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Space for Faith-Based Organizations in times of **COVID-19**

Examples from Ethiopia, Indonesia and the global arena

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Acronyms

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
ACT Alliance	Action by Churches Together Alliance
CCIH	Christian Connections for International Health
FBO	Faith-based organization
FPI	Islamic Defenders Front
GMIT	<i>Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor</i> , Evangelical Church of West Timor
HTI	Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia
INGO	International non-governmental organization
IRC	Inter-Religious Council - Indonesia
JLI	Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama - Indonesia
PaRD	International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development
PGI	<i>Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia</i> , Communion of Churches in Indonesia
PKN	<i>Protestantse Kerk in Nederland</i> , Protestant Church in the Netherlands
TDA	Terepeza Development Association, branch of the Wolayta Kale Heywot Church
YAKKUM	<i>Yayasan Kristen untuk Kesehatan Umum</i> , Christian Foundation for Public Health
YEU	YAKKUM Emergency Unit
WCC	World Council of Churches

Executive Summary

Religious resources reviewed

The first set of questions of this research concerned the specific roles of faith actors in the COVID-19 response. In particular, we wished to find out to what extent the religious resources identified in the previous study (Jansen 2018: 9-10) were mobilised during the COVID-19 response. This is what we found.

Presence - FBOs are on the ground and there to stay. They have built ties with government and communities that reach far back into the past and they will be there to support communities for many years to come.

'Because we were already there, had our networks in the community, we were quick to respond', said Grace Nugroho, director of Yayasan Yabima in Lampung, South Sumatera. 'I don't think there is any other organization with a structure that is so coordinated from national to village level', explained Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, secretary general from the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). Many faith-based actors who were already on the ground used their presence and networks to assist in the COVID-19 response. They had a particularly important role in public health education: in getting messages across to communities and peoples outside the immediate reach of government campaigns. At the same time, faith actors had to be inventive and creative to rapidly shift from physical to digital or mobile phone communication. This appeared especially challenging in remote areas where internet and mobile phone coverage was poor (see further under 'networked societies').

Beliefs and values - the most effective level to realize sustainable change, is the level of hope, beliefs, norms and values. FBOs are ideally situated to address these deep structures of society, even if these concern conservative beliefs and prejudices.

'A fundamental health crisis like COVID-19 can only be managed by social distancing and behavioural change,' explained Jørgen Thomsen. 'In societies where people's own views are so dominantly informed by religion, all major change processes always require change of perception and conviction. Local faith actors can convincingly speak to those convictions and norms'. At national and local level, religious leaders played a key role in channelling health and social distancing instructions

to their communities and convincing them to abide. 'Faith actors have authority,' explained Jørgen Thomsen, 'based on trust and experience, people regard their advice as valid'. At the same time, some religious leaders failed to convince communities to stay and pray at home. In Indonesia, two religious 'super spreader events' had to occur before the leaders of these communities were ready to temporarily halt religious gatherings. In areas with very little infections, such as Eastern Indonesia and rural areas in Africa, religious leaders have a hard time convincing followers to continue abiding to COVID-19 funeral protocols. 'People get angry, they do not see sense in prohibiting funerals in villages', explains Rev. Mwombeki.

Holistic approach - faith-sensitive approaches to development differ from conventional approaches as they incorporate the social, environmental, spiritual and ethical in one complete package. FBOs attend to the whole person: to the material, social and spiritual well-being.

'We should increase the understanding that humanitarian response in such a situation is not only about traditional service delivery, but about a more comprehensive set of interventions,' explains Jørgen Thomsen. Staff and volunteers from faith-based organizations did not only bring food and protective materials to people, speak up and act in defence of rights, they also gave spiritual and pastoral support. A survey conducted by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) found that there was a high need for psycho-social support amongst their faith communities. 'People are confused, they do not know what to do', explained Arshinta. In response, PGI designed a special webportal through which members can access pastoral care, called 'Konsul.Online - With you all the way'.

Religious literacy - a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions, and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

The WHO demonstrated religious literacy when actively inviting faith actors to work on a series of COVID-19 guidance notes for various faith communities, based on deep respect for and knowledge of the histories, texts, beliefs and practices of a

variety of religious traditions. In Ethiopia, the government showed respect for the importance of religion in the lives of many of its inhabitants and an understanding of the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on the ability of all to practice one's beliefs. The government lifted a ban on the broadcasting of religious services and launched a joint month of national prayer on television, presided by leaders from all major religions and the Ethiopian president.

Spiritual capital and empowerment - acts of individual and communal prayer, religious services and celebrations can be a great source of emotional and mental support when the going gets tough.

Spirituality supports people's sense of (inter)connectedness. However, now that social restrictions are keeping billions of believers from practising communal rites, they threaten that sense of belonging and connectedness. Many people feel lonely, isolated and (spiritually) unsafe. 'If people cannot be baptised, cannot be converted, if there are no weddings conducted, that has a very destructive impact on people's life,' explained Rev. Mwombeki. In Ethiopia and Indonesia, networks of faith-based organizations are organising online prayer sessions. 'They try to comfort and console people, take away their fears and mistrust so that people are not panicking', said Kidist Belayneh. 'They give them a sense of personal peace'.

Constituency - faith-based organizations have the power of numbers.

'It is all about the infrastructure that faith actors have,' said Belayneh from NCA Ethiopia. 'If you can reach out to such large numbers of constituents, you have a great resource'. The Terepeza Development Association that works in Southern Ethiopia and is affiliated to the Wolayta Kale Heywot church, could channel their COVID-19 related messages to 1400 local churches, simply by passing them through the general assembly. In Indonesia that has a long tradition of volunteering, in between 200-300.000 volunteers registered at the National Disaster Management Agency. Many PGI member churches established local task forces of volunteers aiding in the distribution of food aid and sanitary materials. Yet, not all international humanitarian agencies seem aware of this grand human resource of FBOs. "In their first COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, UN OCHA mentions the 14 million Red Cross volunteers across the globe as an important localization resource, yet they do not seem to consider the many more millions of volunteers of faith communities..." comments Jørgen Thomsen, co-chair of the ACT Alliance Community of Practice on Religion and Development.

Physical and material assets - the financial resources that are collected through alms-giving are substantial. Besides, religious organizations have hospitals and schools and hold large plots of land.

Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) conducted a survey on faith-based responses to COVID-19 (CCIH and JLI 2020). Of all faith-based organizations participating in the survey, many reported funding as a major challenge 'both for routine programs and covering emergency COVID-19 response' (ibid.p.1). Weekly church donations are substantially reduced now that many churches were forced to close down their Sunday services. Staff who depend on such donations for their income experience serious financial distress. Alternative modes for alms giving by mobile phone have been developed, but these do not motivate all faith members to continue donating. 'I don't think that psychologically, people believe they are giving to God when they give donations by mobile phone,' explains Rev. Mwombeki. At the same time, there are signals that the charity impulse remains high amongst faith communities.

When the Indonesian FBO YAKKUM launched a public COVID-19 appeal among member churches, they collected 1.2 billion Rupiah. Desta Heyi from ICCO Ethiopia, saw on TV that substantial zakat donations were made during Ramadan to support the poor. Physical assets of faith-based organizations proved equally important during the COVID-19 response. In Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church offered its university and training institutes to be used as clinics and quarantine stations. In Indonesia, the twelve hospitals of the Christian Foundation for Public Health (YEU/YAKKUM) have several hundreds of COVID-19 patients under hospital surveillance and are monitoring an even greater number of people with symptoms of the virus outside the hospital.

Networked societies - FBOs are part of wide (faith) networks that operate at multiple levels.

Because of the social distancing measures, the term 'networked societies' gained an altogether different meaning in the context of the COVID-19 response. Faith-based actors had to be quick and creative to find alternative modes of communication. In Indonesia, an informal network of Christian NGOs, scientists and members of a Christian disaster reduction network was established to exchange ideas, infographics and instruction videos related to the COVID-19 response. Such infographics and instructions also benefited the larger community as they were distributed in villages and hospitals. In Ethiopia, Norwegian Church Aid had to consider phone and other digital means to enable continuation of their group work and social mobilization. In areas that do not have internet

coverage, NCA collected phone numbers of beneficiaries who were appointed as focal points. 'We have provided them with credit and now call them on the phone to discuss certain ideas that they can then pass on to others,' explained the NCA program manager.

[Civic] space for faith-based actors

The second set of questions of this research circled around the impact of COVID-19 on civic space. In what way did the COVID-19 restrictions on movement and association hamper the work of faith-based actors? Could faith-based organizations and actors continue to play a role as advocates of marginalized groups?

Ethiopia

Other than in most African countries where space for CSOs and FBOs tends to be shrinking, in Ethiopia, faith-based actors and organizations were explicitly granted more space to operate than before because of the COVID-19 response. The government has provided free media coverage for one month due to the lock down as people are not able to worship and the Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia was allocated a central role in the roll-out of the national COVID-19 prevention campaign. In February 2019, civil society organizations had already been granted much more space by the new NGO law that, other than before, allows them to engage in human rights advocacy and receive donations from foreign donors. All three Ethiopian respondents that participated in this research agreed that due to the new NGO law and the central role allocated to faith-based actors in the COVID-19 response, there are many more opportunities for faith-based actors to initiate activities. They differ, however, in their view on how to respond to this grand governmental gesture. According to Bereket Tassew from the Terepeza Development Association, a partner of Tearfund, faith actors should remain cautious to ensure they are not accommodated by governmental power. According to Kidist Belayneh from Norwegian Church Aid, faith-based actors should overcome their suspicion and 'grasp the opportunity to do what they are mandated to do'.

Indonesia

Space for faith-based organizations in Indonesia is not primarily determined by the government but increasingly by faith-based actors themselves, especially by those contributing to a climate of religious intolerance and polarisation. Many faith-based organizations feared that religious intolerance might become a stumble block for the effective, unified implementation of the COVID-19 response. Especially after the news broke that some religious gatherings had functioned as 'super spreader' events. Anticipating an increase of interfaith tensions, religious leaders

from the main[stream] religious institutions in Indonesia tried their best to promote messages of interfaith harmony and cooperation. Even before the government itself announced large-scale social restrictions, members of the Inter Religious Council organised a joint press event in which they urged their followers to worship at home and combat the virus in unity and harmony. Where the governmental COVID-19 response was at times weak and cause of confusion, faith actors filled the gap by massively mobilizing volunteers and resources to get the right health messages across. At the same time, it was observed that faith actors from different denominations continued to compete for space and funding in the humanitarian arena.

Global faith actors

The social restrictions and other protocols enacted to curb the virus greatly impacted on the space and freedom of faith communities. Nonetheless, during the first phase of the COVID-19 response, the majority of faith actors actively supported the governmental restrictions by calling on their communities to abide to them. During the recovery phase, however, faith actors may well adopt a more critical attitude to governmental COVID-19 policies. On multiple occasions, global faith actors already raised attention to groups whose rights risk being infringed by the COVID-19 response.

Members of the ACT Alliance issued a joint statement on gender and COVID-19, in which they pointed at 'the intersecting injustices' faced by women and girls. An alliance of grassroots- and faith-based organizations from Central America, Mexico, and the United States launched a joint statement to raise attention to the protection needs of migrants and refugees. Although no concrete examples were found of non-faith organizations whose civic space was expanded due to advocacy of faith actors, space for members of marginalized groups whose plights were addressed certainly increased. One encouraging example of how faith leaders increased space for civil society at large was that of the interreligious council in Uganda. They went public and jointly denounced gender-based violence and demanded respect for women's rights. 'No other actors can do that with the same outreach and authority,' commented Jørgen Thomsen.

During the COVID-19 response, inter- and intragovernmental bodies such as the WHO and the UN, have sought cooperation with global faith actors. However, the approach and level of such cooperation differed greatly. While the WHO engaged in an equal partnership with faith actors to develop guidelines for religious gatherings, UN OCHA practically failed to mention faith actors altogether in their first global COVID-19 response plan.

Introduction

Two years after the finalisation of the research *If you need us, allow us. The role of faith-based organizations in enhancing civic space* (2018), the recognition for faith-based organizations (FBOs) seems to be growing. Non-faith actors and donors begin to recognize that FBOs can play important roles as advocates of marginalized peoples, minority rights and gender equality, and as such play a key role in enhancing space for civil society at large. Besides, during the COVID-19 response in the Netherlands, members of the Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA¹) that commissioned the research gained the impression that FBOs were increasingly appreciated by non-faith actors for their specific strengths and qualities. Although these impressions could not be verified, they did inspire the wish amongst members of the Civic Engagement Alliance to learn more about the (changed) roles and positions of FBOs in the context of the COVID-19 response.

The COVID-19 crisis seriously impacted on the role and position of FBOs in two ways. One, all over the world, governments and intra-governmental institutions such as the WHO began to reach out to FBOs to ask for their assistance in the COVID-19 crisis response. Two, in an attempt to stop the spread of the deadly virus, governments began to take measures that deeply affected and limited the freedom of movement, assembly and association of all peoples and civil society organizations, including that of faith actors and communities. These developments gave rise to a series of questions that form the focus of this follow-up research of the Civic Engagement Alliance that studies the role of, and space for FBOs in the COVID-19 response.

Main and sub-research questions

The research sought to find answers to the following main and sub-questions:

The roles and positions of FBOs in times of COVID-19

1. What are the specific roles and positions of faith-based organizations and actors, when compared to secular CSOs, in

times of the COVID-19 response?

- a. What specific roles and positions do FBOs play or take on in the COVID-19 crisis response?
- b. What shifts or newly emerging relations arise between global faith actors (such as WCC, ACT) and non-faith actors (such as WHO, UN-OCHA) in the context of the COVID-19 crisis response?
- c. What linking and learning initiatives have emerged between faith-based actors responding to the crisis in the global North and South?

The impact of COVID-19 measures on civic space for FBOs

2. In what way do COVID-19 measures, such as the restrictions on freedom of movement, assembly and association, hamper the work of FBOs and limit their space to mobilize religious resources?

- a. In what way do the COVID-19 measures hamper the work of FBOs in the crisis response?
- b. What specific roles and positions do FBOs play in advocating civic space at times of COVID-19?
- c. In what way do the COVID-19 restrictions hamper the roles of FBOs as advocates of civic space?
- d. In what way do the COVID-19 measures limit the means of faith-based actors to mobilize their religious resources [see section 'data analysis' below and p. 9-10 of the 2018 research report]?

Religious resources reviewed

3. To what extent does the COVID-19 crisis challenge faith-based organizations to more consciously reflect on their specific roles as faith-based actors and their religious resources: on what they have to bring to the world in times of COVID-19?
 - a. Does internal reflection evoked by the COVID-19 crisis bring about new (emphasis on) religious resources within FBOs? Think of the 'four points' promoted by Jorgen Thomsen [regulate faith life, nurture resilience, nurture inclusivity,

1 *The Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA) is a Dutch rooted Alliance of Faith Based Organizations that have joined forces in a program of Lobby and Advocacy in cooperation with the Dutch Government. The CEA members are: CNV Internationaal, coPrisma, Edukans, ICCO, Kerkinactie, and Wilde Ganzen. In addition, four members of the association coPrisma participate in the CEA Lobby and Advocacy Program, that is: Light for the World, Woord en Daad, Red een Kind and Tear. ICCO has the lead management over this program.*

protect rights). Or of Tearfund's social media campaign that aims to promote reciprocity and solidarity between North and South.

- b. Do non-faith actors increasingly recognize the specific value and roles of FBOs because of their actions in the COVID-19 response? To what extent does the religious resource of 'presence', for example, become more visible in times of travel bans and bring a new perspective to the debate on localization?

The way forward: concluding reflections

- ▶ What can be concluded based on the findings in relation to the title of the previous research report, 'If you need us, allow us!' Do FBOs continue to struggle for recognition of their specific roles and values during the COVID-19 response? If so, how come? If not, what brought this change in recognition about?
- ▶ Which of the changes in the roles and positions of FBOs in times of COVID-19 can be expected to last or disappear after the ending of the crises?
- ▶ What specific roles could FBOs perform during the recovery and reconstruction phase following the COVID-19 response?

Purpose and scope of the research

The purpose of this research report is to inform faith-based organizations, governmental policy makers and other interested audiences about the specific roles and positions of faith-based actors in the COVID-19 crisis response. The research follows-up on a previous in-depth research that studied the role of faith-based actors in enhancing civic space (Jansen 2018). Other than the previous research that contains more theoretical analysis and basic information about the histories and positions of faith actors in Indonesia, Ethiopia and Kenya, this follow-up research has a somewhat lighter touch. It presents a series of field examples and observations by a selected group of faith actors in response to the questions listed above. It builds on interviews with informants that participated in the previous research and on a study of articles and discussions on the web (also see section 'Methodology'). The report contains two country-specific case studies: Indonesia and Ethiopia. In addition, it addresses questions concerning the roles and relations of global faith and non-faith actors in the crisis response.

Methodology

Data gathering

Data were gathered through a rather simple and straightforward method of interviews and desk study. A total of eight interviews were conducted with informants who also participated in the previous research (3 for each country), and

with experts who are able to shed a light on the role of FBOs in the COVID-19 response (2). In addition, 4 resource persons of the Civic Engagement Alliance were consulted. The desk research mainly built on articles and discussions published on the internet and on internal FBO documents and reports.

Data analysis

Data were categorized and analysed in correspondence with the main- and sub-questions of the research as outlined above. The questions concerning 'religious resources' (2c, 3a. and b.) built on the list of religious resources as identified and described on pages 9 and 10 of the 2018-research report. In short, this paragraph argues that FBOs can play an important role in enhancing space for civil society at large, due to:

- ▶ their long-time presence in communities,
- ▶ their rapport with deeply held (religious) beliefs and values that define norms and behaviours in society,
- ▶ their holistic approach that incorporates the social, environmental, spiritual and ethical in one complete package,
- ▶ their religious literacy that allows them to communicate in a language that many people find more accessible and familiar than the rhetoric of rights,
- ▶ their spiritual capital that helps people connect with other peoples, other living systems on earth, and with a transcendent or invisible power that gives them great strength and stamina when struggling for change,
- ▶ their impressive constituency that renders them 'the power of numbers',
- ▶ their substantial material and physical (land) assets and,
- ▶ their position as members of a 'networked society': a wide network of faith-based institutions and organizations connected across local and national borders through shared values and goals.

Structure

The report opens with an executive summary that presents the main findings of the research related to the mobilisation and use of religious resources, and the (shifting) space for and position of FBOs in times of COVID-19. Then, following this Introduction, chapter one presents the findings of the country case study on Ethiopia, followed by an interview with an Ethiopian informant. Chapter two presents the findings of the country case study on Indonesia. It is again followed by an interview, this time with a representative from a regional faith alliance. Chapter three discusses the roles and positions of global faith actors and addresses questions about the shifting relations between faith and non-faith actors, and the global north and south. The report closes with some concluding reflections.

Chapter One: Ethiopia

COVID-19 in Ethiopia

How COVID-19 so far affected the country

On May 18, when many countries in the Global North had already experienced their first peak of infections, the number of COVID-19 affected people in Ethiopia was still relatively low. The Ethiopian Ministry of Health reported a total of 352 confirmed patients, the majority of which resided in the capital of Addis Ababa. One week later, however, when the interviews for this research were conducted, the numbers suddenly began to increase. 'We are getting more cases of people who had no contact with other confirmed patients,' said Desti Heyi, Country Manager of ICCO Ethiopia, 'it is a bit worrying²'. 'All activities are slowed down, we have martial law so it is a very grim situation,' commented Bereket Tassew, director of the Terepeza Development Association, a partner of Tearfund. Bereket connected online from Southern Ethiopia. 'There is uncertainty, a lot of worry and frustration,' he continued.

On May 31, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health reported a total of 1,172 confirmed COVID-19 cases³. Although this number may in itself not seem alarming on a total population of over 109 million people, it is the coincidence of the pandemic with other emergencies in Ethiopia that worries many. 'In our view, the government has prepared well for the pandemic,' comments Kidist Belayneh Program Manager of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)⁴. 'The mechanisms for preparedness have been put in place, but with all the additional challenges, we cannot respond in the way other countries do'.

Food and nutrition insecurity

Ethiopia recently faced a series of new emergencies such as flooding, a local outbreak of cholera and locust swarms, that 'are stretching the capacity of Government and relief partners' according to the UN organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) (GoE and OCHA 2020). The country was only just recovering from years of drought when locusts swarmed the country, massively destroyed crops and left many pastures bare and destroyed. As a consequence, many fear that the food and nutrition insecurity that is likely to affect the country following the pandemic, may cause an even greater threat to the lives of Ethiopians.

'If we have to go into total lock down, that would be disastrous, especially for Ethiopians living in Addis Ababa,' says Desta Heyi. His concern is echoed by a recent household survey which found that 'the food security situation in Addis Ababa could sharply deteriorate in the coming weeks if disease transmission and social distancing measures continue⁵. Similar worries are raised about an imminent food crisis affecting the rural areas of Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, there is no such thing as a minority group whose livelihood is especially at risk due to the pandemic, explains Bereket Tassew.

We live in a country in which 80 percent of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. After the drought and locust swarm, the lock down of the global and local market causes another serious threat to Ethiopian farmers. It slows down the supply chain and makes it increasingly difficult

2 Skype interview with Desti Heyi, country manager ICCO, 26 May 2020. Please note: all subsequent quotes from Desti Heyi in this chapter are taken from the same interview.

3 See Notification Note on COVID-19 Situational Update: https://www.eph.gov.et/images/novel_coronavirus/confirmed-case-Press-release_May-31-Eng_V4.pdf [accessed June 1, 2020].

4 Skype interview with Kidist Belayneh, Programme Manager Norwegian Church Aid, 28 May 2020. Please note: all subsequent quotes from Kidist Belayneh in this chapter are taken from the same interview.

5 IFPRI Blog, 'Survey suggests rising risk of food and nutrition insecurity in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as COVID-19 restrictions continue', May 21, 2020. <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/survey-suggests-rising-risk-food-and-nutrition-insecurity-addis-ababa-ethiopia-COVID-19> [accessed 1 June 2020].

to import seeds and fertilizers. More than 11 million Ethiopians already depend on food aid at this moment. The livelihoods of the majority of Ethiopians are currently in great risk.

IDPs and migrants

On top of the natural disasters mentioned above, Ethiopia recently suffered some serious man-made disasters. In 2018, inter-communal violence escalated in the regions of Amhara, Oromia, Harar, Dire Dawa, Benishangul, and the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP). Close to one million people were forced to flee their homes⁶. In December 2019, Ethiopia still counted 1,414,000 people who were internally displaced due to conflict and violence⁷.

Overseas migrants are another source of concern. Because of the pandemic, thousands of Ethiopian migrants were forced to return home. In between 1 April and 12 May, Ethiopia received over 11,800 registered returnees. To prevent further spread of the virus, they all need to be traced and quarantined for two weeks, but this is difficult as many enter the country through informal border crossing points and are unaware of the quarantine obligation (IOM 2020).

COVID-19 measures and restrictions

Possibly because the government acknowledges the (greater) risk of food and nutrition security crisis, it has so far imposed less severe controls on movement than some neighbouring countries. The country has not been put into total lock down. People are allowed to go outside on the condition that they wear masks and maintain two metres distance from each other. All schools and universities are closed and most employees work at home, but shops are still open. People are not allowed to gather with more than four people, but they still have freedom of movement, except for one area in Addis Ababa where restrictions were imposed following a recent outbreak. Buses and trains are still operating, but may use no more than 30 percent of their total seating capacity, and taxis no more than 50 percent.

Faith-based responses to COVID-19

The national prayer to curb COVID-19

'For a poor country such as Ethiopia, Corona is too heavy a burden,' says Ephraim Tsegay, director of Tearfund Ethiopia.

'We do not have a strong health system, so prevention is our only hope' (Tearfund-NL 2020). Fortunately, the government seriously invested in the development of a nation-wide prevention strategy. Early April, a national COVID-19 campaign was rolled-out that did not only allocate a key role to religious institutions, but that moreover framed the entire campaign in religious terms. On April 6, 2020, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) called for a month-long national prayer to help curb the pandemic. The televised event was attended by leaders from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawhido Church (EOTC), the Supreme Council of Ethiopian Islamic Affairs, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Believers Council and by Ethiopia's president Ms. Sahle-Work Zewde. While the various religious leaders called upon their faith communities to abide by the governmental measures and stay and pray at home during the festive seasons of Easter and Ramadan, the president publicly praised the religious leaders for their support and urged the Ethiopians to practice hygienic discipline (Sahlu 2020).

The joint staging of this national COVID-19 campaign indicates a major change in relations between the state and religious institutions in Ethiopia. State and religion were closely intertwined during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and his descendants. The Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Ethiopian Monarchy jointly reigned the country until 1974, but decades of severe religious oppression and persecution followed when the Marxist Derg regime took power in 1974. Violent religious persecution ended when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took over in 1991, but freedom of speech remained limited, especially since the 2009 Proclamation that prohibited faith-based and civil society organizations to engage in lobby and advocacy.⁸ Although prime minister Abiy was quick to announce a series of democratic reforms after his appointment in 2018, including freedom of press, the previous CEA research found that most faith-based organizations remained hesitant to speak out publicly and adopted a 'wait and see' attitude (Jansen 2018). Two years later, however, the COVID-19 crisis seems to have prompted the government and religious leaders to strengthen their relations. Although the joining of hands was of course motivated by governmental awareness of the influential roles

6 UN OCHA, 27 June 2018, 'Ethiopia: Escalating inter-communal violence displaces close to 1M people', <https://www.unocha.org/story/ethiopia-escalating-inter-communal-violence-displaces-close-1m-people> [accessed June 1, 2020].

7 See: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/ethiopia> [accessed 1 June 2020].

8 Also see previous research 'If you need us, allow us!', page 41 and further.

that religious leaders have in Ethiopian communities, and by a need to curb communal celebrations during Ramadan and Easter, the government also had to let go some of its control over faith actors. A law prohibiting religious institutions to broadcast religious services had to be lifted to enable the national prayer campaign. From April 6 onwards, religious organizations that were affiliated to the inter-religious council were granted television rights and one hour air time each day. As such, the Ethiopian government and parliament actively created space for faith-based actors to play a leading role in the roll out of the national COVID-19 prevention campaign.

In turn, religious leaders of various faiths used the trust and influence they had among their followers by readily supporting the governmental prevention campaign. On April 1, the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council suspended all prayers in mosques and one day later, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church followed by asking its followers to stay and pray at home. Although they may well have been asked to do so, in other countries, authorities had to make much more effort to convince religious institutions of the dangers of religious gatherings.

The power of prayer and religious narratives

The previous research found that prime minister Abiy made 'sophisticated use of religious language, narratives and values' when touring the country to promote major democratic reforms following a severe political crisis (Jansen 2018: 41). Although this time, it were the Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian president who led the campaign rather than prime minister Abiy, once more, the government deliberately opted for a faith-based approach to address a major national crisis.

During the televised national prayer, political pleas for unity, discipline and abidance to hygienic norms were cleverly intertwined with religious appeals for repentance and harmony. 'The national prayer actually started with the religious leaders asking the Ethiopian public to forgive them, in case of any mistakes they had made in the past', recalls Kidist Belayneh. Although such general pleas for mercy are part of the Islamic ritual/tradition of Ramadan, according to Kidist, no references were made to any specific religions or groups. 'They talked about the many grievances and blood sheds that we recently experienced in Ethiopia, without explicitly mentioning affected groups', she recalls. 'They said that we need to repent so that

God is merciful, then we can overcome this challenge as a nation, as a country. We have to give our love to God, be careful to each other, live in peaceful coexistence and not extort to religious extremism'. Such appeals for peace and unity are of course welcome to both the government and society, in times of heightened inter-communal tensions and unpopular measures causing severe economic crises.

One may be cynical about this faith-based approach, denouncing it as a mere instrumentalization of religion for political purposes. Or one may call it intelligent, demonstrating awareness of the human need for moral and spiritual guidance in times of distress. As the Ethiopian president stated, according to a newspaper article, 'at such critical time, religious fathers are the source of hope, courage because they are able to show the light at the end of the tunnel'.⁹

The daily prayers that were broadcast on prime time by multiple television channels and presided by leaders from different faith backgrounds, included religious teachings, prayers, and lessons about necessary precautions to combat COVID-19. All program contributors were asked to abide by a code of conduct to prevent unnecessary competition and negative messages (Tessema 2020). Rumours about COVID-19 survival depending on faith were denounced by explaining that survival depended on adherence to hygienic and other precautionary measures alone. The national prayer was quite popular. According to the Director-General of Ethiopian Broadcast Authority, the shows reached 60 to 70 percent of Ethiopians who have television sets.

That the inter-religious council and the president opened the national prayer instead of the prime minister, may indicate a change in the image and position of the prime minister. Two years ago, it was the prime minister Abiy himself who used religious narratives to promote unity and win the sympathy of the diverse Ethiopian peoples. Today, Ethiopians seem to be a bit wary of such 'preaching' by their governmental leader. 'His popularity has waned,' explains Bereket Tassew. 'He continues to use religious metaphors in public speeches but people are annoyed, say it is not his place to preach'. Besides, his words have not always been followed by deeds. 'You cannot make everybody happy,' explains Bereket, 'this is a federal government'.

⁹ Ethiopian Press Agency, 8 April 2020, 'Ethiopia prays for world community', <https://www.press.et/english/?p=20722#> [accessed 1 June 2020].

Ethiopian politics have always been heavily influenced by ethnic identity politics. Prime minister Abiy did his best to rise above ethnic divisions by using religious narratives as a binding force to unite the different ethnic and religious groups in Ethiopia. Soon after he was appointed prime minister in 2018, he started to promote a new notion of national identity called 'Ethiopianess', a term that aimed to give new impetus to the idea of Ethiopians as one people, united in diversity through a unique biblical history (Jansen 2018: 41).

Recently, however, ethnic sentiments again begin to dominate the battle for power. People are less inclined to buy into the prime minister's "preachings" about national unity and harmony. Opposition parties argue that the prime minister is using COVID-19 as an excuse to postpone the elections that are due in August, in order to retain power.

The heightened political tensions may alternatively be regarded as a backlash or a success of Abiy's calls for openness and tolerance. Civic space has substantially increased due to the democratic reforms introduced by the Abiy government. 'We had no freedom of expression until two years ago.

All of a sudden we were opening up, meaning that you will also see different views,' comments Kidist Belayneh. Now that people are allowed to speak up, the divisions also become more apparent.

Local faith-based responses to COVID-19

On the local level, many faith-based actors have taken up roles in public health campaigns, informing communities about hygiene and social distancing measures. They do so by building on existing faith structures. 'In our area, we are working with 1400 local churches,' explains Bereket Tassew, director of the Terepeza Development Association. 'The [Wolayta Kale Heywot] church has a general assembly, then you have district fellowships, then you have local churches. We pass our messages through the general assembly and then, those 1400 representatives from local churches pass them on to their congregation members.' Likewise, NCA provides support to the national campaign of the Inter Religious Council by distributing public health messages and sanitary materials to members of their local church networks.

Local faith actors do not merely pass on practical messages about prevention measures. They also have key roles in providing spiritual guidance and consolation in times of distress. 'The church is always there for encouragement in times of crisis', explains Bereket Tassew. COVID-19 patients

tend to be stigmatised by the community. Sometimes, even if someone only suffers a minor headache, people around them already run away. In such cases, the church brings biblical messages, saying that people should care for each other instead, look after each other'.

Religious leaders play an important role in people's psychosocial and spiritual well-being, affirms Kidist Belayneh. Together, networks of faith-based organizations are organising online prayer sessions, they share materials for social media use. As such, they try to comfort and console people, provide them with correct information to take away their fears and mistrust 'so that people are not panicking, to ensure their sense of personal peace'.

Faith actors in Ethiopia also initiated emergency response activities on their own accord. Most religious institutions established local COVID-19 task forces. They provide food to the poor and unemployed, distribute sanitary materials and set up hand washing stations in refugee camps.

Preventing GBV and food crises

Faith-based organizations also try their best to continue their regular programs. The spiral-off risk of the COVID-19 crisis is high, it may deepen the food crisis and contribute to an increase of gender-based violence.

At the time of writing, it was not yet clear whether COVID-19 is exposing more women in Ethiopia to gender-based violence. Studies by UN Women and others that look into that matter are currently underway. Yet, irrespective of COVID-19, gender-based violence has always been highly prevalent in Ethiopia. NCA has begun to include messages on gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19 in their regular GBV-program that works with faith-based marriage counsellors. Marriage counselling is part of the spiritual orientation that is generally provided to families by local priests. In the Orthodox church, for example, every member of the community has a personal confessor, called the Father Confessor. On average, every Father Confessor has about fifteen households that he visits on a regular basis.

'We provide skills training to these religious counsellors to strengthen their capacities,' explains Kidist Belayneh. 'We do so because we recognize that they have an influential role in family life. They provide guidance on the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. Counsellors may for example discuss what peaceful family life means. They are a resource and often intervene in case of family disputes'.

Smallholder farmers are another group requiring attention. Not only because of the repetitive natural disasters that destroyed their crops, but moreover because failed harvests may affect a much larger part of the Ethiopian population. 'We try to continue the implementation of our regular program, supporting smallholder farmers, while taking the necessary precautions and following the advice of the Ministry of Health and the WHO', explains Desta Heyi from ICCO. So far, ICCO's local partners and communities have not yet been seriously affected by COVID-19. Farmers can continue to work on their lands while maintaining distance from other farmers. But as global traffic is limited, they may encounter difficulties in the near future because they depend on imported fertilizers and other chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides. Besides, farmers may encounter difficulties with accessing markets if travel limitations are expanded.

ICCO just received funding to start a Desert Locust joint response (DLJR) project in two districts with the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA). The intervention concentrates on food security

and has an income generation component. 'We will supply seed to farmers, and some life-stock, such as goats. We will also conduct awareness raising activities on public health and hygiene'.

While most of the farming itself is not directly affected by the COVID-19 measures, it has become much more difficult to continue community mobilization and group work. One of TDA's regular programs concerns women's self-help groups. Women meet on a weekly base to collectively save small amounts of money that can then be used as loans to meet education and healthcare costs, or to establish small businesses. 'We are now trying to give them the necessary information so that they can take protective measures', says Bereket Tassew. 'We tell them to gather in open areas where they can take their distance, and to meet with no more than four people at once'.

At the same time, faith-based organizations try to establish alternative methods to continue group work and community mobilization.

New ways of working: building digital infrastructures

Switching to alternative modes of communication in Ethiopia is not easy, as the digital and mobile infrastructure in Ethiopia are poorly developed. Kidist Belayneh from NCA relates how she and her team tried to invent solutions to overcome this 'headache':

'Finding different ways to work with the community while abiding to the social distancing roles caused much of our headache over the past months. Because of the State of Emergency, we are not allowed to work with more than four people at the same time. Besides, we don't have a good digital infrastructure in Ethiopia.

In areas where we do not have a good social media platform, we have collected phone numbers of beneficiaries of the GBV-program and we have appointed focal points. We have provided them with credit and now call them on the phone to discuss certain ideas that they can then pass on to others.

In areas where there is no mobile phone network, we are looking at possibilities to work with [local] radio and television to pass on messages to the community. If we plan to broadcast a program or have other communication to share, we can beforehand inform our focal points and tell them to listen to the radio. We are also considering our partners to work more closely with local task forces that have especially been established for the Covid-response. They can act as brokers between the community and health facilities.

Finally, we are also exploring means to establish telegram groups in project sites, who can pass on messages or announce the broadcast of our programs to the wider community. That is how we try to continue our social mobilization work'.

Skype interview, 28 May 2020.

NCA is learning fast, this way. They recently organised a kick-off meeting for partners on Zoom for the very first time. Besides, they conducted a gender audit by phone, interviewing and reviewing their partner organizations by phone, 'because life has to go on!' laughs Kidist.

Civic space - two years later

Civil society organizations experienced a sea change in Ethiopia over the past two years. Two years ago, they were not allowed to be involved in lobby and advocacy, let alone in human rights advocacy. Civil Society Organizations that were engaging in human rights activities could not receive more than 10% of their funding from foreign donors. In February 2019, the so-called Proclamation 621/2009 was replaced by an NGO law that 'totally changed' this restrictive situation. 'It does not matter whether or not you receive foreign donations as long as you engage in legal activities,' says Desti Heyi. 'We are allowed to do advocacy, engage in human rights issues, we may implement income generating activities, as long as these support the organization's vision and mission, and once you have an NGO-license you do not have to renew that each year, submitting an annual report is fine'.

Despite the changes, civil society organizations are not actively undertaking human rights activities and there is no mushrooming of new NGOs. So far, the impact seems especially visible in the spike of training and capacity building activities. 'There is much more space for capacity building. Organizations now do a lot of skills training and empowerment work,' observes Desta Heyi.

Yet, the new NGO law is still fresh and the trauma is still there. That is why, according to Desta Heyi, NGOs do not yet embark on vocal human rights campaigns. Likewise, Bereket Tassew is wary of the new liberties granted by the new government. 'There is a change,' he affirms. 'Compared to the past situation, there is more room to express yourselves and engage in human rights activities. But there are still some limitations, it is not wide open. We see a relative easing of the situation. Space is there for you if you are supporting the government, but if you are not supporting the government, you might face a challenge'.

If you are allowed space, should you take it?

As part of the COVID-19 response in Ethiopia, faith-based actors and organizations have explicitly been granted more space to operate than before. A law prohibiting the broadcasting of religious services has been lifted and the Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia has been allocated a central role in the roll-out of the national COVID-19 prevention campaign. All three

respondents agree that due to these measures and the new NGO law of February 2019, there are many more opportunities for faith-based actors to initiate activities, both in relation to human rights and in relation to the COVID-19 response. But they differ in their view on how to respond to that grand governmental gesture. Should they grasp the opportunity now that they are allowed to do so by law and appealed upon by the government? Or should they remain cautious to prevent governmental instrumentalization?

'There is space, huge space for faith-based organizations to be involved in various activities. I don't think there is a limitation,' says Bereket Tassew. 'But my personal view is that the church should always be in the middle. You have to be in the middle [between government and society] to have a high moral ground, to look at things in a just and fair way, to be the voice of the voiceless, to be the voice of the people. Sometimes churches are tempted to associate themselves with power, also in Ethiopia'.

Kidist Belayneh has a different take on the matter. In her view, prime minister Abiy is challenging faith-based organizations to take a more active role in the countries' development. He advised a series of protestant, evangelical churches to establish a joint council, and they have done so. 'It could be interpreted differently,' says Kidist Belayneh, 'but he challenges them "What have you really done?" Ethiopia is a country rich of religious assets, be it Muslim or Christian, so what have you really done in terms of nurturing that with research, with documentation of our values and so forth?' Personally, she feels that the government is aware of the fact that religious institutions have an important role in this country. 'I think that they are giving us space, in the media as well. The question is, what do you do with that space? Do you grasp the opportunity, or not?'

So far, the give-and-take between government and religious institutions seems to go both ways. The Ethiopian Orthodox church responded to the government's appeal by allowing the government to use several of its universities and training institutes as isolation and treatment centers for COVID-19 patients. In addition, they contributed 3 million birr to support the work of the governmental COVID-19 task force [Sisay 2020]. In turn, the granting of airtime on television and the national month of prayer seems to have sparked the religiosity amongst Ethiopians. More people seem to be praying, according to the observations of the respondents, and even though this may partly have been orchestrated by the government, it means that the support base for religious leaders and faith-based organizations is growing.

Interview with Kidist Belayneh

Head of Programs Norwegian Church Aid - Ethiopia¹⁰

“In my view, faith actors have a responsibility at hand. They should grasp the opportunity to do what they are mandated to do. During a webinar on gender-based violence, one of my colleagues said, ‘the church should be a refuge for women affected by violence’. Faith actors should be challenged to take their responsibility in Ethiopia’s development. In my experience, when faith actors know how to do it, they will act.”

Could you begin by telling me about the current situation regarding the pandemic in your country?

It is very strange. Since last week we are getting larger numbers of Covid-affected people. Before, we had about four or five patients every day but now we get around hundred new cases each day. Community transmission has begun.

The government was aware this would happen. Our prime minister is young, he was foreseeing this situation and pro-actively dealt with it. The mechanisms for preparedness have been put in place.

But with all the challenges in this country, we cannot respond the way other more developed countries can. We have 700.000 refugees in the country, we have suffered natural disasters, floods and locust swarms. We have a large young population, especially in the urban areas, many of whom are [getting] unemployed. So there are many challenges.

How are people responding to the COVID-19 measures?

Ethiopia is a communal society, we depend on each other socially and culturally. There is a lot of negligence within the community, many people do not abide by the social distancing rules despite the efforts by the health institutions and others to get the messages across. Social distancing is a luxury in a society in which people are very dependent on each other. The authorities now started to enforce protective measures, they declared a State of Emergency until August. It is a major challenge for the government, but in my view, abiding by the regulations is an individual responsibility as well.

Are you and your partners involved in the response?

We were already providing emergency response to refugees from South Sudan and IDPs in Somali region in the WASH-sector - water, sanitation and health. In response to COVID-19, we are now also providing protective items, we share COVID-19 response messages, and set up hand washing stations. We provide similar assistance to the IDPs in the Somali region. We are also including COVID-19 messages in our peace, climate and GBV programs, in which we work with religious leaders from different faith communities. And we implement activities to prevent gender-based violence [see main text for details].

How does the pandemic affect your daily work as an NCA Program Manager?

Many of the funding resources used for development are now used for COVID-19 response. As a consequence, we are challenged to reprogram our activities to adapt to the situation. In the long run we may face resource limitations.

Finding different ways to work with the community while abiding to the social distancing roles caused much of our headache over the past months. Because of the State of Emergency, we are not allowed to work with more than four people at the same time. Besides, we don't have a good digital infrastructure in Ethiopia, so we began to design a new plan to continue group work and community mobilization [see main text].

¹⁰ Skype Interview, 28 May 2020. Please note: the interview has been shortened and adapted for the purpose of this report.

Faith-based actors and institutions have been allocated a key role in the COVID-19 prevention campaign. The government has given free media access to faith actors for one month prayer. Do faith-based actors still have space to act and speak out on their own accord?

Yes of course. For one, they have to respond to the governmental appeal because we are facing a pandemic: it is in the interest of all to support the governmental response now.

Were you able to implement any new activities after the government lifted many of the NGO restrictions two years ago?

Yes, we started an interfaith peace program that we could not implement before, or at least not under that name. As part of this program, we train local faith actors, women and youth in advocacy and peace building. We are mobilizing youth to counter hate speech on social media and initiate constructive dialogues instead. We are mapping peace initiatives by women of faith.

We renamed a program that was previously called sexual and reproductive health. Now we can outright call it a gender-based violence program, we can talk about advocacy, about rights.

What, in your view, are the specific qualities that faith-based actors can build on in the COVID-19 response?

It is all about the infrastructure that faith actors have. You call upon people and then they actually come and show up, and you can reach out - that is unique. If you can reach out to such large numbers of constituents, you have a great resource.

A second resource are the catholic schools and health facilities. Catholic schools also have the potential to build young peoples' skills in terms of tolerance, teaching them to make peace with their neighbours. We can teach them to be compassionate and tolerant, despite their different genders or ethnicities.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses this metaphor of the church forest. Ethiopians are tied to their religious values as branches to trees. When you are really building on people's values and nurture these by providing technical support, I believe faith-based organizations can truly add value.

Chapter Two: Indonesia

COVID-19 in Indonesia

How COVID-19 so far affected the country

On May 18, the Government of Indonesia announced 18,010 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across all 34 provinces of Indonesia, with 1,191 deaths, 11,422 patients under surveillance and 45,047 people under observation. Large scale social restrictions were implemented late March in three provinces that were particularly affected by the virus (West Sumatra, DKI Jakarta and Gorontalo) and in 21 districts. These included measures such as closing public places, shutting schools and workplaces, limiting religious activities at houses of worship, limiting social and cultural activities in public, restricting public transport, and limiting travel to and from the restricted regions [UN OCHA 2020; IPAC 2020].

Many Indonesians found it hard to abide by the social restriction measures. The high population density in large cities, such as Jakarta and Semarang, makes social distancing extremely difficult [Bennett 2020]. Only at the end of April, the government in Jakarta started to enforce the measures by imposing small fines, for example for anyone gathering in a group of more than five people [IPAC 2020]. The vast and differentiated geographic lay-out of the Indonesian archipelago forms another challenge for central coordination of the COVID-19 response. The occurrence of the virus differs greatly per island and region, and so does [the quality] of the health facilities [Bennett 2020].

Economic and livelihood security

As in many countries, Indonesia is especially fearing the backlash of the COVID-19 measures on the economic and livelihood security of its over 263 million inhabitants. Indonesia's informal economy is enormous: millions of Indonesians earn their living by selling food and other items in public places on the street, another substantial number of people is homeless or has no formal living address. On 29 April, the President announced economic protection and recovery measures for medium and small enterprises. Smaller-sized enterprises categorized as poor and highly affected by the restrictions can receive social assistance in the form of food packages assistance, cash assistance, and reduced electricity tariffs. By the end of April, 2020, over 8 million people had

already registered for this Pre-employment Card program.

The tourism industry appeared to be one of the most affected business sectors, with an estimated 1.7 million people affected by the COVID-19 measures [UN OCHA Indonesia 2020]

Ramadan

Ramadan and the celebration of Eid [Idul Fitri] formed another major challenge for the country in which 87% of the people are registered as Muslim. Most Indonesian families would normally flock the streets in the evenings to jointly break fast in one of the many street stalls or restaurants. For the celebration of Eid, millions would go on route and crowd in overflowed trains and boats to return to their hometown.

The Government initially refused to prohibit this faith-based travel tradition, called mudik , arguing that it had no power to forbid Muslims from doing so. On April 21, two days before the beginning of Ramadan, however, Indonesian President Jokowi suddenly changed his mind and banned the practise of Mudik. By then, over a million of believers working in Jakarta had already travelled to their hometowns in the provinces [Arifianto and Chen 2020]. In response to that, the government later urged people returning from their hometowns to go into a two-week quarantine. That some authorities take this measure very seriously, appears from an anecdote in which mudik-travellers were locked up in a ghost house by the village head [see below frame 'Using ghosts to scare believers into compliance'].

Faith-based responses to COVID-19

Religious leaders promoting social distancing

Overall, religious leaders and organizations have been quicker and stricter in promoting social distancing than national and provincial authorities [Arifianto and Chen 2020]. Already on March 17, long before governmental restrictions were enacted in Jakarta on April 10, the country's highest Islamic authority, the Indonesian Council of Ulama, issued a fatwa that promoted isolation of people exposed to COVID-19, and urged Muslims to follow the required medical protocols in relation to the preparation and burial of COVID-19 deceased people [Bennett 2020]. Even the fundamentalist Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) joined in discouraging followers from attending mass prayers.

Early in April, before President Jokowi announced his prohibition, NU and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia already advised their followers not to travel to their hometowns for the fasting season (mudik) to prevent further spread of the virus¹¹. A few days before Ramadan, both organizations also advised followers to pray and stay at home during the fasting season.¹²

However, as both leaders of the NU and Muhammadiyah no longer have strong roots in the community (Jansen 2018: 51), various local Islamic leaders and communities did not follow this advice. Many mosques in Aceh, West Sumatra, West Nusa Tenggara, West Java and East Java continued holding regular Friday prayers, as well as tarawih prayers (additional prayers performed at night during Ramadan).

Likewise, Christian church organizations in Indonesia already began to advise their followers to restrict their social movements early on. On March 16, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) advised faith communities from its member churches to stay at home and attend worship services online. Gradually, they advised churches to close down churches for Sunday services altogether. When Easter approached (April 12), many Christian churches decided to adjust or cancel their Easter celebrations in April to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) issued a guidance note in which it proposed three alternatives for Good Friday observances to its member churches: observing the day at home, postponing the services until the end of the crisis, or broadcasting online services. The Christian Evangelical Church in Timor (GMIT) in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara subsequently decided to postpone celebrations after it had earlier cancelled Palm Sunday service.¹³

Using ghosts to scare believers into compliance

Although Indonesian are obliged to register as follower of one of the six religions officially recognised by the government (Islam, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism), about 30 million of Indonesians abide to beliefs and practises from a variety of indigenous cultures that are inspired by animist traditions. Besides, many members of the Sunni community in Indonesia follow a mix of animist and Islamic beliefs and practises. Consequently, a vast number of Indonesians believe in ghosts and evil spirits.

While the main religious institutions tried to motivate their followers to abide by the social restriction measures by calling on their duties to act as good, caring, citizens, some local groups and authorities found alternative ways to 'scare' people into compliance. In Kepuh, a village in Java, a local youth group decided to dress up as so-called *pacong*, ghostly figures wrapped in white shrouds with powdered faces and kohl-rimmed eyes that in Indonesian folklore represent the trapped souls of the dead. In the beginning, the creative act had the reverse effect as it drew people to the streets to come and watch. When the youth group adopted an alternative approach, using surprise appearances instead, it began to work. People became scared and stayed in their house.¹⁴ In Sepat, a village in Central Java, three young mudik -travellers ignored the instruction to go into two weeks of quarantine after arriving in their hometown. The village head then directed the local COVID-19 task force to collect them and place them into quarantine in a building known to be haunted by ghosts. After two days, the three mudik-travellers begged the village head to return home, crying that they had been haunted continuously. The village head consented under the condition that the youngsters completed the quarantine at home.¹⁵

11 'NU, Muhammadiyah advise public to skip 'mudik' in time of coronavirus', *Jakarta Post*, April 6, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/06/nu-muhammadiyah-advise-public-to-skip-mudik-in-timeof-coronavirus.html> [accessed June 4, 2020].

12 'COVID-19: Groups call on Muslims to pray at home', *Jakarta Post*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/23/COVID-19-groups-call-on-muslims-to-pray-at-home.html>

13' COVID-19: Indonesian churches alter Good Friday services to avoid spreading virus', *Jakarta Post*, 7 April 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/07/COVID-19-indonesian-churches-alter-good-friday-services-to-avoid-spreading-virus.html>

14 'Ghosts scare Indonesians indoors and away from corona', *Reuters*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-indonesia-ghost-ro/ghosts-scare-indonesians-indoorsand-away-from-coronavirus-idUSKCN21V0E4>

15 'Stoute mudik-gangers moeten in quarantaine in spookhuis', 27 April 2020. <http://www.indonesienu.nl/nu-actueel/stoute-mudik-gangers-moeten-in-quarantaine-in-spookhuis>

Despite this advice, however, Christians from different denominations initially insisted on going to church anyway, believing that God would protect them. This changed when two pastors died from the virus on 21 and 22 March. Then, many of the churches shifted to online services [IPAC 2020: 5].

On 28 March, religious leaders of all major religions in Indonesia joined hands by issuing a joint press statement in which they urged their followers to worship at home. The press conference was organised by the Inter-Religious Council of Indonesia in the media center of the national COVID-19 Task Force. Three days later, on March 31, the Government followed by announcing the first large-scale social restrictions in response to COVID-19.

Activating networks and volunteers

'Our value is in our network, in sharing and linking across districts', says Arshinta, director of the extramural units of the Christian Foundation for Public Health (YAKKUM) which includes the humanitarian unit of the so-called YEU (YAKKUM Emergency Unit). In a country as vast, outspread and wide as the Indonesian peninsular with its over 1000 islands, the fine networks of churches, mosques and temples that reach even the most far remoted villages are invaluable, especially in a time in which governmental coordination of the response is slow, and travel restrictions are in place.

'Churches have to establish a network to help overcome COVID-19', affirms Jacky Manuputty, the General Secretary of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI). 'Soon after the government announced the large-scale social restrictions, PGI decided to form a church task force against COVID-19, as a model to be replicated by member churches across Indonesia', he writes in an explanatory email. 'This task force works in several divisions, such as information and publication division, volunteer division, diaconia division, worship division, pastoral and hospital services, logistics division, and research division'.¹⁶ Many PGI member churches followed suit. 'In my own congregation, we also established a task force,' says Arshinta. Many people were interested to work as a volunteer to help the

hospital or an NGO, to distribute food or disinfection spray. We will start to train those volunteers next week'.¹⁷ Indonesia has a strong tradition of volunteering that is not limited to faith-based organizations alone. 'The National Disaster Management Agency set up volunteer stacks, not only for faith-based organizations, it is an open facility', says Arshinta. 'I heard that about two weeks ago, two to three hundred thousand volunteers had already registered'.

Within the PGI task forces, many engaged in the distribution of masks and latex gloves to various hospitals, as these struggled with a shortage of protective materials. Besides, staff and volunteers of churches belonging to Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI - Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia), including students from the Christian Students Movement in Indonesia, distributed rice to families that became unemployed due to COVID-19 and to poor hospital patients (in Indonesian hospitals, you are supposed to take care of your own food...).

'Because we were already there, and had our networks in the community, we were quick to respond', says Grace Nugroho, director of Yayasan Yabima in Lampung, South Sumatera. Although¹⁸ Yabima, partner organization of Kerk in Actie, normally supports an interfaith group of farmers engaged in organic farming, they rapidly changed to implementing COVID-19 response activities.

Their first aim was to reach marginalized groups who might have been out of reach for the governmental COVID-19 campaign, or who were particularly vulnerable to the virus, such as the elderly or pregnant women. A group of women volunteers was established to help with the distribution of masks, disinfection materials and information leaflets in six different villages.

In the beginning, much of the work of these thousands of volunteers and task forces focused on the distribution of food and sanitary materials. Soon however, the attention shifted to public health education.

¹⁶ Email by Jacky Manuputty, shared by Corrie van der Ven.

¹⁷ Interview with Arshinta, director of the extramural unit of the YAKKUM emergency unit, 1 June 2020. Please note: all subsequent quotes by Arshinta are derived from this same interview.

¹⁸ Skype interview with Grace Nugroho, executive director Yayasan Yabima, 29 May 2020. All subsequent quotes of Grace are derived from the same interview.

Jakomkris

Jakomkris, a network of Christian faith-based humanitarian organizations, was established in 2016 with strong support from Tear Netherlands. The network aims to strengthen the local church in disaster risk reduction, in increasing community resilience to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and tsunamis. It wants to increase the community resilience and ability to respond to disasters effectively. Jakomkris membership now consists of 13 church members and 17 Christian faith-based humanitarian institutions. Although Jakomkris is not immediately equipped to respond to a pandemic, they nonetheless decided to use their network to regularly share COVID-19 related materials and information, such as a video explaining the COVID-19 protocols. 'Our value is in our network, in sharing and linking across districts,' explains Arshinta whose organization YEU is a member of Jakomkris. 'We now also explore ways to support churches and their communities in Papua, who do not have good access to resources. We may share the info manual movie or connect them to other partners in nearby regions.'

Filling the gaps: public health education

'Many different protocols and regulations were issued by the government', explains Arshinta. 'They were complex and caused much confusion'. Together with members of the interfaith network of humanitarian organizations Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI), in which YEU/YAKKUM is also the member, the HFI national secretariat helped the national Covid task force to create one simple umbrella protocol that covered all different protocols. In addition, YAKKUM information team designed colourful and creative infographics, that could also be understood by people with low literacy levels, as well as public health information that could also be accessed by people with hearing difficulties or impaired sights.

Getting such messages across to the communities now that social restrictions were at place, was another challenge. 'Normally, we simply go to the village, ask all villagers to gather in a community house and share our information', explains Grace

Nugroho. 'Now we had the social restrictions, but we could not easily shift to digital technology as many of the farmers we work with have no computers'. Grace decided to go down to the villages anyway, as that seemed the best way to set up a new mode of communication. This proved to be an additional challenge because, even though the villagers knew Grace, they feared that people from outside would bring the virus. After explaining all precautions with the village head, the staff and volunteers of Yabima gradually regained the trust of the villagers and applied a mix of communication modes using physical meetings with a limited number of focal persons and mobile phones.

Overall, Indonesia has a wide and good internet coverage in the cities and social media is a much used and popular communication tool, especially amongst youth. Yet mobile phones have an even greater reach: practically all Indonesian families have one. PGI and a member church from North Sumatera were very creative in designing mobile phone applications.

Countering false (theological) information

Countering false faith-inspired rumours about the virus is an important aspect of the public health education conducted by faith-based organizations. Some Christian leaders and communities started the rumour that the virus was a test of faith. They suggested that continuing to organise and attend church services despite of the infection risks was a token of faith. Oase-Intim, a partner of Kerk in Actie, has been very active in denouncing such rumours. Thus, in a message that got wide social media spread, rev. John Campbell-Nelson wrote:

As for the test of faith, it is precisely those Christians who refuse to take steps to protect themselves and others from the virus, and rely on God to take extraordinary action to save them, who are testing God. This attitude is strongly criticized in the Bible: "You shall not test the Lord thy God," says Deuteronomy 6:16. The Israelites were being scolded for calling on God to solve their problems without effort of their own. Jesus quoted this very verse when he was being tempted by Satan.

Satan had told him to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple so that the angels would come and catch him, in order to prove that he was the Son of God. Jesus answered, "...it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'"[Mat. 4:7].

In the same way, those who refuse to take action to protect themselves and others from the coronavirus are not proving their faith; they are putting God to the test.

Mobile phone APPS : alternatives for pastoral care and food markets

When PGI found that there was a high need for pastoral support amongst their faith communities, they designed a mobile phone application and special webportal through which members can access pastoral care, called 'Konsul.Online - With you all the way': <https://konsul.online/>. The portal has a chat function that allows visitors to directly share their concerns with a pastoral care givers, it has blogs with spiritual and motivational guidance, stories of people witnessing the disease and sharing their emotions and a facility through which longer sessions for pastoral counselling can be booked.

In North Sumatera, the diakonia of GBKP Synod, a member of the Christian community-based disaster response network Jakomkris, designed a very useful mobile phone application. Many of its constituents are farmers, but they cannot sell their crops at the moment due to travel restrictions. With this app, they can sell their produce to middlemen from other districts. The Jakomkris network is supporting the volunteers to bring the crops to buyers in Medan and the surrounding.

Psycho-social support

In the second week of April, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia conducted a rapid online survey in which they asked member churches to report about the needs of congregation members. Psycho-social and spiritual support appeared to be the most urgent need. 'People are confused, they do not know what to do', comments Arshinta. 'Churches can offer them psycho-social support'. In response, PGI designed the online pastoral care facility described above.

According to Arshinta, funerals are a major cause of distress. 'Amongst all Covid-protocols, those regarding burials are in highest demand. Funerals are very important events in our society. Now, people have to abide by protocols: they don't get it. When I did a rapid assessment in Eastern Indonesia, members of the church were very angry that they had to follow government regulations. They did not understand it, because they had little cases of infections in the community, they said'. In response, PGI developed pastoral letters containing guidance for alternative ways to conduct funerals, now that social restrictions are at place.

Domestic violence is another area of concern, especially in Eastern Indonesia where the prevalence is already high in 'normal' times. The Evangelical Church of West Timor (GMIT) provides pastoral care through online services, prayers during the distribution of food aid and advise on alternative ways to celebrate

services at home. During the online service, Rev Dr Mery Kolimon especially raised attention to family relations. Do we sufficiently listen to each other, she asked? Do we pray and sing together and use this time to strengthen our spiritual lives at home?¹⁹

Space for faith-based organizations

In the previous research (Jansen 2018), it appeared that space for faith-based organizations is not primarily determined by the Indonesian government but increasingly by faith-based actors themselves, especially by those contributing to a climate of religious intolerance and polarisation. The Indonesian government officially supports religious pluralism, sanctioned by the state ideology of Pancasila. During the Suharto dictatorship, fundamentalist Islamic schools of thought were kept²⁰ in check by the two mainstream Islamic organizations NU and Muhammadiyah, who had authority amongst the communities and closely worked with the government. As a consequence of the decentralisation of governance following the fall-down of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, however, fundamentalist Islamic movements operating outside the control of NU and Muhammadiyah and Nu got much more power and influence. Religious intolerance and interfaith tensions have increased since then and violent incidents have been staged. Mostly by Islamic fundamentalists but also at times by Christian fundamentalists and missionary organizations (see Jansen 2018: 49-51).

19 Internal memo Kerk in Actie.

20 The Pancasila, that was introduced by Sukarno in 1945, seeks to promote religious pluralism through 'five pillars' that support the value of 'unity in diversity', that is: (1) belief in the One and Only God; (2) just and civilized humanity; (3) Indonesian unity; (4) democracy under the wise guidance of representative consultations, and; (5) social justice for all of the people of Indonesia. The first of the five pillars or principles legitimized several world religions and was implemented through an obligation for all Indonesian citizens to register as an affiliate of one of the six officially recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

Within this context, many faith-based organizations feared that religious intolerance might again appear a stumble block for the effective, unified implementation of the COVID-19 response. Especially when the news broke that some religious gatherings had functioned as ‘super spreader’ events.

Religious super spreaders and the risk of stigmatisation

Despite their efforts to discourage the organization of [mass] religious gatherings, the main religious organizations could not prevent that at least in two cases, religious gatherings turned into COVID-19 ‘super spreader’ events.

The Jemaah Tabligh, an international Sunni missionary group that has thousands of followers in Indonesia, had organised a four-day international religious gathering for its followers that should take place around mid-March in Gowa, South Sulawesi. When the Governor realised the risk of this event that would be attended by 400 foreigners and Indonesians from 29 different provinces, he called for the organisers to cancel the meeting. The organization followed suit but by then, about 8,700 Tabligh members had already gathered in Gowa. The event caused outbreaks of the virus in 22 out of 34 provinces of Indonesia [IPAC 2020].

Around the same time, clusters of COVID-19 infections were discovered that could all be traced to different meetings of members of the Bethel Church (Gereja Bethel Indonesia, GBI) a member of the Protestant Pentecostal network that began as a missionary organization. The first gathering to be infected was a pastoral meeting of 170 people held on 3-5 March 2020 in Lembang, West Java. Two men that had led church services fell ill and died in less than a week. Eventually, of the total of 677 COVID-19 cases that were identified in Bandung early April, 226 could be linked to the GBI meeting in Lembang.

As both events got wide media coverage, there were concerns that they could lead to religious intolerance, stigmatisation and even inter-communal violence. Researchers from the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) conducted an elaborated study into both cases and concluded that ‘despite a few close calls, however, no serious trouble had taken place by mid-May 2020, thanks in part to efforts by local leaders of the groups involved to defuse tensions’ [IPAC 2020: 3]. In several communities, local officials had to issue public warnings against the stigmatisation of Jemaah Tabligh members who had participated in the Gowa meeting. However, as this religious organization is widely accepted as a legitimate member of the Sunni community, stigmatisation could be curbed. Mitigation of tensions and stigmatisation was more difficult in the case

of GBI that had in the past been accused of ‘Christianisation’ [converting Muslims]. Hate messages against GBI messages increased, especially on websites of fundamentalist Islamic groups. However, because the GBI membership remained highly transparent about the COVID-19 infections and closely cooperated with local authorities, a spiralling of tensions could be prevented [IPAC 2020: 3].

‘We understand that this pandemic has no religious affiliation, no ethnic affiliation, no political affiliation. Covid19 challenges religions to get together on the common platform of humanity, empathy, and solidarity narrative. Covid19 has provided a stage for all religions to stand together in caring and to defend life’.

-Jacky Manuputty, secretary general PGI

Interfaith initiatives

Anticipating the possible heightening of interfaith tensions, religious leaders from the main[stream] religious institutions in Indonesia tried their best to promote messages of interfaith harmony and cooperation. At the very beginning, even before the government itself announced large-scale social restrictions, members of the Inter Religious Council organised a joint press event in which they urged their followers to worship at home, and called upon all faith groups to work together in unity to combat the pandemic.

Another initiative was launched by the interfaith network Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI). ‘HFI was already established about fifteen years ago,’ explains Arshinta, ‘by faith-based organizations such as YAKKUM, NU Muhammadiyah, Wahana Visi Indonesia, Caritas Indonesia and few more. HFI got an important role in the national COVID-19 response. The national COVID-19 task force asked us to take a role in the information. We in turn asked the governmental task force if we could design one simple protocol for communication because we have so many protocols. That was approved by the national task force’. According to Arshinta, the government appreciated the HFI initiative because they ‘are well aware that religion is very important in people’s life. We got quite some respect from the government and the society. Faith organizations try to do their best to support the governmental Covid-measures. Combatting Covid is part of our joint journey’.

At the same time, Arshinta observed that the different faith-based denominations continue to compete for space and funding in the humanitarian arena. ‘Indonesians are expected

to respect and cooperate with different faith organizations, that is part of the Pancasila, the state ideology. In practise however, there is also a natural feeling of competition, one may think their hospital is better and should be supported than our hospitals, for instance.

About 70 to 80 percent of the 5000 staff member of YAKKUM units are Muslim. People from all religions are visiting our nursing schools and hospitals. Only in recent years, because of the growing fundamentalism and religious polarisation, people have begun to choose hospitals or schools according to their religion, but this was never an issue before.

Financial resources

When YEU/YAKKUM launched a public appeal asking followers from its member churches to donate in support of the COVID-19 response, they collected 1.2 billion Rupiah. Unfortunately however, this show of generosity seems to be an exception. After the churches closed for Sunday services, many churches tried to continue the weekly alms giving by using mobile phone applications or bank transfers. However, faith members appear increasingly reluctant to continue these donations, pointing at the closing of Sunday services and their own economic hardships. However in the same time spontaneous support from one church member to another church member or to Muslims during Ramadhan Fasting month for the street passengers or the poor in the surrounding neighbourhood is quite commonly practiced.

Due to funding problems, the operational space for some faith-based organizations is decreasing. Faith actors try to creatively respond to that by proposing alternatives to mobilize resources. Thus, the Evangelical Church of West Timor uses the biblical parable of the five fish and two loaves to motivate congregation members to share whatever they can miss with other families.

Likewise, Jacky Manuputty from PGI calls for 'family-driven diaconia'. 'The Church is facing severe financial problems,' he writes. 'The diaconial movement cannot rely on church institutions, as is usually done. In this situation, we encourage the development of family-driven diaconia. Every family that has more stuff can share it with other families in need. The Church, as an institution, only facilitates to bring together those in need with those who want to contribute.'

Interview with Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki²¹

General Secretary All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is a continental ecumenical organization inaugurated in 1963 as a fellowship of Christian Churches and related organizations. Today it includes 134 member churches and 35 associate members from 39 African countries.

Could you please tell me about your current role and involvement in the COVID-19 response?

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) does not have a grass roots presence as such. We are a member organization, we are a fellowship of churches. Our main role is to keep in contact with the churches. Our intervention is at the continental level, mainly with a theological focus. That is why we came up with this Ten Theological Theses-document on COVID-19 in Africa, to try to help in the conversations, because we see a big role, at least for the churches in Africa, of interpreting the whole COVID-19 situation in a theologically appropriate and responsible way.

Do you get a sense of the different ways in which African countries respond to COVID-19?

Churches in their countries are trying to follow the governmental protocols. These protocols are very different per country. In some countries, faith members can meet, in others they cannot. In Kenya for example, religious gatherings are banned throughout the country. In Tanzania they are not. In Tanzania, they educate people how not to be infected and how not to infect others, which precautions to take. They expect people to respect those protocols and their own lives. In Kenya they have an approach like most of the other countries. They started locking down everything when only one person was affected.

What kinds of distress do these restrictions cause to faith communities?

Particularly in rural areas, where the modern technologies are not immediately available, I think it was very difficult for people not to be able to gather. I also think that it is even more difficult when it comes to religious rites, like sacraments. If people cannot be baptised, if there is no holy communion, if there are no weddings conducted, that has a very destructive impact on people's life. Also, in many African countries, church staff depend on donations for their income that are given during the weekly church services. Now that the services have been closed down, they do no longer receive donations. Some have managed to use mobile money systems to raise some income through their faith groups, but not many. I don't think that psychologically, people believe they are giving to God when they give donations. They have the sense that they are taking their gift to the altar, to the building of worship. Now that is gone, you can say to people to give their offering through telephone, but that is quite new. I think people have not absorbed that theologically and emotionally. Which means that a lot of church staff are in financial distress: they have no income.

I think that the most touching source of distress are funerals. For Africans, the funeral is one of the most important rites of passage, not only for the deceased, but especially for the community. Restrictions around funerals have brought a lot of conflict between law enforcement and people. The funeral restrictions do not allow people to really make closure with the people who died. Here in Kenya, for example, those who have not been able to bury their beloved according to the ceremonies, which are very articulate, may have to do it again once COVID-19 has been overcome.

For they feel they have not done justice to the deceased and their family. At the time of mourning and death, you need community, you need solidarity, spiritual guidance, encouragement and comfort. Now, these are not provided and that causes a serious problem to faith communities.

²¹ Skype Interview 3 June 2020. Please note: this interview has been shortened and adapted for the purpose of this report.

How are funerals currently conducted at this moment?

I hear that in Kenya, presence is limited to five or fifteen people. Some people are buried at night which, especially in the villages, caused tension. It has to be done quickly so that people quickly disperse.

What I find strange is that some countries do not design their response to reality, they seem to simply cut and paste what they see in other countries. They copy protocols from funeral homes but in Africa, most people die in their homes. They are buried in their homestead, there are no funeral homes. Also, I see that many governments issue the same restrictions and containments to the whole country, while in many places, there are zero cases of infection. In Kenya for example, most infections are in Nairobi and Mombasa, not in the villages. That is why people in the villages do not see any sense in prohibiting funerals.

Can you tell more about the Ten Theological Theses concerning COVID-19 developed by the AACC?

We developed these Ten Thesis for conversation and debate, because people want to know: why is this pandemic affecting us, where is this from? In the view of most Africans, there is something divine, supernatural in every major event. There have been so many theological interpretations, postings, warnings that we are trying to counter with these Ten Theses. For example, the belief that this is a punishment from God because our country has sinned. That is where we come in and say 'no-no-no, it is not, we don't think so'. Another question that came up was, how do we get rid of this, how do we overcome COVID-19? There was a lot of bigotry saying, 'let us repent, then it will go away'. There were others who said, 'well... Africa has not been affected. This punishment is for those countries who have allowed homosexuality'. That kind of theologies are very dangerous, because they are not based on proper foundations.

Also, there is the matter of prophets. So many people came up now declaring themselves as prophets. They claim that they have direct information from God, somehow. We were very worried. There were countries where those so-called prophets announced that there is no disease. We are trying to help people to be more reasonable, rational. And to give them hope that we will overcome this crisis.

Do you think that faith-based actors have a special role to play in the response?

Faith-based organizations are localised, they have presence in local settings. They are there to do the practical intervention. I don't think there is any other organization with a structure that is so coordinated from national to village level. In most cases, faith-based organizations serve as channels through which government protocols are passed to the very lowest level of society, the village level. I have seen images of new ways of hand washing hands before people go to church, outside the churches. Images of how people can learn to distance themselves from others. Fear is one of the worst enemies of the people, even worse than Covid. Religious leaders can foster hope and say, 'Covid is not going to kill us, we will overcome this'.

What about life after the crisis?

Our biggest worry is the economic crisis. We only have been in lockdown for two months now and I am happy that many countries are now saying, we cannot continue like this. Many jobs have been lost especially in the semi-formal sector. Many people are just breaking the curfew because they cannot stay inside their homes and starve. We do not know how to trace these people. Violence and street robberies are rising because people need to survive. They need to start earning a living again.

Chapter Three: Global Faith Actors

COVID-19 responses of Global Faith Actors

As may have appeared from the previous chapters, around the world, practically all faith actors big and small have contributed to the COVID-19 response. In April 2020, the Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) conducted a survey amongst its members to get an overview of the actions that faith-based organizations are most involved in, and of the challenges they encounter most (CCIH and JLI 2020). The survey, that included respondents from all parts of the globe, found that 'most participants focus on community-based education, prevention, and promotion (85%) and over half are providing supplies (67%) and health worker training (63%)' (CCIH and JLI 2020: 2). Amongst the top-rated challenges faced by faith actors around the globe are the finding of 'protective gear and training in its use, preparedness for outbreaks, and surge demand, and the prevention of stigma and fear' (Ibid.) The survey furthermore found that 'local religious leaders and faith communities remain highly involved in FBO programs, including spreading public health messages through radio, televised prayer, PA systems, phone calls, SMS, and WhatsApp' (CCIH and JLI 2020: 1).

As the survey and this research were conducted during the initial phase of the COVID-19 response, it may well be that during the subsequent period, faith-based actors will again take up their regular work and roles. They may even place more emphasis on their social-economic activities to prevent further loss of livelihoods amongst marginalized women and farmers, and may take more critical positions to advocate the rights of groups that are particularly affected by the COVID-19 response. So far, however, based on the CCIH and JLI survey and the research conducted for this report, three areas surface in which the role of faith-based actors seems especially significant: public health education, fighting fear and stigma, and advocating inclusion and the rights of marginalized people.

Public health education

Public health education is essential to reduce the further spread of the virus and faith-based actors play key roles because

they can reach even the most far remote communities, and because they speak to the norms and beliefs that guide people's behaviours. 'In societies where peoples own views are so dominantly informed by religion, all major change processes always require change of perception and conviction, that will eventually lead to behavioural changes,' explains Jørgen Thomsen, senior adviser for DanChurchAid and co-chair of the ACT Alliance Community of Practice on religion and development²². 'A fundamental health crisis like COVID-19 can only be managed by social distancing and behavioural change. We need actors that convincingly appeal to peoples' convictions and norms. Faith actors have authority, based on trust and experience, people regard their advice as valid'.

The CICC and JLI survey found that many faith-based organizations work with religious leaders and faith groups when bringing public health information to the communities. 'In some cases, the provision of public health information is integrated with religious teachings so that the messages are responding to both the medical and spiritual aspects of the crisis'. Aligning health messages to local convictions and beliefs is especially important to combat the fear and stigma that accompany the COVID-19 outbreak.

Preventing fear and stigma

62% of the respondents to the CCIH/JLI survey reported that fear and stigma as one of the top-challenges encountered during the COVID-19 response. 'We so easily speak about countering stigmas,' says Jørgen Thomsen, 'but it is very real and risky. We heard about a family in Malawi whose house was stormed by a crowd carrying burning torches because they heard a family member had been affected. Local faith actors have the moral duty and authority to speak out against violence and for inclusion in such a situation.' 'Fear is one of the worst enemies of the people, even worse than Covid,' states Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, secretary general of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), an ecumenical fellowship of African churches who represent more than 140 million Christians in 42 African countries. Some people believe that this is a punishment from

²² Skype interview with Jørgen Thomsen, 29 May 2020. All subsequent quotes from Jørgen Thomsen are based on the same interview.

God because our country has sinned. That is where we come in and say 'no-no-no, it is not, we don't think so'. Together with other AACC representatives, Dr. Mwombeki developed a document called *Ten theological theses on COVID-19 in Africa*.²³ The Ten Theses are no theological orders or instructions.

Instead, they are meant to stimulate discussion and debate amongst the variety of faith communities and denominations that are members of the AACC. The AACC is organising online conversations to discuss the Ten Theses with pastors, faith members, theological teachers and students from English and French speaking African countries. As these faith actors may all in turn initiate discussions on stigmatisation with their constituents in 42 countries, the potential to prevent fear and stigma through this document is significant. 'We are trying to help people to be more reasonable, rational, and to give them hope that we will overcome this crisis'.

Stigmatisation and discrimination in relation to COVID-19 does not only occur in the context of religious intolerance. Together with the World Council of Churches, the AACC also issued two statements in which they denounced racial stereotyping of Africans in the context of the COVID-19 response. One condemned French researchers who implied that tests for vaccines should be conducted in Africa, while the prevalence of the virus is minimal compared to other regions, 'as if Africans are guinea pigs and Africa is a testing lab'. The second condemned 'racist, xenophobic discrimination of Africans in China' in response to disturbing images showing the abuse of Africans residents living in China that went viral on the internet (Piron Global Development, 2020). All around the globe, discrimination mounts/surfaces now that COVID-19 has increased the fear of foreigners who may carry the deadly virus. Here, global faith actors try to speak out against xenophobia and exclusion, and in support of tolerance and inclusion.

Ten Theological Theses on COVID-19 in Africa

Excerpts from internal discussion document, 14 May 2020

Preamble

Theology is God-talk. How we speak about God in relation to every aspect of life determines whether or not we live and act according to our faith. The integrity and relevance of our faith therefore rests on how we speak about God in every situation. In these difficult times of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have a task to provide theological reflections to guide the thinking and actions of the church and its members. We begin by acknowledging that God lets both bad and good things to happen in the world.

Thesis 1: EVERY INTERPRETATION OF THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF COVID-19 IS GUESSWORK.

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' [Isaiah 55: 8-9].

Thesis 3: WE DISCOURAGE APOCALYPTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PANDEMIC

'But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' [Mark 13: 32].

Thesis 4: EVEN IN SUFFERING AND DEATH, WE KNOW GOD PROMISES TO BE WITH US.

'I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world' [John 16: 33].

²³ 'Ten Theological Theses on COVID-19 in Africa - All Africa Conference of Churches', 26 May 2020. <https://www.globalministries.org/ten-theological-theses-on-covid-19-in-africa> [accessed 8 June 2020].

Civic space

Protecting rights while seeking to prevent COVID-19

On 3 June, the executive committee of the World Council of Churches issued a statement in response to the 'damages wreaked by Covid over the last five months'.²⁴ 'Though in some ways the pandemic has been a great equalizer in its range and global impact, it is also exposing and exacerbating the deep divisions, injustices, economic inequalities and racism in our societies,' the statement reads. 'Churches and faith communities are called to accompany the most vulnerable people and communities, as well as to be in solidarity with each other.'

The statement is not the first launched by global faith actors to raise attention for the peoples and groups whose positions and rights risk being infringed by the COVID-19 response. Members of the ACT Alliance amongst other issued a joint statement on gender and COVID-19, in which they pointed at 'the intersecting injustices' faced by women and girls as a consequence of the COVID-19 response.²⁵ An alliance of grassroots organizations, faith-inspired organizations, and religious leaders from Central America, Mexico, and the United States launched a joint statement to call attention to the protection needs of migrants and refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic, together with a five point action plan. Religions for Peace²⁶, a multi-religious platform that represents diverse religious institutions and communities in 90 countries across 6 regions, launched a social media campaign that amongst others calls upon all faith communities to fight stigmatisation and support inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups in the COVID-19 response.

Protecting the rights of the vulnerable and marginalized has always been a core business of global faith actors. Now that COVID-19 deepens inequalities and threatens to infringe people's rights because of overt governmental control and multiple social-economic restrictions, faith actors again seem to step up their efforts to call for continued respect of rights while combating COVID-19. 'We encourage faith actors to take a stand and point governments at the fact that it is important to continue protecting rights while seeking to prevent COVID-19,' says Jørgen Thomsen. 'We support a whole range of activities related to the protection of rights. Girls and women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence now. All seven African countries in which we work report a peak in violence against women. Including cases of women who are being denied access to hospitals and clinics while they are about to give birth. One encouraging example of how faith leaders stepped into that, was the interreligious council in Uganda. They went public and jointly denounced gender-based violence and demanded respect for women's rights. No other actors can do with the same outreach and authority as they can'.

During the recovery and reconstruction following COVID-19, global and local faith actors may play an important role in tracing those groups who are especially hit by the (economic) crisis and remain under the radar of governmental authorities, Thomsen suggests: 'If anything, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities. Rich and poor, men and women. The ACT Alliance strategy is focused on fighting extreme inequality. There is a particular role for faith actors. The overall narrative is about inclusion of the vulnerable, about leaving no one

Multi-Religious Social Media Campaign

Religions for Peace (RfP) launched a sophisticated social media campaign consisting of colourful emblems with messages motivating leaders and members of all world religions to amongst others combat stigma and take special care of the vulnerable: "Together, we will: COMBAT STIGMA, QUELL FEARS, SPREAD FACTS, CARE FOR THE VULNERABLE, TAKE PRECAUTIONS SELF-REFLECT, BE PHYSICALLY DISTANT BUT SPIRITUALLY CONNECTED, SUPPORT WOMEN, EXPRESS GRATITUDE, REALISE THE POTENTIAL OF YOUNG PEOPLE."

Source : <https://rfp.org/an-interfaith-call-to-action/>

²⁴ 'WCC executive committee releases statement on role of churches during COVID-19', 3 June 2020. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-executive-committee-releases-statement-on-role-ofchurches-during-COVID-19> [accessed 8 June 2020].

²⁵ 'A joint statement: gender, faith and COVID-19'. https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FaithGenderCovid19Statement_April2020.pdf [accessed 8 June 2020].

²⁶ 'Protect Migrants and Refugees during the COVID-19 Pandemic', Hope Border Institute and Faith in Action, 15 April 2020. <https://www.hopeborder.org/statement-covid19> [accessed 8 June 2020].

behind. Faith actors are trained to spot inequalities and address inequalities at the lowest level of society. They have a presence in the village, they know who is excluded’.

Religious freedom

As appeared from the previous chapters, the social restrictions and other protocols enacted to curb the virus greatly impacted on the space and freedom of faith communities to conduct religious services and communal rites, such as funerals, weddings, christenings and so forth. That brings forth the question to what extent faith actors experienced a shrinkage of space due to the COVID-19 response?

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom published a factsheet on the impact of COVID-19 on religious freedom. The factsheet reiterates that the WHO called upon all countries to ‘strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights’ (Weiner et al. 2020: 1). To support this aim, the WHO issued guidelines and planning recommendations for mass gatherings, including religious services, that was developed in close cooperation with faith actors themselves [see further below, ‘shifting relations’]. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet also stressed that ‘human dignity and rights need to be front and [center]’ in the effort to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19. At the same time, the factsheet notes that COVID-19 may exacerbate persecution and oppression of religious minorities in countries where this already occurred pre-COVID-19. For example, the Commission received reports of Uighurs in China who were allegedly forced ‘to work in factories throughout the country to compensate for decreased output during the quarantine’ (ibid.)

The Thematic Group on Human Rights of the European Conference of Churches (CEC) issued a statement in which it reflects on the question how to strike a balance between protecting lives and safeguarding civic liberties and religious freedom. They conclude that the imposed COVID-19 restrictions are generally legal and acceptable from a perspective of human rights as they are ‘intended to safeguard human lives, both of the believers and of other members of society’. At the same time, they note that ‘all restrictions of fundamental rights must have a legal base and... be generally proportionate in relation to the aim they serve and the right they limit’ (CEC 2020: 2).

Whether the restrictions are always proportionate may be a topic for discussion. In the chapter on Indonesia, a

respondent already noted that in areas with practically no cases of infection, people find it very hard to understand and accept the rationale of severe restrictions or even prohibitions on the practising of communal funeral rites. Similar observations are made by Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, the secretary general of the AACC: ‘I see that many governments issue the same restrictions and containments to the whole country, while in many places, there are zero cases of infection. In Kenya for example, most infections are in Nairobi and Mombasa, not in the villages. That is why people in the villages do not see any sense in prohibiting funerals’. Restrictions that are not proportionate may not only curtail people’s rights but also harm them in a psycho-social way. ‘At the time of mourning and death, you need community, you need solidarity, spiritual guidance, encouragement and comfort. Now, these are not provided and that causes a serious problem to faith communities’, he explains.

Another psycho-social side effect of the COVID-19 measures may be the way in which they are interpreted and executed by law enforcement. ‘Our partners in all seven African countries reported back saying that civic space was shrinking,’ says Thomsen from DanChurchAid. ‘Not only because of the COVID-19 protocols and restrictions, but also because of the nervous reactions of authorities who try to keep control in a volatile situation’. ‘Despite these restrictions our faith partners go a long way in trying to protect the right to believe differently – Freedom of Religion or Belief – as not only a state obligation, but also an obligation for faith actors’, he adds.

Although most faith-based leaders and organizations appeared more than willing to support the governmental COVID-19 response and have done their best to instruct their followers to act accordingly, if restrictions on religious rites – on weddings, funerals, christenings and other key rites de passage – are extended much longer, they may outgrow the patience of faith communities. ‘If people cannot be baptised, cannot be converted, if there are no weddings conducted... that has a very big destructive impact on people’s life,’ says Dr. Mwombeki.

Shifting relations

Global faith and non-faith actors

During the COVID-19 response, inter- and intragovernmental bodies such as the WHO and the UN, have sought cooperation with global faith actors. However, the approach and level of such cooperation differed greatly.

On May 12, UN secretary-general António Guterres met with Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders to call for their support to combat the pandemic. He acknowledged and praised the key role of faith actors in helping to combat the Ebola crisis. He asked them to again support the COVID-19 response by challenging inaccurate and harmful messages, condemning the rising violence against women and girls, and by activating their networks [WCC 2020]. Although this appeal of the UN leader shows his awareness of the influence of faith actors, it seems to be more along the line of keeping faith actors in check and telling them what to do, than about engaging in an equal partnership.

The global Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Initiative launched by Religions for Peace, the Joint Learning Initiative of Local Faith Communities (JLI) and UNICEF, seems to be more along the line of partnership. The initiative aims to raise awareness of the impacts of this pandemic on the world's youngest citizens through advocacy learning and exchange.²⁷

'Have relations between global humanitarian actors and faith actors improved because of COVID-19?' I ask Jørgen Thomsen. 'The water in the glass is half full and filling,' he replies, 'but it is definitely not full yet'. Thomsen shared two examples that are worth printing in full.

Relations between faith and non-faith actors: two case by Jørgen Thomsen

The WHO-case: a peer to peer relation

"We were invited as representatives of faith-based organizations to a WHO meeting in the headquarter in Geneva, and that was a moving experience. The first question they asked was, 'what can we do for you?' If you compare that to the early days of the Ebola crisis where there was an arm length distance to faith actors. Only very late in the Ebola response did the scientific health community open up and say, 'we have something on our hands here that we cannot handle alone'. They saw then that engagement with faith actors was relevant. They sat down with the World Council of Churches acting as a mediator. Then, a dialogue evolved with local faith actors, Christians and Muslims alike, to regulate burial procedures and other communal religious rites."

"That, I think, and earlier experiences with HIV-Aids, have led to a situation in which there no longer is an arms-length distance between the WHO and faith actors - in terms of WHO asking faith actors to do what they have pre-cooked. The meeting on Covid in Geneva was a peer to peer, eye to eye respectful meeting inviting us in and posing as the first question, 'what can we do for you?' It was a total change of mindset and discourse. Later, the consultation process went viral. WHO worked with a growing number of faith actors on guidance notes. It was a very consultative and slow process, but the guidance notes were out before Easter and Ramadan - that was my concern. When you read the two first paragraphs of that guidance document, that is a sweeping advocacy for the role of faith actors."

The UN OCHA-case: faith blindness

"This example can be compared to the impression we got from UN OCHA. In the same week that the editing of the WHO guidance note went on, we were involved in preparing the global ACT Appeal for the COVID-19 response. Such a humanitarian appeal must align with the plans of UN OCHA, so we studied the OCHA global humanitarian response plan to COVID-19. In the first version of that UN OCHA plan, there was no consideration of faith-based actors. If the response had been about for instance an earthquake in the Netherlands, or something, maybe you could understand that omission. But in a global health crisis that is all about behavioural change - and there is no consideration of faith actors? That makes little sense. So I feel there is still a long way to go".

Source : Skype interview 29 May 2020.

24 See: <https://jliflc.com/2020/04/launch-of-global-multi-religious-faith-in-action-covid-19-initiative/> [accessed 8 June 2020].

North-South Relations

At various times during this crisis, global faith and non-faith actors alike have called for global solidarity. The fact that many felt the urge to do so may in fact indicate that international solidarity is under serious threat.

Of all faith-based organizations participating in the CCIH and JLI survey, many reported funding as a major challenge 'both for routine programs and covering emergency COVID-19 response' (CCIH and JLI 2020: 1). Respondents in this research all reported funding problems as well. Weekly donations during religious services practically dried out, governmental emergency funds were shifted to COVID-19 response and no longer available for other government-sponsored aid programs, former private and business sponsors are facing deep economic crises. 'We are facing serious funding and resource problems,' affirms Dr. Mwombeki from the AACC. 'I don't really know how this will turn out. I think some attitudes are changing in Europe, which was always our biggest donor'.

Overall, the pandemic seems to have increased people's awareness of the innate interconnectedness of all life. 'COVID-19 highlights both profound interconnectedness and profound inequality,' writes Katherine Marshall in a blog. 'The shared spirit of ubuntu - we are because you are - must be the guide'. Likewise, Tearfund Netherlands started a campaign that seeks to strengthen newly emerging notions of interdependency, called In This Together . The organization made a series of podcasts featuring faith actors from the global south who share their experiences with COVID-19²⁸. As such, the organization hopes to nurture a north-south relation based on reciprocity rather than dependency. Yet, whether such notions will become mainstream and, more important, will and can be met by a more equal sharing of resources remains to be seen. Instead, governments and donors seem to focus on the economic survival of their own populations and organizations.

According to Dr. Mwombeki, relations between European donors and African recipients might permanently change after the COVID-19 crisis, but that may not altogether be a bad thing. 'I don't know if donors will continue to support international development cooperation after COVID-19 like before. Everyone is basically focusing on themselves, right now. Luckily, Africa

is not so deeply affected by the crisis as Europe. If relations between Europe and Africa change because of COVID-19, that is not necessarily a bad thing. New attitudes will emerge. Donations could end, but when they end, life will not end. Africa is already looking more at itself and the resources they have, how we can actualize and revive them. The resilience of the African people is strong. I think Africans will rise to the occasion. There are different levels of solidarity. I don't think the change of attitudes will end humanitarian support in times of need. In times of catastrophes, the humanitarian impulse may still be there. But it may be more about international solidarity rather than hand-outs'.

28 See: <https://tear.nl/inthistogether>

Closing Reflections and Discussion

“In my view, faith actors have a responsibility at hand. They should grasp the opportunity to do what they are mandated to do.”

-Kidist Belayneh, Programme Manager NCA

The findings from this follow-up research indicate that the visibility of faith actors is growing. The WHO and national governments actively sought collaboration with faith actors during the COVID-19 response. They did not only do so because they feared that the various religious celebrations would turn into ‘super spreader’ events. They also realised that they needed the support of faith actors to channel health messages to all communities near and far, and to motivate people to abide by measures that had devastating impacts on their everyday social and economic lives.

Likewise, the self-consciousness of faith actors seems to be growing. This report is not the only one published on this topic. A striking number of studies, webinars and blogs on the role of faith actors in the COVID-19 response appeared on the web over the past few months. Many of these publications grapple with the questions of what precisely should be the role of faith actors in the COVID-19 response. They demonstrate a growing need among faith actors to be seen and heard, and an eagerness to learn about one’s own strengths and identity. As is often the case with emancipation struggles, the process starts by mirroring one’s own identity against the ‘other’, more powerful actor with whom one wishes to stand on equal footing. As part of this research, for example, I was asked to answer questions about the ‘special’ or ‘added’ values of faith actors when compared to non-faith actors, and label these as ‘religious resources’. There is a tricky element in that approach, Jørgen Thomsen pointed out.

‘I am not so interested in ‘assets’ or ‘resources’. That again mirrors a rather technical approach. I am interested in approaches that provide the bigger palette of interventions that we all need in life. Call it a comprehensive approach. It is about community cohesion, inclusivity and hope.’

-Jørgen Thomsen, senior adviser DanChurchAid

In a time in which religion is often associated with destruction and violence, many faith-based organizations began to use the terms ‘religious assets’ or ‘religious resources’ to raise attention to the constructive potential of faith-based action. Likewise, the previous research (Jansen 2018) used the notion of ‘religious resources’ to open up a wider understanding of what religion can be about. Western notions tend to reduce religion to a set of ‘beliefs’ or ‘values’ and neglect the experiential, ritual and aesthetic dimensions of lived religion. In a similar way, terms like (religious) leadership, institutions and movements tend to emphasize the public and political aspects of religion whilst ignoring the religiosity and spirituality that inform people’s identity, worldview and behaviour.

In their attempt to gain the recognition of non-faith actors in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance, faith actors may well have fallen into the trap of adopting their economic and technical language and approach (‘assets’). Jørgen Thomsen has a valid point of critique. Now that faith-based actors are increasingly regarded as actors with their own worth and value, rather than as instruments of (governmental) aid and development, they may want to review the underlying discourse of their plea for recognition as well.

‘If you need us, allow us!’ was the title of the previous report. It is a plea for space and recognition that still depends on the willingness of the powerful ‘other’ - the donor, government or UN agency - to grant faith actors that recognition. Perhaps it is time to move from a plea for allowance, to a more self-conscious approach: to ‘take the responsibility at hand and grasp the opportunity to do what you are mandated to do,’ as Kidist Belayneh proposes.

True, a mandate from God and the faith community alone may not be enough to get a seat at the table when major plans and instruments for aid and development are in the made - when UN OCHA develops its global COVID-19 response plan, to name just an example. The recognition of faith actors is growing in the aid and development world, but is far from being mainstreamed.

The faith-blindness is institutional, affirms Jørgen Thomsen. ‘It is built into top heavy global humanitarian agencies. There is too

little funding space and too little inclusion in the international funding structures. Both in UN organizations and in our own financial structures - we may also be self-critical here. 'Yes, we skim some milk and that goes to the local level, but there is very little that ends up in the hands of local faith actors'. The Grand Bargain and localisation agenda is trying to address that.

Some advocacy on the matter has been initiated. Thomsen and others have raised the issue with PaRD, an international partnership of donors and faith actors on Religion and Development, in which he represents the ACT Alliance, and suggested to take it up with OCHA. 'We have tried to argue that PaRD is a privileged arena for aid discussion. And that if faith actors are part of the planning and narrative how to respond in OCHA then there should also be funding'.

So does it all come down to blunt money and funding talk again? After all these talks about values, beliefs, high moral grounds, spirituality and ethics? Certainly not. There are plenty of other opportunities to support the emancipation of faith actors and demonstrate a more self-conscious attitude in the phase following the COVID-19 emergency response.

'COVID-19 highlights both profound interconnectedness and profound inequality. The shared spirit of ubuntu - we are because you are - must be the guide. Nothing... matters unless you do it'.

-Katherine Marshall (2020)

Protecting the rights of the vulnerable and marginalized has always been a core business of faith actors. Now that COVID-19 deepens inequalities and threatens to infringe people's rights because of overt governmental control, faith actors may again need to step up their efforts to call for continued respect of rights while combating COVID-19. So far, faith actors have largely acted in support of the governmental COVID-19 measures, without voicing any straightforward critique. If FBOs advocated, this was merely to raise attention for marginalized and vulnerable groups. Seldom did they criticize the measures because of their devastating impact on the value and quality of life: on people's social and spiritual well-being, autonomy and human dignity.

The COVID-19 response largely focused on securing the quantity of live: on preventing the number of deaths, on extending the life cycles of the elderly with five or ten years by locking them up

in loneliness. But what about the quality of life, what about all those things that make life valuable and meaningful?

Faith traditions and followers have a certain existential wisdom. They have a grounded vision on life and death that strengthens their resilience in the face of disaster, death and disease. This ability to confront the painful reality of suffering, death and loss of control may be a quality that many non-faith actors lost sight of when trying to halt the spread of the virus with all might, and at all cost. In the Netherlands, citizens sent heartening cries to newspapers about their elderly parents or psychiatric sisters who were locked up in clinics and not allowed to see their loved ones. Many of these elderly and psychiatric patients absolutely go crazy, experience panic attacks or worse. Their life expectancy is extended, but at what cost? Likewise, 'if people cannot be baptised, cannot be converted, if there are no weddings conducted, that has a very destructive impact on people's life', Rev. Fidon Mwombeki pointed out.

Building on their newly gained self-consciousness, faith actors could and should perhaps begin to ask critical questions on the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 response on the quality of life, because 'they have a responsibility at hand here'. Perhaps, they should share their worldviews to increase the overall resilience of societies to suffering and death, especially of those in the global North that have been privileged not to experience any major disasters since World War II - because that is what faith actors are mandated to do. Many more questions about the meaning and value of life will need to be confronted during the COVID-19 recovery phase, and in relation to even greater disasters to come due to the climate crisis. Perhaps, it is time for faith actors to more openly share some of their views with non-faith actors. Not by preaching, but by daring to pose the difficult ethical and existential questions, and by sharing their own genuine reflections and concerns. As Dr. Mwombeki does:

'Yes, the virus is there, people are dying from it even if we are trying to prevent it. That is sad, but we cannot continue like this. We cannot continue to lock people in their homes. We need to adjust to the virus, that is my strong conviction. There are so many different viruses in the world, already for ages. We have created vaccines for polio, cholera and malaria, but they are still with us. These viruses kill people every year. Likewise, we need to stop the panicking about this new virus and adjust our life to it. We have to accept this virus is there. Let us adjust our lives and learn to live with it'.

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List of Interviewees and Resource Persons

Ethiopia

- ▶ Kidist Belayneh, Program Manager, Norwegian Church Aid
- ▶ Desta Heyi, Country Manager ICCO Ethiopia
- ▶ Bereket Tassew, Executive Director, Wolayta Kale Heywot Church - Terepeza Development

Indonesia

- ▶ Grace Nugroho, executive director Yayasan Yabima
- ▶ Arshintia, director of the extramural emergency unit of the Christian Foundation for Public Health (YEU/YAKKUM)
- ▶ Jacky Manuputty, secretary general of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (by email)

Global Actors

- ▶ Jørgen Thomsen, senior adviser DanChurchAid, co-chair of the ACT Alliance Community of Practice Religion and Development, and co-chair of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)
- ▶ Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, secretary general of the All Africa Conference of Churches

Other resource persons

- ▶ Corrie van der Ven, Program Officer Kerk in Actie
- ▶ Fannelien Stal, Country-lead Indonesia, Tearfund-NL
- ▶ Gonda de Haan, Program Officer Africa, Kerk in Actie
- ▶ Piet Posthuma, ICCO Cooperation

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