

POLICY AREA:
Toward Ending Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture

Engaging religious actors in addressing the famine emergency in South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen

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Abstract

The United Nations has declared a famine emergency in light of the imminent danger of starvation facing an estimated 20 million people in four countries, and it has appealed urgently for US\$4 billion to meet immediate needs. This crisis should be prominent in G20 discussions. Religious institutions and leaders are actively involved in the immediate and specific famine situation affecting African nations and Yemen and in efforts to end the conflicts that are the primary cause of famine. More broadly, religious leaders are acting to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, Zero Hunger, by 2030. This imperative is shared across religious divides and the common purpose that binds different religious communities portends well for peacebuilding and progress in the affected areas. Religious actors should thus be an integral part of the international response to the famine emergency as well as to the Zero Hunger challenge. G20 attention and support to religious roles would enhance responses to the famine and peacebuilding in affected areas and thus contribute to unlocking Africa's potential. Interfaith action on SDG 2, highlighted as part of the global agenda, can speed progress towards Zero Hunger.

Challenge

The UN has signaled a famine emergency in parts of South Sudan and Somalia, warning that the situation in adjoining areas of the horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Burundi, Kenya, and Uganda, is fragile and very concerning. Parts of Nigeria face famine, as does Yemen. Resources to provide food aid are insufficient: immediate needs are estimated at US\$4 billion, with only a fraction raised to date.

Eradicating hunger and malnutrition is one of the great challenges of our time. Not enough – or the wrong – food causes suffering and poor health and slows progress in other areas of development like education and employment. Some 795 million people – one in nine – go to bed on an empty stomach each night and many more suffer from some form of malnutrition. Thus the aim of SDG 2 is Zero Hunger by 2030.

Religious entities are directly involved in addressing both the famine emergency and the global challenge of Zero Hunger. Religious institutions and ecumenical and interreligious bodies build on core teachings about feeding the hungry and widely varied programs address needs. Religious actors are among the most effective and prominent advocates for policy and programmatic action. Religious leaders from many traditions and the world’s leading interreligious and ecumenical organizations endorse the Global 2030 agenda Zero Hunger objective. Organizations like Caritas Internationalis, World Vision, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and Tzu Chi provide food relief and support food security policies including nutrition and smallholder farmers programs. Bread for the World, a US faith-inspired coalition, is a powerful advocate for action against hunger. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance and the World Council of Churches (WCC) give priority to food and nutrition issues in their global action programs; they are organizing an emergency meeting in Nairobi in June 2017 specifically to identify areas for action to address the African famine crisis. May 21 will see the launch of a global Day of Prayer and Action.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the leading global humanitarian organization fighting hunger worldwide, delivering food assistance in emergencies, and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience. WFP has identified strengthening strategic partnerships with religious institutions as a priority in the effort to achieve Zero Hunger. Pope Francis spoke to WFP’s Executive Board, management, and staff in June 2016, emphasizing the importance of cooperation across secular religious boundaries. WFP has launched an interreligious initiative to further this goal, with support from religious leaders from a wide range of traditions. The strength of religious commitment is reflected in statements by 25 leaders supporting the June 2016 interreligious event at WFP and the diversity and reach of operational programs to address hunger is wide and generally well known.

Proposal

Urgent action is required by G20 leaders to (a) signal the gravity of the famine situation in Africa and Yemen with strong statements and commitments to action; (b) assure adequate and timely financing for food aid; (and c) link famine relief to resolute action to assure access to affected populations. This is in line with the 2017 G20 framework: “More than ever, joint action by the world community is needed in order to address acute global challenges: geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, famine, natural disasters, climate and health catastrophes, migration and displacement, as well as social inequality.” Religious institutions (formal and informal) are critical partners in the challenge.

The planned visit of Pope Francis and other religious leaders to South Sudan, interreligious focus on the famine crisis, and local faith initiatives are indicative of actual and potential religious roles. However, the full potential for harmonized efforts is limited by weak institutional links among relevant agencies that limit communications and partnerships. G20 recognition of the priority for religious engagement can help unlock this potential.

The G20 should link their support for action to UN resolutions. A request for quarterly reporting on progress of engagement of religious institutions and leaders could help chart the future course of engagement and ensure rigor in following up on Summit commitments.

The G20 can also act to advance progress towards SDG2: Zero Hunger by 2030 through explicit support for the global agendas for food security including food production and distribution and nutrition.

Success towards these objectives requires: (i) Full engagement of religious leaders at senior levels in highlighting the ethical issues at stake in the famine emergency, building on the teachings of religious traditions, individually and collectively; (ii) specific engagement of religious leaders in efforts to negotiate access to areas acutely affected by famine; and (iii) cooperative (track two) peacemaking efforts with religious communities in famine affected areas.

Religious actors support food programs and policies in communities across the globe but play especially critical roles in countries threatened by famine. South Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria offer vivid examples of situations where religious actors are actively engaged in peace negotiations and famine relief and where interreligious cooperation has the potential to assure access to vulnerable populations and to support community resilience. This potential is only partially realized and G20 recognition of the positive potential for interreligious cooperation to address both immediate needs and long term solutions could highlight new paths for action by relevant global bodies.

The planned visit to South Sudan by Pope Francis and other religious leaders is an opportunity to highlight religious engagement in the famine crisis and, in preparing for and following up on the visit, to explore opportunities to broaden advocacy and operational engagement in areas of critical need.

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