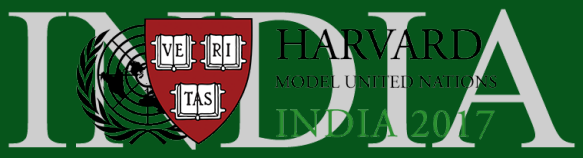
Update Paper for the World Social Forum



While it is only logical to acknowledge the impact and influence that communal affinity towards religion and traditions has on societal development, it is more important to understand and act on the pertinent and persistent issues that stem out of this significant factor of civil society. The sectarian barriers manifest out of communal violence, backwardness in thought, religious constructs, conservative and orthodox beliefs and practices. The high degree of cohesion in one community amounts to a point where one is groomed against another around tension and polarisation. For instance, a state religion is a religion officially endorsed by the state. A state with an official religion, while not secular, is not necessarily a theocracy – a country whose rulers have in their hands both secular and spiritual authority. Burma's population is 90 percent Theravada Buddhist, a faith the government embraces and promotes over Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Minority populations that adhere to these and other faiths are denied building permits, banned from proselytizing and pressured to convert to the majority faith. Religious groups must register with the government, and Burmese citizens must list their faith on official documents. When seen from this larger perspective, differences among religions and sects have created a region where the satisfied and the dissatisfied reside together. The Middle East, with its internal problems and conflicts among states, alongside the possession of economic wealth, is constantly open to provocations and conflict. Hence a major conclusion to be derived is that religion does not necessarily propagate communal disorientation, however undeniably correlates with sectarianism on the lines of disruption and societal restraints.

A certain class could utilise these inherited beliefs to advance its own interests, without necessarily believing in them. This can be seen in the context of a class's defence of its own privileges and existence against other classes, or against other sectors from the same class. Sectarianism is the tendency to undermine social cohesion by pushing for the reproduction of ancient beliefs and separations. This process is not exclusive to religious minorities, but can also be observed in the majority as well. This sort of limiting a community's opportunities and growth potential by encapsulating the people within the bounds of ancient beliefs and customs is not just impractical in today's world, but also negatively deters the evolution of civil societies into modern homes. One can say that these are the real threats faced by our world – a scenario where minds limit the growth of a society. There is a fine line between a moral obligation to uphold cultural stigma and the extent to which a religion/societal belief can penetrate the freedom of a society's understandings of life. For example, Social workers may regularly encounter the expression of sectarian attitudes, whether mooted generally or directed at them personally. Delivering social work in segregated neighbourhoods has presented a range of barriers amidst a dynamic which sustains sectarian attitudes and antagonisms. Neighbourhoods and housing estates may be under the control of paramilitary organizations and there have been examples of social workers of NGOs requiring police escorts when carrying out tasks. We come to understand that the delivery of social work services by NGOs can be deeply modified or reduced by both the prevalence of sectarianism and the impact of violence. A major issue faced by non-governmental organisations today is the limits imposed by the religious and conservative constructs of the societies they try to help. In the case of Iran, NGOs have not evolved out of a natural process as other manifestations of modern civilization such as art, politics, philosophy, and science have went through somehow naturally. That is, since the idea of NGOs is imported, their formation is not yet adapted with the specific culture, knowledge, ethics, and structure. Hence, some local NGOs have been originated from the Iranian culture which is not capable of giving definite answers to the current needs of this society. Not just in the Middle East where reli-

gious beliefs seem to lead the way of life, these cases are highly prevalent in many LEDCs in Africa where the very thought of NGOs reaching out to the rural poor is scary and uncalled for. Lack of access to the remote areas that are in need of aid, inability of local governments to coordinate with aid agencies to reach out to the rural poor, cases of religious leaders and groups denying NGOs to enter their communities and homes, a moral backwardness and sexist interests stemming from conservatism that prevent NGOs from guiding women and self-help groups and finally, religious interests that compromise the funds and aid initiated for the victims – these problems are diverse in nature and stunt NGOs from being able to serve their true purposes.

An important aspect to be considered at this juncture is the existence of faith-based organisations or religious non-governmental organisations Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations have a long history of responding to people in need and today are important players in the international community's response to emergencies. For example, in 1983 Dutch InterChurch Aid warned of a coming famine in Ethiopia. Over the course of the next year the organization became increasingly alarmed about the deteriorating conditions and therefore organized visits to the capitals of seven European countries, urging early action to prevent a large-scale tragedy. No action was taken until the famine reached catastrophic proportions. It was only after the BBC broadcasted a dramatic report in late 1994 that a large-scale response was mobilized. Today, reports from local church partners and church-related organizations such as Jesuit Refugee Service and local councils of churches provide a wealth of information on impending emergencies. However, they rarely result in adequate measures being taken to prevent catastrophic situations because it is difficult for faith-based and secular organizations (as well as for UN agencies) to mobilize sufficient resources to respond to the so-called "forgotten" emergencies. On the contrary, for the faith-based humanitarian community, the increasing visibility of fundamentalist or evangelical Christians in humanitarian assistance is a challenge because the evangelizing aspects of their humanitarian work often affect all Christian organizations. In early 2005, press reports in Indonesia that evangelical groups were trying to bring the Gospel as well as relief to Muslims affected by the tsunami led to questioning and criticism of the work of all Christians. Although the modern mentality relegates religion to the realm of private life, religious NGOs (RNGOs) represent a unique hybrid of religious beliefs and socio-political activism at all levels of society. Differing from congregational and denominational structures, which tend to focus on the development of their membership, RNGOs seek to fulfil explicitly public missions. These agencies need to be studied at length to identify how they can be bettered in aspects they lack considering one of our main concerns – to not allow religion hinder the work of NGOs in any case, whatsoever.

Some international aid organisations have withdrawn from Iraq because of the dangers, making Iraqis even more dependent on local NGOs. The government has registered about 100 local groups that administer direct aid in Iraq. The Iraqis who are displaced and dependent on local assistance – a million people nationwide, according to the Ministry of Displacement and Migration - have been hit hardest.

For humanitarian workers in the non-profit world, the Middle East is as complicated as it gets. A poignant example is the delivery of aid in war-torn Syria – a country where, the United Nations estimates, 7.6 million are displaced and 4.6 million are in need of assistance in besieged neighbourhoods and hard-to-reach areas. Humanitarian actors navigate political complexities on a daily basis, passing through checkpoints and territories of competing and combating factions, as they seek to provide a lifeline to the vulnerable. Hence, the involvement of religious factors outlay a tougher and much more inaccessible environment for social workers to engage and serve their purpose.

As a result of major case studies, one can conclude that the major sectarian barriers that are considered as obstacles are:

I. Denial of permission to enter a few areas

that require humanitarian assistance,

II. Threats to life for reaching out to isolated communities due to religious constraints,

III. Accessibility issues due to language and cultural barriers,

IV. Lack of support from local governments,

V. Cultural limitations that prevent the participation of people.