



Interreligious Collaboration in Peace and Conflict

Executive Summary

On 24 October, 2022 Search for Common Ground (Search) hosted an informal event on “Interreligious Collaboration in Peace and Conflict” as part of the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA). JISRA is a partnership of 50 civil society organisations based in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and Uganda (with supporting lobby and advocacy in Europe and the USA). This international, interreligious partnership is implementing a five-year programme supporting religious actors - including women and youth - to further peaceful and just societies where all enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).

The event was an opportunity to reflect on the value of interreligious collaboration in conflict settings, and draw out best practices from Search and participants’ experiences working in this field. Following interventions by experts from Nigeria and Lebanon, the floor was opened to participants - composed of both civil society organisations and EU Member State civil servants - for a moderated discussion. Below is a summary of the exchange’s key points.

1. Within conflict contexts where religion plays a significant role in people’s lives - personal and/or political - there is a **need for religious groups to collaborate - or at least engage - with each other**. While religion and belief can be instrumentalised as a divider or driver of conflict, efforts towards interreligious dialogue offer an opportunity for people’s beliefs to be drivers of constructive change. This is especially valuable in contexts where religion has been associated negatively with the conflict, and where positive interreligious interactions are deprioritised.
2. Interreligious initiatives create crucial spaces for diverse religious communities to enter into dialogue, address shared grievances, discover joint interests and advocate together for positive change. In addition to the benefits of building relationships and trust between religious actors, **shared networks, visibility and credibility increase a group’s advocacy impact** - especially when dialogue fora are given formal or official recognition by authorities.
3. Opportunities for interreligious dialogue and collaboration vary according to time and place. What works in one context may not work in another, and formats that once were useful may lose - or gain - impact over time. **Contextualisation and local ownership** are crucial components that ensure interreligious collaboration is meaningful for communities.
4. Interreligious collaboration can be highly controversial in contexts where conflict has taken on religious dimensions. To bring different religious communities together, **trust-building activities create a foundation for interfaith dialogue**, which can then be built upon through a step-by-step process of identifying shared interests and taking collective action.

5. The unique position of **secular actors can be used to support interreligious collaboration**. Through their perceived impartiality, actors like the EU and non faith-based CSOs can offer supporting structures where there is a willingness to collaborate and bridge distrust where there is none.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion points above, the following recommendations are aimed at practitioners and policymakers wishing to include interreligious collaboration in their work:

1. **Engage a variety of religious actors, including those with adversarial attitudes.** In order to allow for non-collaborative groups to build trust, it can be useful to continue engaging those who gave initial negative responses and frequently share information on interreligious activities. Organisations supporting interreligious collaboration should take the time to build community trust and establish successful projects.
2. **Take a whole of society approach to interreligious collaboration, and not exclusively engage in high-level fora.** This requires inclusion of underrepresented groups such as women and youth in interfaith initiatives, and making use of powerful tools such as media initiatives.
3. **Create an enabling environment for different religious communities to engage in dialogue.** In some contexts, looser participatory structures and initial informal and intrareligious meetings can encourage otherwise uncertain religious actors to engage. Within dialogues, establishing ground rules for trust and confidentiality can be useful in encouraging participants to speak freely.
4. Religion and belief vary greatly across contexts and conflicts, creating a range of challenges for interfaith collaboration. **Interreligious activities should be strongly contextualised**, for example through preceding in-depth analyses, a continuous process of learning and knowledge sharing between secular and religious actors. Conflict sensitivity should be promoted and integrated into the design of interreligious activities.
5. **Utilise the potential of secular actors by emphasising impartiality and following a non-confrontational approach.** In order for such organisations to maintain credibility, it is crucial to develop their faith literacy, alongside their capacity to comfortably convene religious actors, manage difficult conversations, and pay particular attention to the risks of inducing harm.