INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE

THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION IN COMBATTING INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATIONS: MAPPING INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES AND BEST PRACTICES

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP*

The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs & ISPI Initiative on "Religions and International Relations"

BOLOGNA, March 6, 2018 – Teatro San Leonardo

SUMMARY REPORT

authored by Stephanie Berry and Fabio Petito
FoRB & Foreign Policy Initiative, University of Sussex

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue and collaboration are increasingly recognised as crucial policy tools to combat intolerance and discrimination and strengthen peace building. A critical mass of international initiatives have been developed under the auspices of international and national agencies to contribute to the different policy areas of peace building, human rights and sustainable development (e.g. the International Partnership of Religion and Sustainable Development (ParD), the US Strategy of Religious Leaders and Faith Community Engagement, the UN's Fez Process, the UN 'Faith for Rights' Initiative, the Transatlantic Policy Networks on Religion and Diplomacy and the International Contact Group on FoRB). Given the growing interest in this area, it is important to consolidate these efforts and **develop a shared vision of how interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be operationalised into a concrete policy tool for governments and international organisations to engage with religious actors in sustaining peace and combatting intolerance and discriminations.**

The international workshop promoted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISPI brought together around 35 experts, diplomats, policy-makers, civil society actors working in the area of religion, as well as religious representatives and organizations active particularly in inter-religious dialogue. By drawing from the experiences and exchanges of the participants, this report identifies a preliminary set of key experiences and best practices as well as the risks and limits of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, in order to inform the development of a shared practical vision of interreligious engagement. This workshop is the beginning of a wider multi-stakeholder consultation process under the 2018 Italian OSCE Chairmanship, which aims to develop a set of policy guidelines, on how interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be successfully operationalised to further the aims of peace, sustainable development and human rights protection.

KEY THEMES AND MESSAGES

The panels focused on interreligious dialogue and collaboration in peace building, combatting intolerance and discriminations based on religion and promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and promoting sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. This report captures the key messages and recommendations from the panels and subsequent roundtable discussion, which took place under Chatham House rules. It specifically seeks to draw out some lessons to be learnt, that should underpin the development of policy guidelines in this field.

1.   The two levels of 'Interreligious Engagement'

Participants emphasised the need for a working definition of 'interreligious engagement'. It was proposed to initially think of 'interreligious engagement' in terms of coordination of two interrelated levels expressed by the two words: 1) 'Interreligious': the level of interreligious dialogue and collaboration focussing on the activities involving religious leaders, communities and other religious actors or organisations; 2) 'Engagement': the level of secular-religious partnership focussing on the way governmental and non-governmental organizations can engage interreligious collaborative groups, coalitions and activities to de-escalate violence, combat intolerance and address humanitarian crisis. It was acknowledged that this working definition was based on the assumption that a demarcation of religious and political spheres is central to facilitating a policy of interreligious engagement, however the secular/religious and political/religious divides may be difficult to clearly define.

In relation to the role of religious actors, participants emphasised that while religion inevitably plays a role in political life, not everything is about religion and, therefore, state actors must be careful not to overcharge religions with tasks for which they should not have responsibility. Further, although religious actors must not be excluded from political tasks, it is vital that they do not lead these efforts in order to maintain the division between the political and religious. It was acknowledged that religious actors unavoidably play a central role in peace-building efforts when the governance structures are weak or ineffective. However, it must also be recognized that religion may be part of the problem, as well as the solution.

If there is too much overlap between religion and power, it becomes difficult for religious leaders to maintain credibility. Further, the instrumentalised use of religious actors by political actors may also be problematic, as the legitimacy of religious actors is undermined if they are viewed as permitting state interference in religious matters. Interreligious collaboration may be viewed as a way to promote a particular interpretation or kind of religion and, indeed, challenging contentious practices may undermine the authority of religious actors.

States should not seek to influence religious doctrine. Although theological debate and inter/intra-religious dialogue may be useful to isolate extremism and provide justifications for interreligious collaboration, this must be led by religious actors and not the state and/or political actors. Instead, the role of the states is to provide an infrastructure or environment where interreligious dialogue and collaboration can take place. Places within the state's purview, e.g. schools, museums, etc., must be identified and used as arenas for dialogue. The state can also provide political and financial support for interreligious dialogue and collaboration.

The role of the state as a facilitator of interreligious collaboration is distinct from the vertical relationship of the state with religious communities. Nonetheless, there must not be a state monopoly in this respect, interreligious collaboration can take place outside of this remit.

Recommendation: The role and responsibilities of religious and political actors within a process of interreligious engagement must be clearly established and differentiated.

2. What is Interreligious Dialogue/Collaboration?

In order to map successful strategies and policies, participants emphasised the need for conceptual clarity. Furthermore, it was suggested that dialogue is not enough to generate the anticipated outcomes and instead the focus should be on interreligious collaboration and action. The role of the state in interreligious collaboration was considered in detail. While states can facilitate interreligious collaboration, it was broadly accepted that state involvement is not a prerequisite and efforts led by religions themselves or by civil society must be supported. Furthermore, there is no one-size-fits-all to interreligious collaboration and efforts are context specific. Consequently, interreligious collaboration can be formal (between religious leaders/actors) or informal (at the local level, in neighbourhoods, schools). There is potential to harness informal collaboration in a policy approach.

The specific role of interreligious collaboration in peace building and sustainable development projects was emphasised during discussions. However, the emphasis was primarily on religious communities as state partners in delivering projects (rather than interreligious collaboration), particularly in relation to sustainable development. Participants stressed the sustainability and reach of religious communities, as well as the societal knowledge, as particularly beneficial in this respect. Partnering with religious actors often results in a longer term vision for development projects. Yet, despite recognition that collaboration between religious communities may broaden the reach of development projects, this does not appear to be the focus of efforts.

In contrast, interreligious collaboration was recognised as central to peace building in order to create conditions of peace, as well as preventative diplomacy. Religions possess resources, such as forgiveness, that the state does not, and therefore, collaboration between different religious communities involved in conflict is vital. This is particularly important when governance is weak e.g. in context of transitional justice. However, it is vital to recognise that religion may well be part of the problem, especially if there is an inappropriate overlap between religion and power, which undermines the credibility of religious actors. The need to separate freedom of religion or belief and interreligious dialogue/collaboration was a point of discussion specifically in the context of peace building. If the two are conflated, the potential for conflict arises as FoRB puts religious difference at the centre of collaboration, creating hierarchies and potentially resulting in lecturing. By distinguishing between FoRB and interreligious collaboration, the two may become mutually reinforcing.

The distinction between intra and interreligious dialogue was also emphasised alongside theological debate. Theological debate and inter/intra-religious dialogue may be useful to isolate extremism and provide justifications for interreligious collaboration. Both may enable religious leaders to understand their religion as compatible with pluralism and can facilitate the identification of common themes across religions (e.g. kindness) that can form the basis of future interreligious dialogue. Participants emphasised that it may be beneficial to involve extreme elements of religious communities in intra rather than interreligious dialogue, in order to avoid claims of legitimacy emanating from inclusion. However, it is not the role of the state or political actors to initiate inter/intrareligious or theological dialogue - this can potentially undermine the legitimacy of the process and be counterproductive.

Recommendations: Interreligious collaboration can take place at a number of levels, with or without state involvement. A strict interpretation of the concept is not necessary. However, it is important not to conflate interreligious collaboration with inter/intrareligious dialogue or theological debate and it may be beneficial to separate efforts to encourage interreligious collaboration from FoRB.

3. Bottom up and Inclusive Approaches

A number of participants emphasised that engagement must take place at different levels, rather than just between religious leaders. If interreligious collaboration is to have a societal impact, then actors at the grassroots level must be engaged. It is necessary to build the capacity for citizens to live together and identify shared common values and concerns in order to reduce prejudice. As it is the state's role to guarantee societal peace and security, this falls within the state's remit. In order to achieve this, more investment in the education and training of intercultural leaders was suggested as necessary to develop an alternative narrative. Spontaneous cooperation and joint statements between religious communities around common concerns are particularly effective at creating understanding and tolerance.

All of the participants emphasised the need for interreligious collaboration to include a broad spectrum of religious actors including women and youth, as well as minorities. However, this can often be problematic as the inclusion of women or particular minorities is often political and may result in religious leaders refusing to participate. In this respect, mediation may be an on-going and necessary element of facilitation efforts. The selection process employed to appoint religious actors without a formal religious role is central to the credibility of the process. These actors can be accessed via religious networks or religious leaders, however, it is important that they are recognised by the community that they represent.

In order to ensure inclusivity, it is vital to reach out to groups who are unwilling to participate. However, participation must always be voluntary. In order to ensure participation, interreligious dialogue must provide an open space for discussion and not seek to impose Western liberal values on participants. While it is important to ensure that the needs of participants are met, the goals of interreligious collaboration must be clearly framed to ensure that actors do not exploit the process for their own needs.

Although interreligious collaboration, as a rule, should seek to be as inclusive as possible, it is valid to facilitate bilateral or trilateral dialogue/collaboration when focused around a specific issue.

Recommendation: In general, top-down approaches should be combined with bottom-up approaches if interreligious collaboration is to reduce conflict. As a rule, interreligious collaboration must be as inclusive as possible. However, facilitators must ensure the credibility of those purporting to represent religious communities and must accept those with illiberal views.

4. The Role of Human Rights and Context in Interreligious Engagement

A number of the key initiatives in relation to interreligious engagement have emanated from human rights organisations, such as the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes and the Beirut Declaration. However, as noted above, conflating FoRB and the purpose of interreligious collaboration can be counterproductive. The framing of human rights in way that is perceived as provocative by religious leaders can be seized upon to justify non-engagement. Participants emphasised that although there is no inherent incompatibility between human rights and religion, in some instances the use of the language of human rights can be counterproductive. Efforts to encourage interreligious collaboration must comply with international human rights standards and facilitators must not water down or seek to relativise human rights in order to address the concerns of religious actors. However, it is possible to frame the issues and use non-secular language in order to appeal to religious leaders and actors. It is also important to demystify human rights and emphasise the religious input and origins of many of the standards.

Participants consistently emphasised the need to map different activities and projects within UN member states to avoid overlap and allow complementary efforts. Similarly, collaboration between different agencies funding interreligious collaboration activities and the development of civil society consortia to apply for such funding would be beneficial. It is vital that funding bodies and other donors do not expect immediate change - the benefits of interreligious collaboration will take time.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of context and its impact on interreligious engagement on the ground. The socio-economic situation was specifically identified as a potential cause of conflict between religious communities. Consequently, while best practices can be identified, the relevance and the implications of their application in a given context must be considered. It may not be possible to scale up projects or transplant them from one situation to another and it is particularly important to identify what the grassroots needs are in the context of sustainable development.

Recommendation: Although interreligious engagement must comply with international human rights standards, it is not always beneficial to use the secular language of rights to communicate with religious actors. The framing of concepts in religious terms can be beneficial. In any case, when identifying best practices, it is vital to consider the context in which they have been successful.

5. Prerequisites and Challenges for Successful Interreligious Engagement

Participants emphasised a number of prerequisites and challenges to factor in if interreligious engagement is to be successful:

Prerequisites:

- It is vital to find **common ground** between religious actors. This can be related to spirituality or other non-religious interests. As a starting point, religious actors must view each other as human beings.
- Religious actors and facilitators require **training** in order to develop the skills required to collaborate, including in relation to mediation, religious context and relevance.
- The **needs of religious actors must be met** by the process. Consequently, it is necessary to enter into dialogue in order to identify what these needs are and to manage expectations.
- There is a need to establish **ground rules**, including: listening, respect and no incitement or personal attacks.
- Religious actors must be allowed to **own the process**. In particular, it is important to identify with their assistance the narratives that are helpful to foster collaboration and those that are likely to alienate and undermine participation.
- There is a continual need for **mediation** in order to facilitate continued participation in the process over time.
- Recruitment must be **inclusive**, including women, young people, minorities and outliers within a religious community.
- It must be accepted that **change takes time**. Interreligious collaboration takes time to bed in, establish trust and find common ground.
- It is important to **accept religious actors** and their perspectives at the beginning, rather than forcing them to conform with pre-established norms.

Challenges:

- **Inclusion**, particularly for women or religious minorities, is often political and may result in the non-participation of religious leaders.
- The number of religious communities, minorities, outliers within religious communities, alongside women and young people, means that **a truly inclusive approach is not possible in practice.**
- States tend to **stereotype religious actors**, which may undermine inclusive efforts.
- **Participants will refuse to engage** if particular groups are present, for political reasons. Joint meetings can exacerbate rather than defuse tensions between different communities.
- Not all religious actors will **voluntarily participate** and this must be accepted**.**
- **Security concerns** may prevent certain religious actors from attending meetings in certain locations. Alternative arrangements, such as a conference call, can be arranged, but are not ideal.
- Certain issues are so political that there will be **continual need for mediation.**
- **Blasphemy and apostasy laws** are a particular obstacle as participants do not distinguish between the rights of humans and the rights of religion.
- Religious actors must begin to see their religion as **compatible with pluralism**.
- Contrary to the expectation of donors, **change takes time.**