

# Giving in an Age of Need

By **NASER HAGHAMED**

CEO, ISLAMIC RELIEF WORLDWIDE



Naser Haghamed was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) in April 2016. Since joining IRW 23 years ago, he has worked in numerous leadership roles, including as Director of International Programmes and Operations Director of the Islamic Relief Academy. Mr Haghamed has over 30 years' experience and expertise in both the private and 'third' sectors, running company-wide

operational functions and leading complex projects from inception to successful completion. He has also served on the boards of various private and third sector organisations. Mr Haghamed obtained an Executive MBA with distinction from Aston University, UK, in 2016.

Makkah is the birthplace of the Islamic tradition of giving. For a Muslim, the importance of being good and charitable to others is set out in clear and simple terms in both the Quran and Hadith.

The giving of *Zakat* (alms) is mandatory for all those who meet the minimum requirements, to pay 2.5 per cent of eligible income annually to one of eight categories, including orphans, the poor and those in debt. Beyond this, *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) is readily given for a variety of causes. These range from schools, mosques and local community initiatives to emergency aid and long-term development projects relieving poverty all over the world.

Another important aspect of charity is *waqf* (endowments) – investments in land or property where the profits go to charitable causes. And charitable giving is not restricted to donations of money, material goods or land. Time or volunteering is an in-kind donation that can be just as important.

This broad definition of charity is summed up beautifully in a *hadith* (saying) in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: "Every Muslim has to give in charity." This hadith instructs that Muslims should work with their hands, help those seeking aid, perform good deeds and stay away from evil deeds, as all these will be considered charitable.

In Islam, charity is not only the right thing to do but also an investment in one's reward in the *akhirah* (afterlife). Whatever we are given by Allah ﷻ is an *amanah* (trust) – entrusted to us to use in the best way possible. *Sadaqah* is seen as a loan lent directly to Allah where the returns are unimaginable.

Anecdotal reports from the first 100 years of Islam indicate that *zakat* had a huge impact on poverty alleviation. While no figures on *zakat* collection during this period exist, accounts from the time of Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab (634-643 AD) and Omar bin Abdul Aziz (718-720 AD) suggest poverty was eradicated, with rulers in some regions struggling to disburse *zakat* proceeds because of a lack of poor and eligible recipients.

Islamic Relief was among the first of today's leading international Muslim charities to be set up – established in 1984 in Birmingham, UK, in response to famine in Africa. Since then it has grown into an organisation that works in over 30 countries around the world. So far it has assisted over 110 million people afflicted by natural disasters, conflict and poverty.

Being a charitable organisation, we rely mainly on donations from the public throughout the year – especially in Ramadan and for *Qurbani* meat distributions. We also receive support from governments and international institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Islamic Development Bank to resource the life-changing work we do all over the world.

*Worship God, and ascribe no partners to Him, and be good to the parents, and the relatives, and the orphans, and the poor, and the neighbour next door, and the distant neighbour, and the close associate, and the traveller, and your servants. God does not love the arrogant show-off* Quran 4:36

Charitable giving by the Muslim community has been transformed over the past 40 years. In the 1960s and '70s, Muslims who emigrated to Western countries from parts of South and South East Asia and the Middle East would send money back to their homelands via a trusted friend or family member. Since then this informal approach has been complemented by major international charities that deliver aid to some of the world's remotest places and make the act of giving more straightforward, far-reaching and impactful.

Recently those giving to charity have embraced technological advances such as the internet and smartphones to donate swiftly and easily. One of our fastest growing partners is Islamic Relief Canada, which celebrates its tenth birthday this year and has just secured its first Canadian government funding to help tackle gender-based violence in Iraq. Its rapid growth has partly been fuelled by a mass of younger donors and volunteers who mainly donate online and are very active on social media.

*Verily those who give sadaqah, men and women, and lend Allah a goodly loan, it shall be increased manifold, and theirs shall be an honourable good reward (Paradise) Quran 57.18*

Our biggest single humanitarian response has been to the prolonged and brutal Syrian conflict. So far we have provided US\$195 million worth of food, medical aid and other assistance to over 7 million Syrians deep inside the country and living as refugees in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Our partners in the West have also assisted refugees scattered more widely – most notably Islamic Relief Germany, which has supported a number of local projects aimed at helping refugees settle, learn the language and find ways to earn a living and provide for their families.

Developed Western nations have tended to be seen as places where those in poverty are looked after by the state, so Muslims in these countries have traditionally favoured projects in poorer countries with their charitable donations. In recent times, however,

we are as likely to hear about poverty and desperation on the streets of Atlanta as we are on the streets of Aleppo.

Islamic Relief USA (IRUSA) has recruited and trained teams of volunteers to help those affected by domestic emergencies such as tornadoes and floods. When lead contamination of the water supply prompted the declaration of a state of emergency last year in Flint, Michigan, IRUSA's dedicated volunteers delivered over 300,000 bottles of drinking water to local residents.

As well as the Syrian crisis, Islamic Relief has responded to a wide variety of other emergencies in its 33-year history. These have included devastating droughts and famine in east and west Africa; major earthquakes in Pakistan, Haiti and Nepal; the Indian Ocean tsunami; record-breaking floods in Pakistan and Bangladesh; the conflicts in Afghanistan and Yemen; and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Alongside such emergency responses, Islamic Relief also delivers long-term programmes to lift people out of poverty. Our donors enable us to support and educate more than 50,000 orphans, while our microfinance projects in parts of Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh help women struggling to feed their children by supplying start-up loans to create viable businesses.

In 2016 we supported the launch of the state-of-the-art Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital in South Africa, one of only a handful of children's hospitals on the African continent. We contributed US\$7.7 million to fund the children's oncology unit.

Islamic Relief is blessed and privileged to be able to play a part in harnessing the generosity of donors around the world to help those who need it most. Together we can work tirelessly for what those early Muslims achieved – eradication of poverty and a life of prosperity and dignity for all. **F**

*Islamic Relief Worldwide has provided US\$195m worth of food, medical aid and other assistance to over 7 million Syrians since the start of the conflict*

