and focus of the world. Forming what was described by Antonio Guterres, head of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2015, as the 'biggest refugee population from a

single population in a generation', more than half of all Syrians fled their homes between 2011 and 2015, and more than 4 million sought refuge in neighbouring countries, primarily Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (UNHCR, 2015).

To respond to the massive needs presented by the Syrian crisis, a humanitarian aid infrastructure grew quickly, with international organisations establishing offices in the region, new local humanitarian entities being established, and already-established charities scaling up or redefining their operations. For 2016 alone, the combined funding appeal constituted 4.5 billion US dollars to provide support to refugees and to the communities hosting them in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt, in addition to 3.2 billion US dollars requested for humanitarian aid inside Syria (UNHCR, 2017; UNOCHA, 2017). The large-scale humanitarian response has included a network of many types of humanitarian actors: governmental and private donors, international humanitarian organisations, national governments and national and local organisations. The UN's portal for Syria Regional Response lists over 100 official humanitarian partners working alongside UNHCR in delivering aid to Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 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 and large international NGOs such as Save the Children and Care. These partners include international faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as Caritas, World Vision, and Islamic Relief.[2] Many of these humanitarian entities, however, have also partnered with national NGOs or other members of local civil society. Since the outset of the crisis in 2011, many Muslim and Christian international FBOs have been providing assistance to refugees and to host communities in Lebanon and Jordan, 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 renewed focus on the

'localisation' of humanitarian aid. The call for localisation springs from a recognition that the humanitarian system is not fit for purpose to meet the challenges presented by complex crises (Bennett et al., 2016), partly due to its top-down and internationally-led structure (Cohen and Gingerich, 2015). In the consultation period for the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016, several aid organisations drafted a commitment to localisation of humanitarian aid called the Charter for Change (Charter4Change, 2015). One of its commitments is to pass 20% of all humanitarian funding to national and local organizations by 2018. At the World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain document signed by major governmental and non-governmental humanitarian donors committed 25% of aid to be shifted to local actors by 2020 (WHS, 2016). This promised shift raises questions about the boundaries between international and local, and how the humanitarian system can be more attuned to local priorities and building local capacity whilst leveraging funds from international donors.

Increasingly, humanitarian agencies are seeing religious communities, including international and local Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) as well as Local Faith Communities (LFCs), which fit the description of local actors, as important partners.[3] There is a growing literature outlining the nature of faith-based humanitarianism, highlighting the advantages that LFCs have in delivering aid. Because they are already established in affected communities at the outset of a crisis and have strong local relationships, LFCs are able to mobilize an assistance program quickly, often demonstrating a deep cultural awareness and integrating a spiritual dimension into their provision of aid (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013, p. 4; Gaillard and Texier, 2010, p. 82; Wisner, 2010, p. 129). LFCs may have access to funding streams other than the institutional donors on which many other humanitarian actors depend (Wuthnow and Offutt, 2008). Those funds are often extremely flexible, which helps them to act quickly and in keeping with the priorities they identify rather than priorities which may have been set by a donor in another continent who is unfamiliar with the context

(Clarke, 2007; James, 2011; Kirmani, 2012; Lynch, 2011).

Local FBOs, and in particular LFCs, have been found to rely more on local staff which are not as costly as expatriate staff and, more importantly, are seen as sharing cultural proximity with their beneficiaries. Their location can help them to develop more relevant and effective distribution mechanisms than international humanitarian organisations with limited experience in the local context (DeCordier, 2009, p.617; Amarasiri de Silva, 2009, p.258). Research in Sri Lanka by Amarasiri de Silva (2009) and Korf et al. (2010) in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami found that local faith-based actors could navigate local cultural complexities better than international humanitarian organisations newly arrived on the scene. Beyond other local grassroots NGOs, LFCs are often 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 crisis happens.

At the same time, the growing relationship between international donors and local groups comes with a range of challenges regarding motivation, funding restrictions and donor pressure. 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 pointed out by Zaman (2012, p. S135), 'international humanitarian organisations, including the United Nations (UN) agencies, simply do not share a common "script" with certain local faith-based aid providers'. Furthermore, their cultural embeddedness may make it difficult for local faith-motivated actors to make decisions based on need rather than local power dynamics (DeCordier, 2009, p. 619; Korf et al., 2010, p. S70).

There is also concern that local FBOs including LFCs may selectively choose their beneficiaries, prioritizing 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 to certain behaviour, such as to change religions (James, 2011; Jayasinghe, 2007). Indeed, research on the topic has increasingly emphasised that the concept of 'disaster evangelism' is highly contested and complex (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011, p. 534-535) and 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 (DeCordier, 2009, p. 614). Nonetheless, these accusations are regularly cited amongst members of the international humanitarian community as a key concern regarding the work of faith-based actors (Ahmed, 2005; Bush et al., 2015; Lynch and Schwarz, 2016).

With regards to donor relations, there is some concern that LFCs may not honour their donors' wishes for humanitarian accountability,[5] either through neglect or due to conflicting priorities (Kirmani, 2012; Leurs, 2012), though other scholars have suggested that this may be better understood as LFCs' higher commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of the affected communities than to the specific expectations of donors (Zaman, 2012, Korf et al., 2010, DeCordier, 2009). In a further complication, donors may not always distinguish LFCs from other types of FBOs (Jeavons, 2004), while in highly religious contexts which characterise much of the developing world, community members may not distinguish FBOs from secular organizations (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 of refugees fleeing Syria in 2013. Most (90% at the time of writing) live not in UN administered camps but in local communities (UNHCR 2017), creating opportunities for LFCs to become directly involved in

delivering refugee services. Donors are eager to channel funds through local institutions, but the complex dynamics outlined above present challenges to attempts at effective engagement. In order to increase donor engagement with LFCs, a set of individuals, organisations and networks have arisen to play the role 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 that intermediaries play. Indeed, there is not even a common shared definition of an 'intermediary'. In literature on humanitarian aid, common themes are their crucial role in humanitarian supply chains (Oloruntoba and Gray, 2006; Overstreet *et al.*, 2011), their function to ensure security for international aid workers (Stoddard *et al.*, 2006) and their influence on outcomes of humanitarian aid toward or (more often) away from sustainable development (Lewis, 1998; Lewis and Mosse, 2006) or political stability (de Silva, 2009; Menkhaus, 2010; Okumu, 2003). These discussions are often focused on state actors, and they do not analyse the roles of intermediaries as potential assets or barriers for localising humanitarian assistance.

By choosing to support local delivery of humanitarian aid rather than deliver aid themselves, these intermediaries play a crucial role in scaling up the localisation of humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. In order to explore the breadth of roles that intermediaries play, two case studies were selected of intermediary organisations supporting Christian LFCs working with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. We begin by detailing the methods for the case studies, followed by a report of the results of interviews and observations with intermediaries and LFCs. We then discuss how these findings apply to literature on LFCs, and conclude with recommendations for further research on intermediaries as key actors in the middle between the priorities of international donors and

local implementers in the humanitarian system.

Methods

To explore the roles which intermediaries play when facilitating humanitarian aid to refugees, this article presents two case studies of intermediaries who have chosen to work with local LFCs rather than implement programming directly themselves. To select our case studies we focused on the two countries with the largest ratio of Syrian refugee populations: Lebanon and Jordan. As of mid-2017, approximately 1 million Syrians were registered as refugees in Lebanon, all of whom were living outside of formal camps, either in Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) or in host communities. There were approximately 660,000 in Jordan, only 140,000 were in formal camps, with the rest living in 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% to its pre-crisis population, and in Jordan, an increase of approximately 10% (UNHCR, 2017). The Lebanese and Jordanian economies have suffered under 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 on their backs.

Although there are many examples of both Christian and Muslim faith communities providing aid to refugees (see El Nakib and Ager, 2015), we have limited this study to Christian intermediaries. This limit allows us to explore unique challenges raised by Western donors from historically Christian countries 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 example, the Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches has been in operation since 1952, and currently

supports Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Because of their religious ties to Christian-majority countries, many FBOs in the Middle East access funds managed by large Christian INGOs in the United States, Canada, Australia or Europe. Though many of these INGOs access institutional donor funds, they often rely most heavily on private individual donations raised through religious networks.

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

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD), an NGO established by the Baptist Society, has a Relief and Development division that partnered with 18 churches to provide food and other types of aid to Syrian refugees, with funding from institutional donors. 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 was collected in tandem with an external programmatic evaluation, in August 2014, conducted for LSESD. This was at the peak of their response programme, when LSESD was beginning to think of beginning some early recovery activities in addition to providing emergency aid. Six of LSESD's partners were visited, and interviews conducted with a total of 13 Lebanese church pastors or

members involved in refugee assistance, seven donor representatives, and nine LSESD staff.

The ACT Alliance Jordan Syria Lebanon Forum (JSLF) was set up in 2012 to coordinate the response of its member churches and church-related organisations delivering aid to Syrian refugees. The JSLF brings together member organisations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, including national churches, national and regional FBOs, and connects them with its international members to fund the work of members and their partners who are implementing humanitarian responses in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. JSLF members are also members of ACT Alliance, a global coalition of 140 churches and church-related organisations involved in humanitarian aid, development and advocacy work. All members of 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 Switzerland, Jordan, Thailand, El Salvador, Kenya and New York.

Although it coordinates regional responses, the JSLF meets regularly in Amman, and the research was conducted with partners in Jordan. The data from JSLF was collected from September to November 2015, after a couple of years of intense humanitarian programming in the Syria response. The wide portfolio of projects included healthcare, food vouchers, shelter rehabilitation, education and psychosocial support. Data is based on interviews with four of its implementing partners, two ACT Alliance Secretariat staff, three donor representatives, as well as two site visits to local aid distribution centres. All participants agreed to participate in our study on the condition that we 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 (LSESD)

LSESD's funding came primarily from Christian NGOs based in countries from the

Global North including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as from limited direct donations from churches around the world. Many of LSESD's donors expected them 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, LSESD managed all financial transactions directly. In practice this meant that LSESD signed contracts with local supermarket vendors and then gave food vouchers to churches for distribution.

LSESD gave churches clear guidelines regarding beneficiary selection using vulnerability criteria, distribution procedures and verification of voucher use, particularly emphasizing 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 mentoring of church leaders and volunteers, and LSESD sponsored training events for partners on topics such as project management, humanitarian principles, and child protection.

Overall, LSESD staff held that their role was to take on the administrative and bureaucratic load of humanitarian operations in order to, in the words of then-director, 'let the church be the church'. They saw their role primarily as taking on 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.

A donor for LSESD highlighted this role as mutually beneficial not only to local communities but benefiting Christian donors in other countries as well, saying:

> 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 staff member at LSESD 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; LSESD helped broker a relationship between such partners. Furthermore, LSESD targeted donors who were more likely committed to long-term programming: since local churches are typically engaged in their communities over the long-term, most were looking for donors who would maintain a long-term relationship beyond the immediate humanitarian response.

In order to facilitate this relationship-building, LSESD held partner 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 LSESD's role: 'We keep saying that churches should be churches, not NGOs. We are the NGO. So the onus should be on us to connect them better.' LSESD facilitated this coordination between partners because they were a trusted intermediary. For example, while churches were often reticent to share beneficiary lists with one another, they regularly shared this information with LSESD. LSESD was therefore developing a means by which they could cross-check beneficiaries themselves.

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 [Lebanese NGO] Himaya, UNICEF. 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 LSESD and under LSESD's guidance.

LSESD itself demonstrated limited engagement with UNHCR and other international

humanitarian coordination mechanisms, feeling that as a small NGO in Lebanon participation in these mechanisms at the national level was time-consuming with limited benefit to their program. Nonetheless, LSESD staff members encouraged local partners to reach out to UNHCR at the local level, and they supported local partners to identify refugees not benefiting from UNHCR assistance and to encourage official registration as refugees.

One repeated theme in the research with LSESD was that its partners highlighted how LSESD 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 LSESD had gradually increased their 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 LSESD, where few of its local partners had any experience in the processes and administration of humanitarian aid. LSESD staff, for their part, took great pride in freeing up churches to implement activities without being burdened by donor requirements. LSESD assumed responsibility for all proposal writing, reporting, financial management and donor liaising in their funded projects. Program staff worked hard to write and revise reports according to donor requirements. When partners sent them materials that were considered poor according to donor standards, they wrote, re-wrote and hunted down additional information. Some donors, in turn, expressed their appreciation for the high-quality data analysis and detailed financial reporting submitted by LSESD.

Nonetheless, LSESD itself had only three years' experience implementing donor-funded projects at the time of this study, and so was still developing its own internal capacity

and understanding of humanitarian language and expectations. Since LSESD staff expressed a strong desire to implement effective humanitarian programming, some of their donors were working with them to strengthen their management capacity according to the standards and language of the humanitarian sphere.

Even with this support in place, church partners, who were not accustomed to the procedures which are considered standard in most donor-funded humanitarian programs, often found LSESD's reporting requirements onerous. One church leader, for example, complained about the need to maintain receipts and copies of all checks, and to follow rules for signatures on vouchers and distribution sheets. He felt this demonstrated a lack of trust for the partner and a lack of understanding on LSESD's part with regards to churches' capacity for following these procedures, without acknowledging that these are considered bare minimum requirements in the commodified process of donor-funded humanitarian work.

Other partners recognised and appreciated that LSESD took on most of the procedural responsibility on behalf of its church partners. Though working with 18 churches, LSESD only identified one of these churches that had the capacity and interest for engaging directly with donors, so 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 distribution, beneficiary coordination and home visits. Commenting on local partners' tendency to work tirelessly, risking burn-out at times, one of LSESD's donors observed:

> 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, 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. For their part, church partners both 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 service to their beneficiaries with a limited number of volunteers.

Another reason why donors have been open to working with LSESD, with its network of mostly-evangelical churches as implementing partners, was the previous humanitarian expertise of some LSESD staff who had worked for respected INGOs. '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 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 evangelization in a way that could really get us in trouble (LSESD donor, 2014).

To address such concerns, LSESD invested time into creating a 'theology' of humanitarian assistance, and increasingly they were re-framing humanitarian training content in overtly religious terms which would feel more relevant to church members than content typically delivered to NGO staff. Then-director of LSESD's relief division, an experienced humanitarian with a background in INGOs, had theological training and was working with pastors to develop ways of explaining humanitarian values in a way that would resonate to church leaders and members. One LSESD staff member commented 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 LSESD was systematically seeking to educate secular humanitarians or teach their donors about religious literacy (see Gingerich et al., 2017), though they did try to help build their awareness and sensitivity to the differences in ways of thinking between their church partners and their other humanitarian partners. The head of one of 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 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 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 emphasized the importance of spending time listening to refugees and building relationships of trust. One partner described this approach as different from approach of larger organisations, which can be 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 LSESD sought to ensure the dignity of beneficiaries was through ensuring ethical treatment of beneficiaries and promoting mutual respect on 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 dignity of beneficiaries.

ACT Alliance Jordan Syria Lebanon Forum (JSLF)

Since 2012, JSLF has coordinated an annual appeal ($7 million USD 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 (both Christian and of other faiths), and community leaders in collaboration with national governments to distribute aid to affected populations without distinction based on religious or political affiliation, or other status. JSLF members meet monthly to coordinate their responses and to share relevant information. As the Forum has developed, member organisations have increased the level of cooperation and coordination with each other, from sharing responsibilities for stakeholder meetings with government and UNHCR, to geographical coordination of aid distribution.

JSLF's main intermediary role was therefore in networking FBOs of varying sizes and varying mandates, and in assisting them to complement one another's capacities in order to maximise implementation capacity of Christian aid providers in Jordan. They created a wide-reaching network where international donors and local providers could jointly create, fund

and implement humanitarian projects to support refugees.

Partners and JSLF 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. Because many ACT Alliance members were also donors from the Global North, they contributed to the funds of the appeal and themselves sought funds from other members of the Alliance and outside donors. Importantly, these consortia could access funds not available to individual members, due to minimum funding requirements as well as the need for knowledge of donor procedures. For example, the JSLF was able to apply to a large 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 funds in the future.

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

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

Various JSLF partners commented on how coming together for joint programming began a process of closer coordination and collaboration between the various members. A JSLF partner explained one project as follows:

> 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 (JSLF implementing member, 2015).

JSLF facilitated partnerships beyond the ACT network itself, as well. One partner

reported that they had worked together to introduce a new model for partnering with the Jordanian government to subsidize food distribution at UNHCR and World Food Program coordination meetings. Their idea was adopted by other humanitarian agencies as well as by other JSLF members. This engagement in coordination at various levels has helped ensure that best practices were shared more widely than would be possible without intermediaries. Another partner reported that they organised their distribution of aid through local committees made up 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.

JSLF also supported its partners through training, actively identifying training needs from its members and developing a capacity-building program accordingly. They also helped arrange specific training events according to requests from their partners. One JSLF 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 (JSLF implementing member, 2015).

JSLF also facilitated joint monitoring activities and coordinated evaluations for all participants in the annual appeal process. In the immediate aftermath of the waves of Syrian and Iraqi refugees who fled to Jordan, JSLF conducted or facilitated rapid needs assessments, using their local contacts with government officials and other humanitarian actors to get a broad understanding of needs on the ground, and then they worked with implementing partners to design programming according to identified priorities. In Jordan, ACT members liaised regularly with government ministries in order to maintain a good understanding of projects that were likely to receive government approval. One JSLF donor member sent a proposal writer to develop an appeal on behalf of all its partners in a timely fashion, and in

compliance with the expectations of the humanitarian community.

JSLF tried to avoid setting onerous requirements on implementing partners when possible, although increasing requirements were often difficult to avoid due 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 (JSLF donor, 2015).

JSLF 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 received training in humanitarian guidelines and accountability processes from JLSF, which was important, according to one donor, 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 continued:

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 toward 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 (JSLF donor, 2015).

In the interviews conducted for this research, JSLF partners spoke about their respect for humanitarian values including the contentious issue of impartiality. One partner used the following description to explain 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' (JSLF

implementing member, 2015).

Furthermore, JSLF and its partners felt that their Christian values added an additional degree

of depth to their ability to live out humanitarian principles. As one JSLF member explained:

Donors' language is more materialistic, but with our Christian-humanitarian language,

we can convert this materialistic concept into more humanitarian and development

language (JSLF 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] (JSLF implementing member, 2015).

JSLF partners often referred to their concern for improving inter-communal relations, for

example between Christians and Muslims, and between Syrians, Jordanians and Palestinians,

in the areas where they work.

Discussion

In our interviews and observations of the work of JSLF and LSESD, key themes

emerge about the scope and roles that intermediaries play. In the flows of humanitarian aid

from donors to Syrian refugees, there exists a complex web of intermediaries at multiple

levels. LSESD appears to play a simpler role than JSLF as a broker between a specific set of LFCs (Christian churches in Lebanon) and Western private donors. Yet each of these donors is often 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 humanitarian literature (see Korf et al., 2010, p. S72), we find a complex web of intermediaries operating in a liminal space (see Heathershaw, 2016) between the international, national and local levels. In this middle space, intermediaries play a crucial role in determining the quantity and quality of humanitarian assistance. For example, JSLF networks Western and Middle Eastern church donors 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, funding accompanied by additional layers of accountability.

Returning to the literature on LFCs, we offer reflections on how intermediaries in our study are involved in navigating humanitarian challenges. In the complex network of relationships comprising the humanitarian system, intermediaries such as JSLF and LSESD increase connections between donors and implementers. LSESD acted as a marriage broker, pairing international donors with suitable LFCs who had the capacity and desire to deliver aid to refugees in their communities. With its broader network, JSLF could streamline the delivery of aid 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, both JSLF and LSESD increased collaborative responses by helping local partners to build relationships which enabled them to share learning and delivery. Through coordination, LSESD and JSLF increased geographic

coverage and minimized beneficiary duplication. These local and relational links in turn

facilitated the delivery of aid to vulnerable populations which could potentially be missed by

other aid providers. Furthermore, activating these joint responses also increased local

partners' external coordination with other humanitarian actors. Both JSLF and LSESD chose

to encourage and support their local partners to coordinate with other humanitarian actors

directly rather than be their representatives, thus 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 et al., 2015,

p.20).

Addressing the concerns about 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 a variety of personal interactions. Rather than giving unconditional approval, they

developed trust through investing in relationships that enabled mentoring and ongoing

capacity building. Donors are rightly concerned about a lack of professionalism of local

actors (Ferris, 2011; Paras and Stein, 2013), and for many of the LFCs in our study, the

expectations of international humanitarian donors were difficult to understand and apply.

LSESD and JSLF helped normalise those expectations by taking partial responsibility for the

administrative burden of humanitarian assistance, helping local partners to incorporate

processes of accountability, and increase their fluency in humanitarian and donor languages.

These intermediaries used their position in the middle to maintain an understanding of each

donor's specific requirements, and they regularly communicated these requirements to

implementing partners in a way that was resonant with the capacity of the partners. They thus

helped partners gradually grow in their capacity to operate in the humanitarian sphere. It is

doubtful that in most cases the local churches or community organisations could have

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

There is a tender balance to be drawn, however, between perceived professionalization to activate local capacity and the instrumentalisation of local communities (see Baker and Miles-Watson 2010; Baker 2012; Ager et al., 2015). We found a tension between capacity-building and 'letting the church be the church'. If LFCs and other local groups become professionalised 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 moral support for their members and the wider community. For example, if a pastor manages a humanitarian response, he or she may have less time to teach or mentor congregants; if a church facility is being used as a distribution centre or a school for refugees, it may not be available for religious teaching or choir practice.

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 a role in the church for religious teaching and guidance, not for aid provision. Furthermore, the influx of finances changed churches' operating budget significantly, and intermediaries were concerned that they not re-structure entirely in response to a temporarily inflated budget. Thus, in some cases, attempts to normalise funding requirements added another layer of bureaucracy rather than streamlining the process, a risk of adding another layer of intermediaries. This bureaucracy may require changing financial management systems, creating or changing bank accounts, hiring administrative staff, and a host of other labour-intensive systematic changes that had the potential to transform LFCs from having grassroots

community structures to 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 and New York. With their affiliation to a specific faith community, especially in confessional societies where religion and politics have engaged 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 conversely argue that they are more neutral than institutionally-funded aid providers because they are able to maintain financial independence from political and governmental entities. Furthermore, due 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 LFCs use. These linguistic differences are an example of the different 'scripts' used by secular humanitarian donors and LFCs (Fiddyan-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Zaman, 2012).

As intermediaries, LSESD and JSLF staff seemed fluent in discourses such as SPHERE and HAP (standards for humanitarian aid) as well as Christian concepts used by LFCs such as integral mission and the Great Commission. For local partners, it was essential that any use of humanitarian language take into consideration, and be incorporated into, their religious language. As intermediaries, LSESD and JSLF staff transitioned seamlessly between a discourse full of religious terminology and ideas, and one more familiar to the humanitarian sphere. They could thus help local religious actors understand better what was expected of them in humanitarian terms and also equip them to engage with other humanitarians. They also helped donors understand 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). The concern that churches might use the opportunity provided by aid to Muslim refugees for proselytisation (Jayasinghe, 2007; James, 2011) arose frequently in interviews with intermediaries. In its mentoring and training with LFCs, 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 power dynamics. Through training and mentoring they helped local partners to increasingly value 'impartiality', which LSESD referred to as 'non-conditionality', by not placing any conditions on behaviour (such as church attendance, for example) for vulnerable beneficiaries to access aid.

Interestingly, when studying Christian LFCs serving mostly Muslims, other aspects of risk and liability did not emerge as issues of great concern in Lebanon and Jordan, though there was frequent mention of potential liability for partner organisations providing aid inside Syria. This may be because proselytisation draws so much attention that it obscures other risks, and 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, though, 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, a practice that Lynch and Schwarz (2016) call 'donor proselytism'. In the daily delivery of aid, both LSESD and JSLF 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, and JSLF and LSESD addressed this imbalance by defending local implementers' limited capacity for documentation and reporting, and by offering alternative

reporting systems that could satisfy both partner capacity and donor requirements. They also regularly educated donors about the context on the ground and cultural sensitivity while on donor visits, and they helped donors 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 priorities of human dignity and professionalism, both LSESD and JSLF staff highlighted concerns about visits from donors, particularly when photographs were involved. Both LSESD and JSLF staff understood the importance of imagery in fundraising and the desire to facilitate these visits, but also expressed concern that photography is a sensitive activity for both local partners and displaced families in the Middle East.

Related to this discussion of differing priorities is the key 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 which often differ from those of humanitarian donors, and many expressed that those values needed to take priority. Intermediaries helped negotiate between these differences in values (Ager and Ager, 2011; Kirmani, 2012; Leurs, 2012). A starting point for LSESD's local church partners was affirming the importance of local religious values; however, some Christian donors and larger Christian NGOs, like some JSLF members, framed their work in slightly different terms which sought to reconcile Christian values with humanistic values, while still prioritizing Christian values. LSESD and JSLF thus helped local partners 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 our study demonstrated different priorities which 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 given

them an opportunity to show solidarity with Muslims and demonstrate their place in the community. Interviewees spoke about how their actions reflected on the reputation of the entire Christian community, and they showed a keen awareness 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 toward sustainable community relations, an aspect which is easily overlooked in humanitarian responses (Amarasiri de Silva, 2009; Menkhaus, 2010).

Conclusion

Our study explores the roles of intermediaries in the humanitarian aid system through two case studies in different contexts: 1) a national faith-based organisation working directly with LFCs in Lebanon, and 2) an international network of FBOs and LFCs in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon cooperating for aid, development and advocacy. In our interviews with staff members, local partners, and donors, we found numerous ways in which intermediaries directly influence the scope, shape, language and quality of refugee assistance at the community level.

As an exploratory study in a relatively new area, our findings are limited by scope and the fuzziness of the humanitarian landscape. Our study is based on two case studies and its scope is limited 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 they are often recipients of funding from both secular and faith-based donors (see El Nakib and Ager, 2015). Studies which map a large segment of humanitarian actors could explore the scale of intermediary-facilitated aid in a particular context of refugee response, and these studies could analyse the makeup and structure of networks that channel large funding streams toward refugees. Our

study has primarily found examples of the potential positive role intermediaries can play, due to our primary data being drawn from interviews with the actors themselves and their immediate donors and partners. Studies which analyse the impact of intermediaries along the humanitarian aid chain would help to paint a more nuanced picture of the ways in which intermediaries shape the effectiveness of humanitarian projects.

Our study raises two questions about the localisation of humanitarian aid, one about definition and another about location. By paying attention to intermediaries at multiple levels, we may rightly ask who or what can be defined as 'local'. The localisation conversation has centred around transferring resources and building capacity at the national level (Charter 4 Change, 2015; WHS, 2016). Organisations working in capital cities are closer to local communities than international organisations, but they may not be better attuned to needs at the community level. LFCs and community-based organisations are by definition based at the community level, but as they increasingly participate in large-scale humanitarian work, they may become more attuned to the priorities of humanitarian donors than to recipients of aid. Alternatively, local actors may become more attuned to meeting the needs of recipients of aid than to fulfilling other important community functions (Korf et al., 2010). By studying the roles and capabilities of intermediaries, scholars and humanitarian actors can better understand the needs and priorities of donors and recipients of aid as they are negotiated in the spaces-in-between.

Another key question raised by our study is where to locate debates on humanitarian principles. From the extreme ends of the humanitarian chain, the principles of neutrality and impartiality may be applied in such different ways as to seem incompatible. Shifting the discussion toward the middle spaces, where intermediaries facilitate flows of resources and ideas, could enable a better quality of dialogue about humanitarian values. In the upheaval and instability of 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 sojourn and settle. 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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Endnotes

[1] The term faith-based organisation (FBO) is understood differently in different contexts. In this paper, it will be used as a broad term to describe all registered organisations that engage in humanitarian work with a faith motivation, which may be either local or international (see Clarke, 2007). FBOs can be distinguished from Local Faith Communities (LFCs) which are places or communities of worship which may also engage in humanitarian action (Ager et al, 2015).

[2] It is difficult to accurately assess the extent of the contribution of FBOs (both international and local) to the humanitarian system beyond that it is significant (Gingerich et al., 2017). Many international FBOs raise funds outside of the formal humanitarian system, and much of the funding to international organisations such as the Red Cross is passed to international and local FBOs. See Gingerich and Cohen (2015, p. 16).

[3] See endnote 1.

[4] Four principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence have guided international humanitarian action for several decades. They are enshrined in documents including the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent's Code of Conduct (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1994), and the more recent Humanitarian Charter which is a part of the Sphere standards for humanitarian action.

[5] The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (Core Humanitarian Standard, 2014) provides benchmarks for humanitarian accountability 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.

[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 (who were primarily Christian) fleeing territories captured by ISIS.