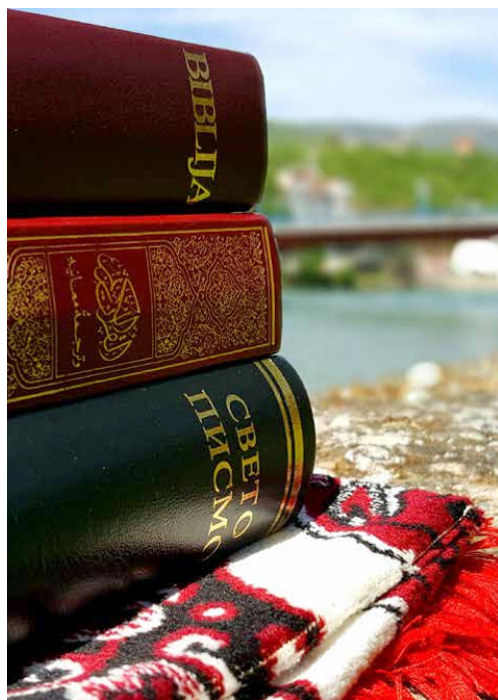


Advancing Interreligious Peacebuilding

EMERGING GUIDANCE BASED ON EXPERIENCE

THEORY OF CHANGE FOR CRS' LEARNING AGENDA

If CRS brings together representatives from multiple interreligious dialogue and action projects (IRD/A) to engage in a structured and facilitated process of exchange and cross-learning, then they will be able to identify emerging guidance for IRD/A efforts, based on their lived experiences in diverse locations and conditions, that can inform more effective IRD/A initiatives by CRS and other peacebuilding agencies.



AIP supported the launch of a joint Interreligious Studies and Peacebuilding Masters' degree program involving three theological faculties. The program is the first of its kind. *Photo courtesy of the Board for Inter-Religious Cooperation, Goražde*

SUMMARY

From 2016-2018, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) implemented a learning effort called Advancing Interreligious Peacebuilding (AIP). The project committed CRS's internal resources to promote deliberate learning about effective interreligious action for peace, focusing primarily on four projects working on Muslim and Christian dialogue in Egypt, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Philippines and several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. To promote cross-learning among CRS staff and partners, the project organized three annual learning events intended to strengthen replication and adaptation of promising practices in interreligious peacebuilding. This document offers the key findings and emerging guidance from the three-year effort and the annual learning events. While the lessons discussed are drawn mainly from work with Muslim and Christian groups, many of them are applicable, with appropriate adaptation, to work with other faith communities.

WHAT IS INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING?

Interreligious Peacebuilding brings together individuals, groups and institutions of different faiths and cultural traditions, and draws on their spiritual values. It engages in processes of dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, mutual problem solving, and practical actions that promote greater mutual understanding, respect, and social equity to achieve harmonious coexistence for the common good. The effort involves identification of commonalities, modification of misconceptions, and acceptance of differences. It often strives for individual transformation and healing, as well as work to build greater cohesion within groups. These endeavors recognize that religion can provide a prophetic voice for justice and peace, while acknowledging that it can also be manipulated to promote disharmony and dominance.

CORE PRINCIPLES

Many indigenous cultures and each of the world's faith traditions, teachings, and practices embrace the concepts of peace and reconciliation. Interreligious peacebuilding draws on these spiritual and institutional resources to promote improved relations and greater justice within and across faith and cultural groups—and in the larger society.

Who is engaged?

1. Engage religious actors and traditional and cultural leaders—including those who hold formal positions and others who are recognized as responding to conditions of war and violence from their faith or cultural tradition.
2. Depending on immediate objectives and the context, determine which faith, traditional and/or cultural groups to involve, including youth and women in those communities.
3. Undertake horizontal engagements across key religious and secular groups at the community level.
4. Engage in vertical connections from grassroots to policy makers, including government entities, when appropriate, leveraging or enhancing the influence of religious groups.



Muslim and Christian religious leaders, community dialogue practitioners, civil society and government representatives participate in a ritual to signify their aspirations for peace in Mindanao.
Edwin Antipuesto/CRS

What are the desired outcomes?

1. Personal healing from trauma and greater openness to engagement and reconciliation with others.
2. Stronger relationships within faith groups to enable outreach to other groups.
3. Social, economic and political equity and justice across different faith/cultural groups.
4. Unity in diversity: greater trust, tolerance, acceptance, fair treatment, and respectful listening across groups.
5. Sustainability of gains in intergroup relations.
6. Respect for human rights.

How does an interreligious effort proceed? (process principles)

7. Draw on faith traditions and spiritual practices as a basis for interactions and dialogue.
8. Make certain that initiatives are informed by careful context/ conflict analysis, including the needs and perspectives of religious groups, as well as gender and cultural dimensions.
9. Address drivers of conflict, not just symptoms.
10. Extend beyond dialogue among religious groups to practical action and innovation, involving cooperation/collaboration across group lines.
11. Avoid neglecting or glossing over discussion about the substance of religious traditions; strive for understanding and appreciation, not necessarily agreement.
12. Ensure broad participation by all relevant groups, including those who are “hard to reach.” In some circumstances, hard to reach groups can be approached through religious channels.
13. Ensure that the process does no harm: identify connectors and dividers, mitigate unintended negative consequences.
14. Religious groups and leaders are in a strong position to promote positive change at the community level. Depending on the structure of the faith communities (degree of hierarchy, centralization or decentralization, etc.) the ability and need to exert influence at higher levels may be quite varied in different settings. (This reflects the principle of subsidiarity).
15. Allow flexibility and adaptation, based on new information or events, or the success/failure of project activities; critically review theories of change periodically.

RELIGION CAN PROVIDE A PROPHETIC VOICE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE.

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INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING DRAWS ON SPIRITUAL VALUES, IN ADDITION TO DIALOGUE, MUTUAL PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND PRACTICAL ACTION.

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ITS AIM IS HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE FOR THE COMMON GOOD.

THEORY OF CHANGE OF INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

The overall theory of change for the AIP program was as follows:

Theory of Change for interreligious dialogue and action: If local faith communities and their leaders, including Muslims, Christians, and other cultural groups, engage in personal healing, rebuild internal group cohesion, and participate in intergroup dialogue, training and practical initiatives to meet shared needs, then, over time, mutual understanding, tolerance and trust will be enhanced, because healing, reconciliation, joint decision making, and action represent opportunities for positive interactions that can break down stereotypes and hostility, contributing to peace and security.

KEY APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES USED IN AIP

The AIP project worked directly with CRS interreligious peacebuilding programs in Mindanao, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt and the CIRCA projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. Each pursued somewhat different approaches, based on local contexts, needs and conditions. Nevertheless, several conceptual frameworks were shared and applied, with appropriate adaptations, in each setting. In addition to these conceptual frameworks, each project engaged in a series of initiatives working closely with religious leaders and their communities.

Application of “Three Bs” Framework. Most of the AIP projects used this concept in some way—although not always explicitly.

- **Binding:** personal change and trauma healing
- **Bonding:** building internal group cohesion
- **Bridging:** making connections across group boundaries to build trust and positive relations

The projects also discovered that the three elements are not necessarily sequential or linear. While personal change may support efforts to build greater social cohesion within identity groups, progress in personal transformation does not always precede intra-group work. Similarly, while increasing intra-group understanding (bonding) is often an advisable preliminary step before inter-group engagement (bridging), the process is not always linear; steps repeat and circle back or occur out of logical sequence. Flexibility and adaptation in response to local conditions and developments is crucial. In some settings, while intra-group bonding work was needed, it was also important to engage all groups simultaneously, to avoid the appearance of favoring one group over another during bonding activities.

Muslim and Christian women in Mindanao, Philippines engage in dialogue on common issues such as early marriages, community trash and threats of recruitment of youth by violent groups.
Photo courtesy of the Prelature of Isabela



PHILIPPINES

In Mindanao, project participants found that Bridging activities can be sustained when local leaders have been engaged and provide support for interreligious dialogue. Local partner organizations reached out to traditional religious leaders and the local barangay council members, as well as youth and women's groups, to gain support. Youth, women, and men are now active participants in bridging activities across groups.

EGYPT

The AIP project had been working with Muslim and Christian youth and assumed that they would be ready to move to the “bridging” step of direct interactions with their counterparts in the other group. However, in one village, the Christian youth expressed fear of participating in joint training sessions with Muslim young people. Project staff, relying on the flexibility of 3 Bs model, decided to engage first in separate training to achieve greater internal group “bonding,” before moving on to bridging.

Appreciative Inquiry (the “4 Ds”): Appreciative Inquiry generally involves 1) Appreciating what is [Discover]; 2) envisioning a positive future [Dream]; 3) planning a future by addressing needed improvements and building on assets [Design]; and 4) engaging in joint action [Deliver/Deploy].

Appreciative Inquiry provides a useful conceptual framework for intergroup engagement, as a flexible planning tool that emphasizes positive elements, rather than focusing on problems from the beginning. Several of the AIP projects discovered that they were proceeding along these lines naturally, even if they were not self-consciously applying this framework. This positive and hopeful approach seems to appeal to faith-based groups, at least as a starting point, in contrast to methods that might emphasize a critique of what is wrong or problematic. In some settings, it was possible to combine the “3 Bs” and “4 Ds” concepts to step through personal transformation, internal group work and intergroup engagement using an appreciative mindset.

Connector projects. Most of the AIP projects engaged in connector projects: joint efforts across groups to address community needs in practical ways. In each context, religious leaders

TO BE EFFECTIVE, CONNECTOR PROJECTS REQUIRE CAREFUL ATTENTION TO PARTICIPATION, JOINT DECISION-MAKING, AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY.

CELEBRATING SHARED PROGRESS IS ALSO IMPORTANT!

and other faith-based actors played pivotal roles in helping the communities determine which projects to undertake. In several cases, a focus on the most vulnerable or marginalized elements of a community enabled fairly easy agreement on joint projects. Examples included addressing water and sanitation needs, constructing interreligious youth centers, and improving street lighting.

The underlying assumption of these initiatives is that, by working together for the common good to make tangible improvements in community life, religious groups will increase their understanding and tolerance of one another and build social cohesion. Because connector projects provide a platform for interaction between diverse identity groups while addressing shared practical needs, they permit integration of dialogue and action.

A learning from AIP is that these connector projects, while programmatically rewarding, should not be rushed. It is important to follow structured, participatory processes that include mapping of local conflict issues and practical needs, joint decision-making about the focus of the connector initiative, coordination meetings with local authorities, and celebratory launch events. They also require careful attention to conflict sensitivity, given the material and financial resources involved, and may require additional technical expertise beyond the peacebuilding field (for example, in microfinance or construction).

CIRCA The Capacity for Interreligious Community Action (CIRCA) project worked with religious actors in Nigeria, Niger, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Egypt, drawing on a combination of spiritual, cognitive, and practical motivations for interreligious action and supporting local Christian and Muslim organizations to work together. The projects emphasized working with leaders and youth to engage in practical connector projects and focused on building individual skills. Training included modules on peacebuilding, cooperation and partnerships, followed by identification and implementation of practical connector projects. Connector projects varied considerably and included efforts to improve access to potable water, natural resource management, income generation and environmental sanitation. For example, young men in Konni, Niger developed a joint enterprise for hiring out public address systems and tents, as well as selling ice blocks to the community. They agreed that all positions would be co-managed by a Muslim and a Christian; for example, a Muslim chairperson with a Christian deputy. After joint training, the youth worked together to construct a storage and sales facility, and collaborated to ensure smooth functioning early in the connector project. For example, when the Muslim youth responsible for bookkeeping got a job elsewhere, he trained his Christian assistant to take over these duties. Not only did the joint venture become visible in the community, but so did the closeness of participants. While interreligious interaction was previously limited among the youth, they began to participate in one another's important events such as child-naming ceremonies and weddings.

Building Capacities of Religious Actors, Institutions, Networks and Platforms. The CRS projects recognized that, in order to achieve sustainable progress in the communities, it would be necessary to enhance skills for dialogue and exchange, and to strengthen local organizations that could carry on the work. In most cases, CRS works with and through local partners that represent the relevant faith communities and cultural groups in that setting. For some of those groups, peacebuilding was a new approach. Therefore, building skills through training and accompaniment was a crucial program element.

ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING DEPENDS ON CAPACITY STRENGTHENING AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AMONG DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS, COMMUNITY RELIGIOUS LEADERS, AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES ALL HAVE ROLES TO PLAY.

POST-TRAINING ACCOMPANIMENT IS A KEY ELEMENT.

In some locations, there were existing organizations dedicated to peacebuilding and intergroup efforts. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, local Interreligious Councils were strengthened and expanded. In Mindanao, CRS worked to ensure that religious leaders were connected with existing networks and provided Culture of Peace and other training to build local capacities for intergroup work, including the “3 Bs”. In Egypt, local Muslim and Christian partner organizations were reinforced through training and accompaniment.

EGYPT In Egypt, the project was working in a village that was experiencing high tension between Muslim and Christian communities. Project staff worked intensively with community and religious leaders, making multiple formal and informal visits to build relationships and trust. The situation escalated due to an incident of sexual harassment between a young Muslim man and a young Christian woman, leading to fights between her relatives and the young Muslim—and all were taken to the police station. At that point, a community leader decided to intervene, and asked the local AIP project partners to help—which was a challenge to their new relationships. Together, the partners reached out to the two families and used mediation skills to find a mutually satisfactory solution. The process involved influential leaders at the district level, community religious leaders, and the local AIP committee, all working together to build consensus. This response to a critical incident increased legitimacy of and interest in the interreligious peacebuilding project, especially among young people.

Engaging Youth and Women in Interreligious Peacebuilding. In each AIP project area, it was important to work with young people and to understand the local context from a gender perspective. Youth were considered an important program constituency, as they represent the potential, either for perpetuating prejudice, stereotypes and intergroup hostilities, or for introducing more positive views across dimensions of difference. Mobilizing youth and women for peacebuilding efforts through religious groups was a priority for most of the AIP projects, given the challenges related to elder- and male- dominated leadership structures of most religious institutions. At the same time, it was necessary to understand, in each context, what kinds of interactions would be acceptable, and what limits might exist, particularly across gender lines.

EGYPT In rural Egypt, the final evaluation found that local Muslim and Christian partners facilitated the female involvement in youth teams with “intentionality, courage and skill,” given that women and men rarely mix in public spaces in this context. These young women went on to organize a series of interreligious activities engaging mothers in their communities. First, they convened a discussion circle to learn more about the issues of interest to the mothers. They then held an awareness session on child-rearing from an expert speaker, followed a few days later by a skit and interactive discussion led by the youth. After a second discussion circle the following week, they brought in another speaker to present positive ways of dealing with parenting challenges. This was again followed by a skit and interactive discussion. The third cycle addressed the mothers’ concerns about sexual harassment, and the fourth covered children’s rights and child protection.



In Luxor, Egypt, AIP supported Muslim and Christian community leaders to jointly expand a nursery school for young children of all faiths, and to plan activities for parents to meet across religious lines. Photo: Madonna Safwat from Luxor Coptic Catholic Diocese Development Office

**WORKING
“HORIZONTALLY”
ACROSS FAITH
TRADITIONS CAN
BE A FIRST STEP
BEFORE WORKING
“VERTICALLY”
TO INFLUENCE
DECISION-MAKERS.**

.....

**INSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE CAN FOCUS
ON RELIGIOUS
STRUCTURES
THEMSELVES, AND
ON SOCIOPOLITICAL
INSTITUTIONS.**

PHILIPPINES

In Mindanao, CRS has been involved in peacebuilding work for more than 20 years, working closely with Christian, Muslim and indigenous groups to build relationships of trust and cooperation. Part of this work has involved support to the Mindanao Peaceweavers network, comprised of eighteen organizations dedicated to long-term peacebuilding in the region. That group has been able to provide a unified voice in relation to the official peace process of negotiations between the Government of the Philippines and the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front, helping to shape the emerging agreements and ensuring that the rights and interests of all groups are respected. During the AIP project, CRS staff attained particularly strong institutionalization of interreligious collaboration in one village. There, the village captain not only participated in the peace and conflict mapping conducted by the project’s core group, but has also strongly supported and collaborated with an interreligious youth association emerging from the core group, and has paid particular attention to the needs of Indigenous Peoples within his constituency. This aligns with national government policies that encourage all government units to support interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Addressing Institutional Change. CRS recognizes that achievements in individual healing, internal group cohesion and intergroup relationships are significant. Ultimately, however, many of the underlying causes of tensions at the community, subnational and national levels are systemic, embedded in cultural, social, political and economic institutions. Making meaningful changes in these structures is a long-term prospect; most interreligious peacebuilding efforts do not start there. Nevertheless, several of the AIP projects were able to either create or strengthen new structures or to challenge existing dynamics that perpetuate marginalization, isolation and inequity.

BOSNIA

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the team and partner have worked to strengthen local Interreligious Councils, which work with Orthodox and Catholic Christians and Muslims in many communities in the country. In addition, the CRS team was able to bring together Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic theological faculties to establish a joint masters program in Interreligious Studies and Peacebuilding. After two years of regular meetings among representatives of the three faculties, courses are now offered in each of the three faculties, and the effort has been approved by high level religious leaders. In the first year, twenty-three students from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia enrolled, twice the number originally expected. A young Muslim man said, “I was most attracted by the contents of the curriculum, which enables studying of peacebuilding through psychological and social sciences, but also from the aspect of religion.” A young Christian woman from near Sarajevo stated, “For two years, I have been involved in peacebuilding in BiH. This inspired me to obtain an academic degree.”

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EMERGING GUIDANCE FOR THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF IRP PROJECTS

This document is focused specifically on interreligious peacebuilding. Many other lessons from the peacebuilding field would also apply, but we have not attempted to replicate all of those here. Helpful practices in interreligious peacebuilding include the following:

- Identify resources for peace in religious teachings and values. Look for commonalities across different faith traditions, especially those that touch on issues of peace, reconciliation and mutual respect. Explore and build tolerance and respect for differences.
- Rely on local leadership and experience. Gaining the support of local religious leaders from the start of a project is crucial.
- Seek to engage all religious leaders and other groups relevant to the local context, including those who may not identify as explicitly religious. For instance, in the Philippines, local indigenous leaders do not identify with either Muslim or Christian religions, and in West Africa local cultural groups and individuals fulfill important community functions, operating in parallel to faith-based groups.
- Conduct context and conflict analysis, delving more deeply into the role of religion, religious leaders, and significant historical events/myths in supporting or reducing tensions.
- Consider the motivations, interests and capacities of formal religious leaders—and other potential religious and non-religious actors—as they engage in peacebuilding activities or address conflicts in their communities. Community leaders bring their own perspectives, interests and agendas, which must be recognized.
- Strive for balanced participation by all religious groups in the situation. An imbalance in participation will not work; slow down if necessary to allow all groups to engage equitably, especially lower power minority groups.
- Identify religiously-based associations, organizations and networks already working in the area and build on those.
- Sustain training, mentorship and accompaniment with local religious groups for as long as

possible, while also allowing the relationship to grow and change. Superficial short-term and one-off trainings will have little impact.

- Understand the gender dimensions of the situation (the roles of women, girls, men and boys) and how they play out in religious institutions, traditions and teachings. Engage women in culturally appropriate ways.
- Challenge young people to take initiatives for peace and reconciliation, working through local religious groups as a vehicle. Young people, particularly young men, are often considered “problems” or perpetrators of violence, rather than untapped resources for mitigating violence. As much as possible, support them to undertake their own assessments and to initiate their own practical projects to make a difference in their communities.
- Engage government officials and key institutions to address needed changes in policies, resource allocation and institutions, particularly related to equity and justice. Religious leaders and their constituencies often have connections with individuals and structures within government. Although the initial interreligious work may be primarily horizontal across groups, ultimately, vertical engagements for institutional change may be necessary, and religious groups can maximize their influence to promote such changes.
- Recognize how the strengths and limitations of religious actors will influence their ability to pursue different levels of change. Religious groups and leaders are well-positioned and well-practiced in promoting individual change, even transformation, often involving a spiritual dimension. Extending, at a local level, to intergroup dialogue and reconciliation represents an attainable stretch. For some, reaching to address issues of justice and equity involving policies, structures and even culture will be a challenge.

**THINGS
TO REMEMBER:**
GOOD GENERAL
PEACEBUILDING
PRACTICES
THAT APPLY TO
INTERRELIGIOUS
PEACEBUILDING

- Well intentioned peace actions can make matters worse. Just because you are engaged in peacebuilding does not mean you can ignore Do No Harm/conflict sensitivity principles.
- Understanding the conflict context is crucial. Conflict analysis is not optional; shared analysis across groups is preferred, whenever possible.
- Think carefully about how positive change will actually happen in the context: who has the power to make change, how will they be persuaded to act, who can influence them.
- Articulate an explicit theory of change—and then review it regularly to see if the expected changes are resulting from our actions.
- Training does not necessarily lead to behavioral change; sustained engagement, mentoring and accompaniment are needed.
- Pay attention to potential “spoilers,” armed groups and those who are “hard to reach” in other ways.
- Increased contact between individuals and groups will not automatically result in increased peace and security.

For a full repository of materials aimed at effective peacebuilding practice, visit dmeforpeace.org or CRS’ Research and Publications library on crs.org.





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