

Commentaries from the Faith & Philanthropy Summit in Rome

Commentary 1

Muslim Philanthropy: What's in the name?

Hisham E. Nourin

Executive Director - Strategic Initiatives and Programs

Qatar Foundation

I was invited to attend the Muslim Philanthropists Mini-Summit at the inaugural “Faith and Philanthropy Summit” that took place in Rome. The mini-summit was sponsored by the Muslim Philanthropy Initiative at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists. The event brought together 40 leaders of Muslim Philanthropic organizations from across the world working in different mission areas to discuss challenges, opportunities, and learned lessons that can further the impact of their work. Such forums are of great value, since Muslim philanthropy is estimated to contribute between \$100 to \$200 billion according to a 2019 report by the Islamic Development Bank.

The first sessions of the day helped set the tone, focusing on discussing a vision for the future of Muslim philanthropy “What does the world look like in 2047?” This included what challenges organizations currently face, how to overcome them, and how to take a more proactive approach to address some of these obstacles. Many of the participants shared that they tend to be more reactive in their approach due to the pressing needs within their communities, which doesn't usually allow for the luxury of planning strategically. Philanthropic organizations must work on identifying agile models of delivering their objectives given the environment of uncertainty that they sometimes operate in, whether it is from a consistent funding pipeline or the unexpected needs of their beneficiaries. This will allow for increased efficacy in utilizing their resources.

Another key topic that was interesting as a salient theme in the discussion is the importance of coalition building. The value of working with other groups toward a common cause or to cater to a specific demographic provided a multiplier effect in creating a sustainable impact. It was interesting to hear from the group how this approach was effective, however, it required different partnership models depending on the objective, location, and type of organizations that are aligning.

The following day the group was split into three breakout sessions to zoom into specific topics of discussion. I was fortunate to moderate one of the sessions that delved into what differentiates general philanthropy from Muslim philanthropy. The discussion was insightful as it provided diverse perspectives from the group and while there were common definitions shared, there was no consensus on what unique value proposition Muslim philanthropy provided.

So, what role does faith play in philanthropy? In the Islamic faith the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) says “Every act of kindness is charity,” which highlights the multitude of ways that philanthropy can be exercised. However, the Prophet PBUH also provides guidance in other sayings emphasizing that Allah only accepts that which is wholesome and pure in the context of charity. I believe that this latter concept offers a deep and profound reality of how faith is ought to be considered. This means that philanthropy needs to be approached in its totality and what implications it has on the society and not only for its utility. It is essential to consider how funds are gathered and to ensure that there are no transgressions on any of the creations of Allah, whether it is by exploitation through usury, the environment, or human beings, to name a few. Therefore, Muslim philanthropists need to deconstruct and perhaps revive an Islamic paradigm when it comes to philanthropy that transcends this material world, otherwise, we might just call it philanthropy.