



Wilton Park statement on assisting religious minorities in humanitarian crises

The world is experiencing an extraordinary era of humanitarian crises, generating massive numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). In this context, many vulnerable religious minorities face discrimination and restrictions in their places of origin, which can be seriously exacerbated by civil war and other social and political unrest. This is particularly evident where religious minorities remain within the borders of their own countries.

Religious identity itself often makes minority communities targets of violence and abuse during crises, which may compel them to flee conflict and persecution rather than to seek humanitarian assistance. The intersection between the chaos of crisis and religious minority status dramatically increases vulnerabilities, yet assistance providers, to date, have often been slow to recognise the significance of religion as a factor.

- Freedom of Religion or Belief lies at the heart of universal human rights. Furthermore, securing the integrity of religious communities safeguards pluralism, encourages multicultural awareness, reduces future vulnerabilities, provides spaces for spiritual and emotional needs to be met effectively in post-crisis environments, and, ultimately, promotes long-term stability and global peace. In short, the presence of minorities in full possession of their human rights, including religious freedom, is fundamental for producing stable and peaceful societies and is a powerful antidote to those seeking to produce future humanitarian crises.
- Though there is often a desire and commitment on the part of humanitarian actors to help all affected by crises, the needs of vulnerable religious minorities are often missed or inadequately addressed. It is possible that disparate and inadequate provision for minority communities may be the unfortunate result of systemic biases and discrimination, which may become more pronounced during times of chaos or crisis.

To address these challenges, an unprecedented gathering of human rights activists, humanitarian actors, representatives of governments and international organizations, and members of religious minority communities took place from 12-14 November 2018 at Wilton Park in the United Kingdom. The meeting discussed how the international community can better ensure delivery of humanitarian and development aid, underpinned by the rule of law and international norms, in a way that addresses the complex and contextual needs of religious minority groups in conflict and crisis settings.

The following key points emerged during the discussions:

- **Humanitarian responses ought to be guided by the principles of humanity and impartiality.** These principles call for the provision of assistance on the basis of need alone, ensuring that no one is unfairly excluded from receiving assistance. Although the principle of impartiality is vital to provide a person-centred approach, humanitarian practitioners may need to focus more intently on understanding the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of religious minorities in order to be effective; the extent to which a group identifies as a community needs to be understood in conflict responses; and more broadly to ensure 'Do No Harm' conflict-sensitive assistance.
- Humanitarian responses recognise the need to build resilience, conduct assessments, and improve the delivery of services for vulnerable populations and religious minorities. However, there is a dearth of creative approaches and tools to empower and protect populations made vulnerable as a result of their

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ethnic and religious diversity. **To fulfil this need, leadership and policies are required at agency level to champion the inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities in responses.**

- Humanitarian actors are faced with the challenge of providing vulnerable religious minorities protections in the midst of a programme paradigm that seeks to be blind to the faith of the recipients. While “need not creed” is a key humanitarian principle that guides service provision for all people regardless of their demographic identifiers, **there are many cases where religious identity should be acknowledged as a part of the situational analysis, programme development and evaluation phases of humanitarian response.**
- **Vulnerability due to religious identity should be included in vulnerability criteria**, particularly where religious identity has played a role in the conflict, and also where certain groups, such as converts, face a particular threat.
- **Disaggregated data throughout (in needs assessments, monitoring of delivery, and final evaluations) can help humanitarian practitioners determine whether vulnerable groups and religious minorities most at risk are able to access and utilise humanitarian assistance.** Given the risk of collecting sensitive information on religion and ethnicity, policies are needed to reduce the risk that this data might inadvertently further endanger vulnerable and marginalised religious communities.
- **Increasing protection for religious minorities should be undertaken by means of a two-track approach.** Decades of work on gender and disability demonstrate that, like religious minorities, women and people with disabilities often run a greater risk of neglect and discrimination during crises and conflicts. Responses to this enhanced vulnerability have involved inclusive humanitarian and development policies including both (1) mainstreamed protections, and (2) targeted interventions to help prevent deep-rooted discrimination and exclusion.
- **Assistance policies should more effectively encourage and facilitate the participation and partnership of local and national religious communities in determining specific needs of vulnerable religious minority individuals and communities.** The inclusion of local religious leaders can also significantly strengthen humanitarian responses by challenging prejudice, reducing tensions along religious lines and promoting local engagement, thus enhancing the sustainability of humanitarian efforts and reducing the risks of future conflicts.
- **Particular attention should be given to ways in which programme implementation can show faith-sensitivity to religious communities, to include working with them to equip and empower them.** This includes considering culturally sensitive delivery mechanisms, for example in the context of protection issues such as trauma counselling and grievance processes. Humanitarian agencies should ensure religious minorities are represented within staffing, especially in sensitive settings such as refugee interviews.
- **Finally, it is important for aid agencies to proactively include religious minorities in their communication strategies.** Religious minorities need to know their rights and understand processes that relate to them, such as how to register as refugees, become aware of the international assistance that is being provided or be included in communications about political processes (such as returns, access to education and work). Religious minorities, as well as the wider population, benefit from transparency and accountability in the provision of aid and assistance, which will help to build the citizen-state contract, and the contract between citizens and humanitarian agencies.