M&E Thursday Talks on DME for Peace

“What is Effective Action in Inter-Religious Peacebuilding”

Part 1: Overview

On Thursday, August 27, 2015 DME for Peace hosted Dr. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Diana Chigas, Andreas Hipple, and Dr. Amineh Hoti for a discussion on the question, what is effective in inter-religious peacebuilding? This is part of the launch of the Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding Project (EIAP), which is made possible with generous support from GHR Foundation. This is a summary of the discussion. More information about the EIAP is available on www.dmeforpeace.org/eiap.

Andreas Hipple is a seasoned international development and philanthropy professional specializing in organizational capacity building, monitoring & evaluation, faith & development, and public-private partnerships. Andreas received his M.A. from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and has significant experience working with organizations across Africa, including Benin, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, and the DRC.

Dr. Amineh Hoti was a co-founder of the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations (CMJR). As its first Director, Dr. Hoti worked on the development of some of the CMJR’s earliest courses. She has organized several major conferences and was Consultant Editor of Valuing Diversity towards Mutual Respect and Understanding, sponsored by the Woolf Institute and the Society for Dialogue and Action (D&A). This book is an accompaniment to the National Curriculum and is an important learning resource for secondary school teachers. Her book, Sorrow and Joy among Muslim Women, Cambridge University Press (2006) was nominated for the 2007 Kiriyama Prize. She is Executive Director of the Society for Dialogue and Action and an Adviser to the Three Faiths Forum. She now lives in Pakistan but remains as an affiliated lecturer with the CMJR and Fellow-Commoner of Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge. More recently has helped to found Center for Dialogue and Action, the first Centre in Pakistan to offer courses on Diversity at a University level.

Dr. Abu-Nimer is a professor at the American University’s School of International Service in International Peace and Conflict Resolution, and the faculty director of the Center for Peacebuilding and Development. He is also Co-founder and Executive Director of the Salam Institute. As a recognized expert on conflict resolution, dialogue, peacebuilding and development, Dr. Abu Nimer has worked for over a decade on Arab-Israeli dialogue and peacebuilding efforts, the application of conflict resolution models in Muslim communities; inter-religious conflict resolution training; interfaith dialogue; and evaluation of conflict resolution programs. As a practitioner, he has conducted over a hundred training workshops and courses all over the world on themes of conflict resolution; community development, peacebuilding, reconciliation and development, training for trainers; interfaith and interethnic dialogue; culture, religion, intercultural training; conflict resolution and human rights in relief and development projects, and problem-solving workshops in such conflict zones as Sri Lanka, Mindanao-Philippines, Palestine, Israel, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and Guatemala, as well as other areas including Egypt and the United States.

Diana Chigas is a Professor of the Practice of International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the Fletcher School, Tufts University and Director of the Reflecting on Peace Practice program at CDA Collaborative Learning Projects in Cambridge, MA, USA. At CDA she has worked with non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies to improve the impact of peace programming and
development and humanitarian assistance on conflict. She has worked with OECD-DAC to develop an approach to guidance for evaluation of conflict prevention and peacebuilding and with the United Nations on issues of evaluation of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. She is currently co-directing an action research effort on understanding cumulative impacts of peacebuilding efforts. Prior to joining CDA, Diana worked as a facilitator, trainer and consultant in negotiation, dialogue and conflict resolution, at Conflict Management Group, a non-governmental organization founded by Harvard Law School Professor Roger Fisher (and now part of Mercy Corps). Her work has included development of strategies, training and advice on preventive diplomacy in the OSCE, “track two” discussions in El Salvador, in South Africa, Ecuador and Peru and in the Georgia/South Ossetia peace process, and facilitation of inter-ethnic dialogue in Cyprus.

Part 2: Speaker Presentations

Andreas Hippel opened the discussion outlining the inter-religious work that GHR Foundation has supported and the challenges GHR Foundation faced with their grant recipients demonstrating effectiveness in inter-religious peacebuilding.

GHR is a private family foundation that gave out grants for inter-religious initiatives and related international development initiatives anonymously for the past fifty years. In the past few years, GHR has moved into being a more professional foundation in an effort to develop external communications capacity to shed light on the work of its partners. In the recent years, a lot of funds were given to Western faith-based aid agencies, but three things were always missing. First, we haven’t seen a meaningful connection between Security Sector development and the peacebuilding community, on issues of faith in particular. Second, though there have been some efforts to measure the impact of inter-religious work, we didn’t find many documented efforts of monitoring and evaluation of inter-religious work. Finally, there haven’t been comprehensive efforts to engage with faith communities on the ground in the development sector. GHR foundation is funding efforts to address those gaps mentioned above.

GHR’s work on inter-religious initiatives started in 2009 in the wake of September 11 attacks as GHR touched the growing international need to build bridges between people from different faiths. As a non-specialist body, GHR aims to identify practical approaches to advance inter-religious relations and dialogue for the sake of action. GHR looks at social psychology, conflict management and other disciplines for advice on how to build social cohesion and capital.

There are a few aspects of inter-religious work that GHR is trying to define. Some of those are: how does working on common concerns contribute to building social cohesion and social capital that could help communities withstand the pressure of extremism and other forms of violent actions and actors? How to sustain community connections beyond the initial impact of inter-religious work in sectors like health, or children? In order to find answers, GHR is working through partnerships to maximize funds and identify creative answers and solutions.

Currently, many organizations and individuals, on many levels, are doing inter-religious work. The importance of inter-religious work has been established in the development sector. However, some questions remain unanswered regarding the importance of inter-religious work in social cohesion and peacebuilding. Some of those questions may be: When does inter-religious work add to peacebuilding? What are the challenges that face this type of initiatives? This talk is another step in the quest to answer those questions.
Dr. Hoti then presented sharing her experience working on inter-religious peacebuilding and the difficulties in demonstrating effectiveness.

The Center for Dialogue and Action was established in the wake of religious tensions caused by events of September 11 in the US and July 7 in the UK; it is based at the Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge. The Centre teaches courses on Abrahamic Faiths and encourages everyone, especially women and youth, from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to attend those courses in attempt to get together and start to understand one another. Also, the Woolf Institute in Cambridge has strong to the University of Cambridge and teaches courses on Muslim-Jewish relations where clergymen from all faiths come to the institute as students, get together, and start conversations.

In Pakistan, we also established an inter-faith center in Forman Christian College in Lahore. Establishing this center in Pakistan was an effort to help manage the global crisis of how we perceive the religious other, the ethnic other, and the gendered other. While working with different ethnic and religious groups in Pakistan, the term inert-faith proved to be problematic as it was perceived as a movement to force people to abandon or change their religious identity. Therefore, we substituted this term with indigenous concepts of “ilm”, which means understanding and empathy; “adab”, which means mutual respect; and “insaniyat”, which means humanity. Using concepts that are closer to people’s culture eased their concern and got people to react favorably to the courses we taught. As a result, we managed to teach three cycles of courses about inter-faith in a city where inter-faith courses are banned. We are hoping that other schools and universities will get more engaged in our work and replicate our concepts in their curricula. We are trying to fill in the gap in the local curricula by authoring booklets for students and teachers that promote concepts of knowledge, humanity and respect. Leaders from different faiths contribute to the content of those booklets. We are hoping that the preliminary steps we are taking will lead people to be more engaged in those concepts in the future, especially Pakistani youth. We are hoping to create a global community that would change people’s perspective of the “other” and celebrate diversity.

**Dr. Abu-Nimer then turned the discussion on how to evaluate inter-religious peacebuilding.**

To start off, I would like to emphasize that evaluating peacebuilding interventions in general is difficult. And to shift the focus back onto inter-religious work, I would like to raise some questions. The first question would be: is evaluating effective inter-religious peacebuilding easier or more difficult than evaluating peacebuilding interventions in general? Is it even possible to evaluate inter-religious interventions? What are some of the challenges we face when conducting inter-religious peacebuilding work? These are some of the questions we are struggling with in our quest to evaluate inter-religious work.

I would like to focus on some of the challenges that face practitioners often when evaluating inter-religious interventions. Some of those challenges are common with any other type of peacebuilding interventions, and some of them are unique to inter-religious interventions. A common challenge faced when evaluating any type of peacebuilding interventions is the lack of baseline studies; sometimes due to lack of capacity and others due to programmatic mistakes.

One challenge that is unique to inter-religious peacebuilding interventions is that they’re more resistant to monitoring and evaluation. Those interventions are motivated by faith not by profession; the people implementing them believe that having faith is enough to make an intervention work. Though having faith is essential, it’s not enough to ensure the quality of the intervention, programming, or follow-up.

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Another unique challenge is when inter-religious interventions succeed, it’s difficult to measure how the faith aspect contributed to success. Beneficiaries of such interventions usually attribute the success to divine intervention, rather than good programmatic planning and execution.

A third unique challenge is, in a context where many different types of peacebuilding interventions are operating and political change is achieved, how can we measure the impact inter-religious work had on a macro-level? How can you accurately measure the role inter-religious work played when there are other interventions working on the same context; especially that inter-religious actors usually isolate themselves or are isolated from other actors in the peacebuilding sector.

Also, the presence of taboos in religions forms an added challenge. Taboos make practitioners unsure of how far they should stretch inter-religious dialogue. This often forms relationships between different faith communities based on shallow commonalities instead of stronger relationships based on understanding of deeper issues of difference. Also, the presence of taboos make the job of monitoring real progress more difficult as practitioners usually cannot talk about taboo topics with beneficiaries to measure progress on this front.

Finally, challenges arise from working with institutions that do inter-religious work because they usually are very cautious about measuring change within the institution itself. It is easier to detect change in perception, attitudes and behaviors in individuals than it is in institutions.

Diana Chigas then concluded the discussion by sharing some of the work CDA has done on the topic of evaluating inter-religious peacebuilding and the highlights of a recent meta-review of inter-religious peacebuilding evaluations.

CDA is supporting the EIAP in helping to develop capacity and guidance on the M&E component of the inter-religious action. To start our on inter-religious action, we wanted to take a look at the state of the field. So, we raised questions like: What are the evaluation practices out there? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those evaluations? How to move from individual to macro-level impact and how to measure that impact?

Despite of partnerships, willingness and tremendous effort, it was challenging to find/locate evaluations and pull what evaluations exist together to form an overview. For the Meta review, seven evaluations from six countries and 15 organizations were collected. Drawing heavily on the OECD-DAC quality standards, the meta-review examined the approaches to the evaluations, the purpose of the evaluations, there questions, criteria, methodology, and strengths and weaknesses of the evaluations and the evaluation process. Some questions were raised while working on the review, such as: How similar is the evaluation of inter-religious peacebuilding to the evaluation of other peacebuilding initiatives? Can we apply the same analytical lens to inter-religious evaluations? Can we understand effectiveness in the same way in faith-based context? How do we deal with attribution issues in inter-religious work? Etc. What we learned from the evaluations we managed to collect is that evaluation approaches and methods and programmatic approaches and methods in inter-religious work were quite similar to other types of peacebuilding interventions. The weaknesses that CDA found was that reporting on the data was largely through self-reporting with little triangulation to produce independently verifiable data. Also, the data was collected mostly from participants of the projects, which did not give a chance to measure the macro-level impact.

Through analyzing those evaluations, CDA was trying to identify the added value of inter-religious interventions, unfortunately, no reliable data was found on that front either. We found that the evaluations raised questions on whether inter-religious work promoted trust between different faith communities, or

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whether it positively influenced people’s religious identities, but there was no proper follow-up documented regarding those questions.

Issues that CDA thinks should be developed are the following: criteria for assessing the quality of inter-religious programming; methods to get more reliable data and evidentiary support for the conclusions; and ways to integrate issues of conflict sensitivity and gender while carrying out an inter-religious intervention.

Questions to keep in mind when evaluating inter-religious action:

- How do we define success and failure in inter-religious work?
- How do we measure the “unmeasurable”/intangible?
- How do we trace the impact of the individual/interpersonal change into impact on wider socio-political context?
- How do we understand what’s unique about the contribution of inter-religious interventions?
- How do we develop evaluation for non-projectized interventions?
- How can we understand the ways in which the value base and motivation of inter-religious work effect theories of change and effectiveness? And how do measure that?

**Part 3: Question & Answer**

**Richard Tanto:** If evaluation is based on a specific project that has been implemented, will there be any need for a baseline survey? The evaluation should be based on the project under evaluation.

**Dr. Abu Nimer:** A baseline survey or interviews are essential regardless of the size of the project/program that is being implemented. A baseline gives a clear starting point that we could measure any progress we achieve against. For example, if we do not know what the starting point in perceptions and attitudes was of one group towards the other, how will we be able to measure any changes in that regard?

**Ned Lazarus:** Are there any outstanding examples of effective inter-religious work and/or effective evaluations of inter-religious work that can be used as models for scholarship and teaching?

**Diana:** The evaluations that CDA managed to locate have not been very well done. There’s a debate regarding how to determine whether an initiative or an evaluation is “effective”. The EIAP is trying to develop a typology of theories of change in order to draw evidence of what are the different conditions of effectiveness in this work.

**Andreas:** GHR couldn’t find many effective evaluations; the search is still on going.

**Dr. Amineh:** We conducted surveys that measured the respect one faith group held towards another before and after one of the courses we taught about inter-religious peacebuilding. A positive change was recorded; we found that those groups had increased respect towards one another after the course.

**Kerry Abbott:** It is difficult to measure whether the institution intervening has influence over the people who make the problems. In Palestine, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Lebanon etc. And the people who accept to meet are usually not the problem. As for the superficial nature of the activities, (in Lebanon, joint condolence calls, for instance, after some tragedy), isn't it more useful to avoid religious topics and just
work together on a common need. And in the process discover how different faiths can work together on a common cause?

**Dr. Abu Nimer:** Religion is a sensitive topic, but that does not mean we need to avoid it, on the contrary, we need to understand it better. We need to understand our religious identities and there manifestations and give a chance for others to understand us. If we don’t talk about religion and keep it in the dark, it will be easy for us to dehumanize others and be dehumanized. Exploring and expressing religious identities can be challenging and even painful, but we need to do that in order to form genuine relationships between different faith communities and establish firm grounds to work together towards sustained peace.

**Christopher Goss:** While organizing and bringing together people of different faiths, how can you utilize reflective listening?

**Dr. Hoti:** We can’t let difficulties stop us from bringing people of different faiths together. When we first start any course, participants of different faith usually feel uncomfortable sitting close to one another. Once they share more about their cultures and histories, they start to trust one another ad get closer. Some of them work on joint projects after the courses are over. We try to create a safe space where people feel comfortable to share commonalities and differences and speak up. We need to have more of those platforms in educational institutions and elsewhere to nurture a culture of mutual understanding. Every culture has its strengths and weaknesses and we need to work more on understanding both commonalities and differences.

**Ricardo Wilson-Grau:** Andreas, thank you. Do I understand correctly that for the GHR Foundation the answer to the question of what is effective in inter-religious peacebuilding is to be found in evaluation? That is, for GHR and for you, the focus of EIAP is on how to measure the impact of interreligious peacebuilding actions?

**Andreas:** For GHR, it’s a matter of defining what’s effective in inter-religious peacebuilding. We look into different approach and assess in which context each approach is most effective. We also look into when it’s appropriate to lead with a common non-religious theme that would ease the intervention into deeper more complex religious themes.

**Tamra Pearson d’Estree, University of Denver Conflict Resolution Institute:** Are we aiming to create a sense of common humanity or identity, or to create a sense that DIFFERENCES are acceptable? In our work we see concerns about conversion or dilution of beliefs by interacting with others. This raises a larger question about whether we are clear on the goals of this work, and how these may change when moving from the interethnic to the interreligious context.

**Andreas:** In inter-religious work it might be assumed that the aim is to create a universal religious identity. But inter-religious work must accept and celebrate difference. Research shows that a well-done inter-religious intervention would increase a person’s commitment to their own religion while also increasing understanding and acceptance of other faiths.

For more information visit the **Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding** online community at [www.dmeforpeace.org/eiap](http://www.dmeforpeace.org/eiap).

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