Analysing “cultural proximity”: Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

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In conjunction with a “global resurgence in religion” and the increased visibility of Muslim faith-based organisations (FBOs) in the humanitarian sector (Thomas 2005), it has recently been suggested that Muslim agencies may be able to bring added-value to the aid process. Known as “cultural proximity”, this line of argument is derived from a theoretical sense of religious unity in Islam and maintains that Muslim FBOs have logistical advantages in Muslim areas and can provide more effective and sensitive aid for Muslim beneficiaries.

Several academic studies have touched on the cultural proximity argument (Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan 2003, Benedetti 2006, De Cordier 2007, Benthall 2008) and this paper contributes to an identified need for in-depth analysis in relation to aid operations in the field. Based on fieldwork carried out on Islamic Relief Worldwide’s humanitarian assistance project for (Muslim) Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, this paper analyses the accuracy of the cultural proximity thesis and explores the terms of the argument in more detail.

It is shown that suspicion of political or fundamental Islamic groups in Bangladesh has created a hostile atmosphere for Muslim FBOs which makes the work of Islamic Relief more difficult. Furthermore, in this case study, religious solidarity between an organisation and beneficiaries does not appear to guarantee a higher quality of service or the provision of religious services, despite heightened expectations from refugees. Discussing the lack of a suitable mosque in the refugee camp and the detrimental effects of this on the community, provides an illustration of how Muslim FBOs are prevented from benefitting from their faith-base by operating within a secular aid regime. An analysis of relations between aid workers and refugees is also given and reveals that religious solidarity does not necessarily create a more positive atmosphere at the individual level.

Based on these findings this paper argues that cultural proximity theory does not account for the variety of political, social, cultural and ideological differences which have the potential to usurp religious unity. Furthermore, it questions whether a “Muslim” identity can really be seen as a unifying element between an institutionalised organisation which works according to secular policies and models, and an ethnic stateless community whose sense of religion is tied to past and current suffering and political ambitions relating to a larger geopolitical issue.

1 The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author only and do not necessarily represent the views of Islamic Relief.