

Muslim Philanthropy's Response to Rising Humanitarian Crises

Tariq Cheema¹

World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists

¹ Dr. Tariq Cheema is the founder of the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists, a global network of affluent individuals, corporations, foundations, governments and academia, dedicated to advancing effective and accountable giving. His trendsetting efforts towards institutionalizing Muslim Philanthropy have earned worldwide acclaim. Dr. Cheema ranks among the 500 most influential Muslims impacting the world today.

While global figures on the number of people suffering from natural disasters and conflicts are constantly rising, Muslim-majority countries are affected more than other countries by these large-scale humanitarian crises and disasters. This trend is unfortunately on the rise, according to a recent report published by the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC, 2017).

In 2015, sixty percent of armed conflicts recorded worldwide occurred in Muslim majority countries, resulting in severe humanitarian crises and displacement. Alarmingly, 71% of people globally (around 89 million) who require humanitarian assistance due to natural or man-made disasters reside in Muslim-majority countries (SESRIC, 2017). Widespread extremism and instability across the world in general and in Muslim communities in particular has made the aforementioned scenario even worse. In 2015 for instance, 75% of all terrorist attacks and more than 90% of fatalities had been recorded in Muslim majority countries.

Muslim giving is the lifeline of humanitarian organizations that contribute toward a robust relief network on the ground. However, this relief network is challenged by two main issues: Firstly, the overwhelming proportion of Muslim giving is directed towards disaster relief, thus leaving very little room to diversify funding. As a result, less money is available to invest in addressing other societal needs, such as health, education, food security, and economic empowerment. Secondly, the high burden of humanitarian crises combined with limited availability of human and financial resources and lack of coordination among relief actors compromises the effectiveness of service delivery.

Against this backdrop, it is of paramount importance that Muslim Philanthropy adopts a holistic approach whereby devising and funding interventions for both crises management *and* crises prevention. Philanthropy is a problem-solving mechanism that drives towards creating

solutions for sustainable change and investing in the future. Muslim philanthropic giving is closely related to the Arabic concept of *Takaful*, which translates to standing in solidarity with the needy. Muslim giving is heavily influenced by the fundamental pillars of philanthropy present in the Islamic faith: *Zakat*, the compulsory alms giving of Muslims, and *Sadaqa*, the discretionary charity that can take the form of financial resources, donation of material needs, or voluntary service. These practices most closely encompass an understanding of giving as a spiritual and social obligation (Cheema, 2013).

In a region where philanthropy is predominantly faith-inspired, the resolution of longstanding religious and geopolitical conflicts is critical to the peace and prosperity of the region and its neighboring borders. Humanitarian work in Muslim societies has taken the form of ad-hoc charity relief efforts. It involves providing immediate aid for day-to-day needs and action to challenges that demand a quick response. Today, the innumerable organizations that are lending humanitarian support across the Muslim world are unable to address and focus on the root causes of the challenges faced. Although the Muslim community has an effective network which responds to the challenges, it has, in a way, mimicked the act of fire fighters by providing immediate responses and relief to control the damage instead of searching for solutions that can contribute to permanent change.

Unresolved national and regional political issues manifest into violent reactions. In these contexts, the public voice is not the most effective tool for change, as democratic regimes are not the common norm of governance in many Muslim-majority countries. As a result, public opinion has a minimal effect in steering policy. This contributes towards the persistent requisite for governing bodies to identify and implement sustainable resolutions for humanitarian crises afflicting the Muslim community. Conflicts in countries such as Syria and Iraq demand

immediate attention and relief, and many donor organizations working within the region are compelled to provide reprieve to disaster stricken communities, stretching their financial resources thin, thereby creating a gap between immediate assistance and long term resolutions. Furthermore, humanitarian actors are often working in isolation in providing relief, even competing against each other to exhibit their impact, thus lacking coordination and sometimes even harmony.

Muslim Philanthropy has become synonymous with humanitarian aid, which is a characterization that needs to be altered. It has become imperative to fight the battle in conflict zones on both the short and long-term fronts (Ashmawey, 2015). Simultaneously addressing these aspects is how philanthropic actors in the region will be able to implement sustainable measures instead of providing only temporary relief. There is a need to re-evaluate definitions of what constitute '*humanitarian*' and '*developmental*' needs in order for these countries to progress (Gelsdorf, 2010). Take for example, the internal conflicts and natural disasters in Sudan that exacerbated the humanitarian crisis the country experienced. Sudan has been a witness to violent conflicts since 2003. Over time, aid has decreased; thus leaving disaster relief efforts on hold and pushing the internally displaced population to a rising proportion. The country has also been riddled with natural disasters, requiring both immediate short-term relief for survival and initiatives for long-term restoration. These two needs divided the financial resources the government was able to provide as well as the philanthropic and humanitarian aid Sudan received from around the world (SESRIC, 2017). Nearly fifteen years into violent conflicts and natural disaster afflictions, Sudan is still struggling to implement sustainable infrastructure and facilitate the rehabilitation of a majority of the population.

Focusing on the following strategic areas can transform the philanthropic definition in these environments:

- 1) Altering the Relief Ecosystem - Humanitarian actors working in Muslim societies must collaborate with one another and encourage information sharing and partnership building in order to tackle problems rapidly and effectively.
- 2) Fueling Innovation – Humanitarian actors working in Muslim societies should encourage innovative solutions for problems instead of managing crisis the conventional way. For instance, practitioners in the field ought to leverage Information Technology & Communication (ICT) for building disaster prevention or resilience and introduce human-centered design thinking in developing low-cost, high-impact solutions that are compatible with the local environment and in alignment with the ground realities. It is imperative that philanthropy engage with solutions and not remain exclusive to interventions that hold risk of handout dependence.
- 3) Exploring Strategic Areas - Providing short term relief to communities at risk is extremely important, however, conflict-ridden countries such as Iraq and conflict-affected countries such as Jordan need solutions for long term sustainability and impact to truly help the community at large. Moreover, the importance of advocacy for critical issues such as Conflict Resolution and Rights Abuse Protection cannot be ignored.
- 4) Inculcating Applied Approaches - Humanitarian actors working in Muslim societies ought to learn from the legacy of faith-based and other philanthropic traditions from around the world that have strategically transformed local and national communities.

There is a need for resilience building in Muslim societies and as such, investing in strategic areas is key to creating an infrastructure that can support sustainable giving.

Philanthropy aims to impact communities by way of long term holistic approaches. This can be achieved by investing in communication and media strategies, introducing technological innovation for disaster relief and sustainable solutions, and introducing technology in inaccessible conflict areas. The challenge of today, in which the root causes of social and economic injustices span beyond families, villages, cities, regions and even nations, poses a new mandate for which organized efforts are ever more crucial.

Humanitarian giving can consist of a pool of resources with strong positive implications if it is utilized under a unified ideology. Interventions thus must be re-evaluated according to environmental context and with visionary future goals, integrating conflict sensitive principles to create a ripple effect for peace, principled humanitarian approaches for conflict resolution, and disaster relief management in all countries afflicted by crises (Lange & Quinn, 2003).

Philanthropy in Muslim societies, despite facing a complex set of external and internal challenges, is bound to grow both in its maturity and effectiveness (Cheema, 2013). However, without the application of research and innovation, conventional giving models will continue to be less effective. Further, in a region where philanthropy is predominantly faith-inspired, the resolution of longstanding religious and geopolitical conflicts is critical to the peace and prosperity of the region and its neighboring lands.

References

- Ashmawey, M. (2015). *Why Humanitarian Interventions in MENA Must Change*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/why-humanitarian-intervention-in-mena-must-change/>
- Cheema, T. H. (2013). Middle East and North Africa. In P. Cagney & B. Ross (Eds.), *Global fundraising: how the world is changing the rules of philanthropy* (pp. 223-237). Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Gelsdorf, K. (2010). *Global Challenges and their Impact on International Humanitarian Action*. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
- Lange, M. & Quinn, M. (2003). Conflict, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: Meeting the Challenges. *International Alert*. Retrieved from http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/conflict_humanitarian-_assi.pdf
- The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC). (2017). *Humanitarian Crises in OIC Countries - Drivers, Impacts, Current Challenges, and Potential Remedies*. Ankara, Turkey.