

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM CHARITIES IN THE WEST TO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print)
ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: Since the mid 1990s, civil society has been making significant contributions to international development but, at the same time, it became a focus of a special concern in development discourse policy. However, regardless of its significant influence to international development, the Muslim organizations have been neglected in this discourse but this has been noticeable only after the terrible event of 9/11. Since the early 1980s, Islam has become a significant driver of change and Muslim organizations have become important actors in efforts to fight global poverty. The author tries to highlight the growing prominence of Muslim organizations in development contexts and argues that the contributions of these organizations are still inadequately understood. However, the paper also discusses the need to develop a nationwide umbrella organization in order to achieve more transparency and accountability.

Keywords: Global development, Islamic tradition, Muslim charities, religious

I. INTRODUCTION

On June 25, 2006, Warren Buffett gave \$37 billion to charitable foundations, mostly to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It challenged the Muslims in the West in regard how they are lagging behind in terms of charities, in spite of the fact that many Muslim countries suffer bad immunization, lack of HIV and anti-malarial medication, and medical means to reduce cervical cancer incidence and deaths, and plus, millions of refugees. However, there are oil billionaires in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states who could donate billions to relieve the above mentioned problems in Muslim countries. According to the 2006 Forbes Magazine list of the World's Richest People, Saudi and Gulf billionaires are worth at least \$134 billion. Muslim billionaires in Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon are worth additional \$29.4 billion. This is not taking into account Muslim billionaires and millionaires in Asia and elsewhere. Moreover, the oil boom in the Middle East generated at least 300,000 new wealthy millionaires

in the region. According to, the total annual amount of *zakat* (Islamic charity) collections from individual citizens is estimated at \$20 billion for Saudi Arabia alone and well over \$100 billion globally [10]. Many of these wealthy Muslims fund some Muslim charities in the West. For instance, Council on American Islam Relations (CAIR) launched a massive \$50 million media campaign in 2006 which involved television, radio, and newspapers as part of its five-year program to create a better understanding of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. Thus, the western Islamic organizations which are funded by Muslim countries are mostly involved in *Da'wa* (i.e. Islamic call, an equivalent to Christian evangelism), conversion to Islam as well as in publishing, broadcasting and disseminating Islamic teaching and values. And what about the contributions of the Muslim charities and organizations in the West to the international development?

My first assumption while reading the literature was that western-based Islamic aid agencies or charities are a new phenomenon, but the most important source of foreign aid in Muslim countries. Yet, little is known about these organizations. I hope I will be able to provide baseline information on contributions of Islamic charities of the West in the Muslim world. I will start with tracking sources of funding for the charities and assessing their objectives and strategies in the community. Then, I will review available evidence of their political and social agendas. At the end, I will examine the impact these organizations are having in the Muslim society. The term West in this term paper includes the western countries such as USA, Canada, UK, Germany.

My first hypothesis is that the Muslim charities in the West function on free donations from the Muslims in the West which accept donating as their religious duty. In this regard, they have gained a considerable outreach and become part of the global development movement. However, the recent changes in international development also forced the Muslim charities to review their principles and turned their attention towards the international development goals such as

reducing poverty, empowering Muslims in poor countries through education, providing them with medical technologies and medications. These changes pushed the Islamic charity organizations to reinforce global or universal values through the Islamic principles. This paper attempts to analyze the ideological basis for Islamic charities in the West and compare them with the international development goals. The findings of the paper also contain some suggestions to the Muslim charities in the West in regard to the organizations structure and international development goals.

II. IDEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR ISLAMIC CHARITIES

Approximately 1.2 billion Muslims live in the world today, with approximately 80% living outside in the Arabic-speaking world. An estimated 7 million Muslims reside in America, which has almost 2,000 mosques, Islamic schools, and Islamic centers [5]. The local Islamic community organizations in the West are very active in public welfare to bring relief to society. The main feature of these NGOs is that they are voluntary (national, regional or transnational, as well as community-based). These organizations are functioning on the basis of the third pillar of Islam, *zakat*, almsgiving, which is a central theological, ethical and political principle within Islamic welfare discourse and practice.

There are two types of *zakat* in Islam: *zakat al-fitr* (a flat fee imposed on each person at the end of Ramadan), and, *zakat al-mal* (a tax on wealth). In practice, payers usually give *zakat al-fitr* directly to beneficiaries without interference from the state or any other third party, however, in the case of the *zakat al-mal*, it was the Islamic state to manage the tax on wealth. It still is the dominant view in political Islam, which sees the state as the only rightful recipient of *zakat*. It is deposited in *bait al mal* (Islamic treasury) and used to address specific social problems [6]. Today, the Islamic institutions such as mosques, play as a third party to collect and distribute the aid to the needy [18]. *Zakat* is commonly defined as a form of charity, almsgiving, donation, or contribution. It differs from these activities primarily in that they are arbitrary, voluntary actions, known as *sadaqa* [1]. However, the resources of the Islamic charities are not limited with *zakat* and *sadaqa*. The other resource bases include the following: 1) *zakat* (Islamic alms), 2) *kharaj* (land tax), 3) *sadaqat id al-fitr* (an equivalent to poll tax, which every Muslim must pay, except the absolutely poor, given on the conclusion of the fasting month of Ramadan), 4) *waqf* (charitable endowments), 5) gifts and donations, 6) voluntary services (education, defense etc.) and 7) obligatory family support [21]. The larger Muslim committees in the world, including

in the West comprise of relatively sizeable professional organizations with a range of services within health, education and social services.

According to the *Qur'an* and Islamic tradition, rich Muslims should pay *zakat* with 2.5 % of their assets once a year [3] and Muslims started to the institutionalization of *zakat* right after the death of prophet Muhammad. Islamic law on basis of the *Qur'an* (2:177) empowers the Islamic state or community to collect funds and spend them on the eight categories specified in the *Qur'an*: the poor and the destitute, the wayfarer, the bankrupt, the needy, converts, captives, the collectors of *zakat*, and in the cause of God for the general welfare of the community—for the education of the people, for public works, and for any other need of the Muslim community. The verse was more emphasized by the words of the Prophet Muhammad: “In ones wealth there is a due (to God and His men) besides *zakat*.” In this regard, charity in Islam may be in any form—one’s personal efforts, talents, skill, learning, property or possessions.”

The data demonstrates that *zakat* committees in the West appear with a high degree of legitimacy. They have a strong popular support, with their local grounding and non-bureaucratic image. These organizations provide relief and humanitarian assistance to poor communities during emergencies, natural disasters (prolonged drought and floods), famine and epidemics or are engaged in long-term development activities, including community development, agriculture, water, health and education in the least-developed Muslim countries. In this regard, Islam is similar to all major religions, however, is also different by developing a moral theology that emphasizes social justice, and collective responsibility for the welfare of others and emphasizing the significance of the socialization process, along with peace, justice, social harmony and collective responsibility for the poor [20]. This social theology of Islamic charities is based on the *Qur'an*, which says that justice is the main source of good governance and ignoring it is to ignore the main thrust of the Islamic faith. The use of the word “justice” more than a thousand times in the *Qur'an* increases the idea of “goodwill” and benefit to Muslim society [21]. Thus, religions other than Islam in the West are referred to a set of beliefs or practices that spiritually link autonomous individuals to God, for Muslims, however, Islam as a way of life is “a blueprint for an ideal society...a blueprint that organizes all aspects of social and political life”, for nurturing a trusting and trustful society, with “a universal mandate...to create an ideal society on earth” [20].

Moreover, the creation of an ideal society also has political purpose and involves political function in the

form of involving people in charity work and accumulating the social capital for the common good through the promotion of individual virtue which means altering individuals' behaviour to conform with divine revelation. Altering a behaviour can also mean to increase the level of religiosity, however, like other non-Muslim charities, it also targets at least to raise the level of "sympathy" and support for Islamists "from the public" which has indeed "increase[d]" tremendously over the past decade or so [2]. However, the most significant target is embodying two discourses: one reinforces global or universal values and the second, spreading the brotherhood of Islamic principle.

The government grant programs are also another financial source of the Islamic NGOs. For example, in 2007, Mercy-USA for Aid and Development received a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This grant, valued at over \$300,000, helped the organization to open three new clinics and three feeding centers that will provide health and nutrition services to approximately 20,000 vulnerable women and children in south-central Somalia. Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded the International Development and Relief Foundation (IDRF) and its partner organization Islamic Relief (\$87,000) in order to provide 100 temporary fiberglass water tanks with a total capacity of 1 million liters, and installed 500 emergency latrines in camps for displaced people. It benefited some 20,000 people in Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, Pidie and Aceh Barat in northern and western Aceh Province. However, *zakat* still remains the main source of the Islamic organizations in the West.

Whatever the target is of charity works of the Islamic charities, they are crucial in poor Muslim countries. First of all, charitable work is an important part of western Muslims' identity because it is a part of the Islamic belief of *zakat*. According to Al-Qardawi, three major factors make *zakat* an important part of Muslim identity. These are as follows: first, the payment of poor due is obligatory so that the poor and the needy could be helped adequately and be enabled to devote themselves to the worship of God; second, the payment of poor-due cleanses Muslims from their sins and dirt. And third, God has showered a blessing on the rich by granting them wealth, and has elevated their status with surplus wealth. As they lead a happy life, it behoves genuine that they should pay the poor-due and be grateful to God for granting them such bounty [1].

Thus, the ideological basis for the Muslim charities in the West is the *Qur'an* and the Prophetic tradition. It inspires the Muslims in the West to contribute to the international development movement in the world and

preserve their identity in the West. However, the *zakat* is not the only source for the activities of the Muslim relief organizations in the West. The government grant programs are also a financial source for these organizations. Moreover, Islamic-based charity organizations serve as a place of worshipping and integrating the Muslims to the society and the world. They also mediate between the Muslims' traditional identity and their new western identity.

III. ACTIVITIES OF MUSLIM CHARITIES TOWARDS THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Taking into account all the positives, Muslim charities are founded on the principle of *zakat* [15]. Their work especially becomes more vital when we take into consideration that the natural disasters like tsunami afflict Muslims in Asia, or roughly two-thirds of Muslims live below the poverty line. The Muslim charities in all these cases provide emergency cash assistance, food and medical care as well as educational and psychological services to Muslims. They also launch orphan sponsorship programs, enhance their food, health care and education programs during Ramadan and times of disaster, and operate community development programs [2]. For instance, the mission of the Islamic Relief Foundation, which is headquartered in California, is to alleviate suffering, hunger, illiteracy and diseases worldwide regardless of color, race or creed, and to provide aid in a compassionate and dignified manner. Islamic Relief aims to provide rapid relief in the event of human and natural disasters and to establish local development projects to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and disease [16]. Human Concerns International (HCI) contributes 90% of its funds to relief programs, development programs and development projects. HCI sponsored over 2000 children around the globe and has provided medical, educational and other basic needs to children up to the age of 16 years and operates the program in nine countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bosnia, Kashmir, Guyana, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Somalia, and Sudan. These contributions provide continual financial assistance for medical, educational, and basic needs of the child. Since 1980 HCI has contributed over \$40 million dollars towards facilitating Sustainable Development through long term development projects. The UK's other leading Islamic relief agency, Muslim Aid (1985) and Small Kindness (1999) which both were founded by the singer Cat Stevens, or known as Yusuf Islam after his conversion, focused on relief aid in the Balkans and other poor Muslim countries. Muslim Aid's annual budgets are smaller than Islamic Relief's (£3.7m in 2000- 2001) allows the organization be innovative in its projects but the organization gives priority to

building mosques and less on extending aid to non-Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya [4].

The aid which the developed countries and international organizations provide is not sufficient unless the people are trained with new skills. Taking this fact into consideration, the HCI raises funds to establish schools that offer free training in sewing, stitching and embroidery as well as training supplies to train women to a level that they can do sewing and embroidery to earn a living. Human Appeal International (HAI) based in the UK also believes that education is the key to eradicating poverty. The organization funds the training sessions for deprived communities in Muslim countries to develop people so they become independent and involve poor in macro-economic development.

In many cases, these institutions deliver aid without distinction as to religious belief or political affiliation in Asia and Africa. In this regard, they comply with the international charity regulations under the Treasury Guidelines Working Group of Charitable Sector Organizations and Advisors, Principles of International Charity 1 which was announced in March of 2005. It also helps them to function in the international arena because to work with other non-members of the charities and non-Muslims, including secular individuals and groups. Therefore, Islamic charities perform multilayer functions, including bringing people together to discuss community problems, find solutions, foster civic skills, formulate human and social capital, collect funds, and provide social network programs. For instance, HAI in the UK funds £8 250 project in Ethiopia in order to provide 10 shallow wells to provide safe clean drinking water for the local population and their livestock. Islamic Relief was able to build a substantial fund-raising base overseas. According to Benthall [4], the organization has £15.1m revenues for 2000, £2.8m came from the US, £2.2m from France and £1.9m from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Mauritius and supports major emergency projects in Afghanistan, Palestine and Ingushetia. Non-Muslims also benefit from these projects [4]. However, the assistance to the countries with large Muslim populations is more visible than to the countries in minority Muslim populations and Muslim charities need to work hard to reach non-Muslims in the afflicted regions of the world. For instance, Table 1 shows that Muslim charities in the UK, USA, etc. mostly concentrate in countries with large Muslim populations (Sudan, Nigeria, Kenya, Morocco, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal among others), while others are more interested in minority Muslim populations in countries where Christianity is domi-

nant (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Guinea Conakry, Malawi, Mozambique).

TABLE I:
MAJOR TRANSNATIONAL ISLAMIC NGOS AND COUNTRIES OF OPERATION

Transnational Islamic NGOs in the West	
Islamic African Relief Agency (ISRA), (Denmark)	Chad, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Sudan and South Africa
Muslim Aid (UK)	Africa, Asia, Bosnia
Islamic Relief	Africa, Asia, Bosnia, Russia
The Islamic American Relief Agency (IARA), (USA)	Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda
International Muslim Relief Network (USA)	Somalia, Sudan
Human Concern International (Canada)	Benin, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan
Mercy International (USA)	Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan
Islamic Relief Worldwide (USA)	Egypt, Ghana, Sudan
Islamic Relied Worldwide	Mali, Sudan
World Ahlubait Islamic League (UK)	Tanzania (with strong business interests in the UK, USA, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates, India and Pakistan)

Note: These are inter-governmental organizations, which provide considerable material and ideological support to national and transnational Islamic NGOs [21].

One of the most important features of many Muslim charities in the West is that they are affiliated with major international and other Islamic donor organizations. In this regard, it is a very positive outcome of the western-style Islamic NGOs that they have become a part of the global NGO movement. The Islamic charities in the West are very limited with Islamic Development Bank and Asian Development Bank due to the limited opportunities for cooperation between these banks and NGOs. However, the possibilities of extending cooperation with Islamic NGOs in areas such as, exchange of information, health projects health and women's development activities could be among the areas where cooperation with these banks are mostly envisaged. The Islamic charities, for instance, the HCI is affiliated with many umbrella groups and organizations, such as: Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Refugees (ACBAR), Middle East Working Group (MEWG), Philippine Development Assistance Program (PDAP), and South Asia Partnership (SAP). HCI also works in partnership with Islamic Relief, Canadian Red Cross, Canadian Lutheran World Relief, Hope International, etc. HCI also supported the \$1.2 million dollars

project to repair ten schools in Aceh after tsunami together with Islamic Relief UK. HAI started a project providing 1 000 fishing boats in Aceh (Indonesia) to help the local fishermen return to work and begin providing for their families again. The Islamic Relief and Muslims Aid also work very close with the UK government's Charity Commission [4]. This makes them adopt the standards of accountability and preserve their distinguished Islamic identity. In this regard, Salih wrote that "As there is no distinction between ethics and law in Islam, there is also no distinction between NGOs' social, economic, political and religious functions... If Islamic philanthropic organizations seek to become truly professionalized, they need to submit to the kinds of professional standards and codes of conduct that are increasingly demanded of western NGOs and private sector companies. Should they take this route, then they will lose much of their specifically Islamic character" [21].

Thus, Muslim charities seek to help those in need. This aim is highlighted in charity regulations of many countries which seek to ensure that charitable resources were devoted to proper purposes in the public interest. Therefore, the Muslim charities are driven by at least three major crises: first, the crisis, which refers mainly to the economic crisis and its social ramifications; second, the livelihood crisis emanating from civil wars, drought and famine aggravated by the economic crisis, and the governance crisis, including economic mismanagement, corruption, abuse of power, disrespect for human and civic rights by military and one-party authoritarian states. The major Islamic relief organizations are affiliated with other international organizations which makes their work more effective. However, in order to achieve more progress in the charity work, the Islamic organizations also need to develop a nationwide umbrella organization so that to achieve more transparency and accountability.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is a religious and social responsibility of each Muslim to be active in humanitarian work and support the development process in the world. This mainly is based on *zakat* principle in Islam. Besides the *zakat*, *sadaqat id al-fitr* (an equivalent to poll tax, which every Muslim must pay, except the absolutely poor, given on the conclusion of the fasting month of Ramadan), *waqf* (charitable endowments), gifts and donations, voluntary services (education, defense etc.) and obligatory family support are among the resources which these institutions function on. These resources are supposed to be the main source of Islamic state revenue, but in the West, the mosques

and other Islamic NGOs elaborated them as a part of the social welfare program. Due to the lack of research in this field, it is very difficult to estimate how much Muslims donate to these institutions. Moreover, because of the fear to get accused in connection to the terrorist organizations, many Muslims do not want their names recorded as potential donors of these NGOs.

The Islamic social and educational organizations in the West are mostly philanthropic and nonprofit organizations which are registered and regulated through multiple channels. They also act as voluntary organizations that manage the acceptance, collection, distribution, and utilization of *zakat* (as well as the voluntary forms of giving: *infaq and sadaqah*).

Many of Islamic organizations at work in a local area and are more oriented to their communities in using *zakat* proceeds. This makes the nature of *zakat* organizations fragmented, and moreover, lack a professional management. The united charity foundations in the West would allow to adopt new regulations which can better facilitate the nongovernmental *zakat* institutions and maximize the mobilization of *zakat* funds and their immediate redistributive economic impact in the world. The idea of establishing a united organizational apparatus for the nationwide *zakat* collection came into limelight. This will bring more enthusiasm of the voluntary sector in *zakat* management which then will lead to clear regulations to strengthen its structures and accountability. On the other hand, it will help Muslims and the state to watch. Like other non-Muslim charities, the Islamic charities also seek to increase the level of religiosity, or at least, to raise the level of sympathy and support for Islam. Islamic charities usually provide more support to the countries with large Muslim populations, however, they also need to work hard to reach to non-Muslims in the afflicted regions of the world.

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