

## **Background article: Expressions, Aid for those in need**

### **Al-Mizan Charitable Trust**

There are a number of Islamically-inspired charities that are based in Britain, some of which focus on international work and others include working with people in need in this country. There are Muslim organisations that exist to help Muslims in need, but our focus here is on the Islamic principle of *sadaqa*, which we can translate as “bearing one another’s burdens”, which is the humanitarian principle that underpins those Islamically-inspired charities that pledge themselves to serve human beings in need on the basis of their humanity and without reference to their faith, ethnicity or cultural background.

Such a charity, registered with the Charity Commissioners in the UK (No. 1135752), is the Al-Mizan Charitable Trust. It takes its inspiration from verses of the Qur'an, such as: “You will never attain piety until you spend out of what you hold dear” [Q. 3:92]. It is not enough, from an Islamic perspective, to just give away the ‘small change’ that one does not miss. Similarly, the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad: “None of you have faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself”. The word neighbour here expresses the humanitarian principle; every human being in need is the concern of the Al-Mizan Trust.

### **Looking at the website**

Al-Mizan Trust has its own website: [www.almizantrust.org.uk](http://www.almizantrust.org.uk) There we can read its own self-description:

**Al-Mizan Charitable Trust supports people living in poverty across the UK, regardless of their faith or cultural background.**

Although Britain is seen as a wealthy country, one in five people live below the official poverty line and struggle with the rising costs of living. The welfare state also does not provide access to skills and opportunities to help people better their circumstances or equip people with sufficient savings to deal with a life crisis or change in circumstances.

Through the General Welfare Fund, the Trust provides small grants, which help with the costs of education and training, employment and enterprise, household items, medical and mobility, and subsistence.

The Trust operates a flexible Grants Policy, which is designed to meet a person’s individual needs. In order to enable as many people as possible to access the grants, the Trust runs with very few exclusions, (factors which would make an applicant ineligible). Beneficiaries include children and young people, single parents, elderly people, victims of domestic violence or abuse,

asylum seekers and refugees, prisoners and ex-offenders, disabled people, and the working poor.

The Trust also runs four fundraising campaigns throughout the year. During Ramadan, Food Parcels are distributed to low-income families. Before the school year starts, Back to School Backpacks are given to children living in poverty, which contain school uniform vouchers and essential stationery supplies.

When the cold winter months begin, homeless people receive Winter Warmer Packs that contain warm clothing, toiletries, and first aid items. To celebrate Mother's Day, Mother & Baby Kits are handed out to new mothers who cannot afford essential baby items.

The fundraising campaigns are run in partnership with grassroots organisations, so that the packs reach the people who need them the most.

The Trust is a member of the Association of Charitable Organisations and adheres to all recognised models of good practice and quality standard, which is essential to ensure accountability when disbursing funds through the General Welfare Fund.

Central to the ethos of the Trust is that no direct, voluntary donation from an individual towards the General Welfare Fund is used to cover administrative costs or overheads.

In its website statement on Vision, Mission and Values, we read:

Our **vision** is to break the vicious cycle of poverty in the UK.

Our **mission** is to support disadvantaged people and deprived communities across the UK, regardless of their faith or cultural background.

Our **values** are:

- **Accountability** – We consider every donation, both large and small, to be a pact between us and the donor, which is based on trust and a mutual responsibility to those in need. We scrutinise every expense to ensure that your donation is spent wisely in combating disadvantage, deprivation and poverty.
- **Compassion** – We provide the best possible support to everyone that approaches us, in order to help them break out of the cycle of poverty.

- **Effective** – We work with our beneficiaries to identify the appropriate type of support we can offer them, which will ensure that we can make a lasting impression on people’s lives.
- **Equality & Fairness** – We value the diversity of all humankind and we pledge to ensure that our policies and procedures do not discriminate on any grounds. We invest in the betterment of all society, irrespective of creed, culture or personal circumstances.
- **Respect** – We recognise that asking for help is not easy and we promise to treat you with respect throughout any interaction. We are committed to providing a fair and confidential service to everyone that approaches us for support.

In the website Frequently Asked Questions, number 9, we read of the unique approach of this charity:

How is the Trust different from other grant-making bodies?

Al-Mizan Charitable Trust is a grant-funder, and the only Muslim grant-funder to individuals in the UK, regardless of their faith, culture or background. We pride ourselves in being a young, ambitious charity, run entirely by a committed team of volunteers. We are a pioneering charity, entrepreneurial in our approach and continually developing our processes and systems. We stay abreast of the different challenges facing disadvantaged communities across the UK and this is reflected in our grant-making policy. We consider our responsibility to our donors as important as our duty of care to our beneficiaries. We are visionary, forward thinking and take a long-term view in our growth and development.

## **Methodology**

Al-Mizan draws its funding from anyone who wishes to support its work: Muslims, people of other faiths, people with no faith commitment. It uses Islamic principles to inspire freewill giving by supporters; they will have a special meaning to Muslims, but at the heart of Islam is the principle that ‘this guidance is for the benefit of all humankind’ and so others can also be inspired without being Muslims. Funding comes from four broad sources:

- People are encouraged to give regular donations so that the charity can have the security of knowing that a certain amount will come in each month. It is often the most convenient way for people to contribute, but does it cease to be noticed because it is just an entry on the monthly bank statement?
- There are regular appeals throughout the year to trigger the conscience of people to their responsibility for a particular need. This might encourage those who give regularly to consider if they are really ‘giving what they love for

themselves' and also might be an invitation to new people to get involved with a particular aspect of the charity's work.

- Links are made with businesses to develop corporate sponsorship of particular projects.
- Periodic special fund-raising events, such as sponsored walks or cycle rides, which not only raise money, but also bring supporters together, provide opportunities for new people to get involved, and provide a 'fun element' to engage children and train them to think of others.

Al-Mizan Trust is a campaigning organisation that wants to draw attention to the causes of poverty so that it can be relieved and not just to give money to those in need. In this way it expresses the central Islamic ethic of justice. The causes of injustice must be identified and efforts made to correct them. It is not enough merely to be aware of the demand for justice; the Islamic principle is a call to action – to strive for justice. Al-Mizan Trust uses research to draw a situation to the attention of people. Let us look at the 'Back to School Backpacks' project as an example.

First, it raises the awareness of people to the situation:

A survey of teachers by the NASUWT union found that:

Almost three-quarters of the teachers had seen pupils coming to school hungry;  
Over a quarter had given food to hungry pupils;  
Most had seen pupils unable to afford uniform;  
15% had given pupils clothing;  
59% said their school had given pupils clothing;  
Almost two-thirds had lent or given pupils school equipment;  
41% had given advice to families on issues related to financial pressures;  
And most said financial pressures meant rising levels of anxiety among pupils.

Education is often talked about as the key to breaking out of the vicious cycle of poverty, but when families cannot afford the right clothing or stationery for school, it has a detrimental effect on the children's ability to learn.

And for most children living in poverty, the school lunch can be the only nutritious meal they have all day, so during the summer holidays, parents have to spend more on food, which means there is less money to buy uniform or stationery when the school year starts.

Second, it identifies what is needed to address the problem:

Each Backpack is worth £50 and contains £20 of school uniform vouchers, drawstring bag for sports; pencil case, pens, pencils, ruler, maths set, scientific calculator, highlighters, homework diary, A4 notepad, record cards, sticky

notes, folder with dividers, USB stick, dictionary, thesaurus, fiction book, and non-fiction book.

Finally, the charity sets an optimistic target for how many backpacks they can reasonably hope to purchase, so that they have something towards which to strive. They engage the services of volunteers to pack the backpacks in various locations around the country and then distribute them respectfully to the recipients.

By going to the website, one can find records of the quarterly campaigns of the charity and a description of the various activities in which they engage. As would be expected of any registered charity, policy documents, annual reports and accounts, and a list of trustees can also be found there. A close study of the annual reports is especially useful to see the work of the charity and the problems in British society that it addresses.

A critical part of the work of the Al-Mizan Trust is to respond to the needs of those caught in a situation in which they desperately need some financial assistance. Often people in such situations cannot access help from social services or from other charitable bodies. By looking at the 'case studies' on the 'Explore' page of the website, one can find many accounts of the range of people and situations that have been helped by Al-Mizan Trust. Notice the way in which the dignity and humanity of beneficiaries is maintained and cherished; the Islamic principle of the infinite value of every human life is demonstrated here. Similarly notice the emphasis on partnership; working with beneficiaries and not treating them merely as the recipients of help.

As part of their aim to train and encourage Muslim children to think of the causes and effects of poverty in Britain, the Al-Mizan Trust produced a 'Good Deeds Calendar' for Ramadan – have a look at the pdf file that goes with this article.