# Addressing Religion in Conflict: Insights from Myanmar

# Addressing Religion in Conflict: Insights from Myanmar

Angela Ullmann & Seng Mai Aung[1]
Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich

[1] The authors wish to thank the many interlocutors in and outside of Myanmar who shared their knowledge and explained their views and engagements on this topic. Special thanks go to Nay Phone Latt, Htaike Aung, and Phyu Phyu Thi at the Myanmar ICT Development Organization (MIDO) and Panzagar; to Su Phyo Lwin, Jenny Vaughan, and Charlotte Neil at Mercy Corps; and to Seng Mai Aung and James Chen at the Institute for Global Engagement for their patience in answering the many questions and reviewing the case studies. Many thanks also go to Kaw Mai and Dr. Saw Hlaing Bwa at the Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, for their support and guidance on this article. Finally, a big thank you goes to the *Culture and Religion in Mediation* (CARIM) team (and especially Owen Frazer and Katrina Abatis) for supporting, reviewing and proofreading the article.

This article has been produced by the CARIM program (http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/think-tank/themes/mediation-support-and-peace-promotion/religion-and-mediation.html), which is a joint initiative by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich and the *Religion, Politics and Conflict* (RPC) sector of activity of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) (https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/human-rights/peace/religion-and-conflicts.html).

## Abstract

Peaceful coexistence between groups belonging to different religious traditions is under pressure in Myanmar today. Despite this, various peacebuilding initiatives aimed at addressing issues that involve interfaith or intercommunal relations and peaceful coexistence between religious communities in Myanmar exist. This article looks at what Myanmar and international peace practitioners and policy makers can learn from selected initiatives addressing intercommunal relations in Myanmar after the violent incidents of 2012. Key insights are drawn from three cae studies. First, is the insight that there are a diversity of approaches to address religion in conflict and it is important to match one's approach according to what is driving the conflict, rather than using interfaith exchange as a panacea for religion in conflict. Second, the religious identity of peace practitioners impacts their scope of engagement, which makes working in religiously and culturally balanced teams, as well as working together with insider peacebuilders, all the more important. Third, religion can play the role of a divider and a connector across local, national, and international system boundaries. Even if a practitioner focuses on one arena, religion's transboundary nature has implications for process design and needs to be dealt with consciousy.

**Keyords**: religion and conflict, interfaith tension, interreligious coexistence, mediation, peacebuilding, Myanmar.


## 1. Introduction[2]

The opening of Myanmar in 2012 was accompanied by the latest manifestations of pre-existing tensions between religious communities, mainly between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minorities. The riots in Rakhine State were the backdrop to the developments in other parts of country. Cities such as Meikhtila, Lashio, Kalaw, Myitkyina, and Mandalay saw violent clashes between Buddhist and Muslim communities, often leaving several people dead, families forced out of their homes and many properties destroyed.

[2] A longer version of this paper, including the case studies from which the insights are drawn, will be published shortly in the *Mediation Resources* series by the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich (http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/mediation-reports/mediation-resources.html).

While the events in Rakhine State have had a catalytic effect on the developments in other parts of the country, it is important to differentiate between the conflict dynamics at play in Rakhine State and in Myanmar's other regions. The Muslim community at the center of the outbreaks of violence in Rakhine State in 2012 identify themselves as 'Rohingya', while nationalist discourses refer to them as 'Bengali Muslims', showing that their identity and origin (and thus eligibility for citizenship) is disputed. As intercommunal relations deteriorated in various parts of the country, enmity extended to all Muslims, regardless of their ethnicity and status as Myanmar citizens.

Anti-Muslim discourses were openly shared by political and religious leaders, as well as private citizens, which set the scene for the environment surrounding the outbreaks of violence between 2012 and 2014. However, religious tensions and specifically anti-Muslim sentiments date back to colonial times and the military regimes. Interfaith tensions were thus not new to Myanmar in 2012, but the wave of violent incidents brought intense animosities to the fore.

Efforts led by outsiders to address interfaith violence were often counterproductive as the Bamar-Buddhist majority perceived them to be biased and felt that foreigners had no right meddling in this sensitive internal matter of the country. The topic is still very delicate, which is why learning from existing initiatives remains important. Luckily, courageous individuals and community and faith-based organizations, sometimes with international assistance, continue to

address intercommunal and interfaith relations, and there are more ongoing efforts today than in 2012.[3]

The aim of this article is to capture and highlight the learning points of such peacebuilding approaches applied to religion[4] in conflict in interfaith or intercommunal relations in Myanmar after the violent incidents of 2012.[5] The insights are drawn from research on three case studies: the Flower Speech Campaign by Panzagar[6], the Local Resilience for Peace program by Mercy Corps, and Religion and Rule of Law Training by the Institute for Global Engagement. The experience and learning points from the case studies are organized into the following questions frequently asked by peacebuilders faced

---

[3] As inspiring examples of such courageous individuals, see the *Portraits of Diversity*, a series of video portraits celebrating Myanmar's religious diversity, produced by the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) with the support of the Government of Australia, the Government of Norway, and the Asia Foundation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7Ho86Mzr4g.

[4] This article understands religion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that may permeate every aspect of life. These dimensions include the references of orientation and navigation that religion provides to many people's lives, the ways people live and enact their faiths, the stories and teachings they inherit and share, their spiritual experiences, the community-forming aspects of religion, the leaders that guide these communities, and also the institutions and power relations they build. See Woodhead, L. (2011). Five Concepts of Religion. *International Review of Sociology,* 21(1), pp. 121-143.

[5] It is thus not relevant for this article to draw conclusions about whether any one project should be considered a success or a failure, but instead it focuses on what we can learn from the challenges that were presented and how they were dealt with.

[6] The word *Panzagar* in Burmese translates as "flower speech" in English. The campaign chose this name because flowers have a very positive connotation in the Burmese language, and their symbolic nature of beauty and kindness can be easily understood.

with conflicts with religious dimensions:[7]

a) How does religion drive the conflict?

b) How do we address religion in conflict?

c) How do we address the interplay of religion and exclusion when engaging religious actors?

d) How does the implementer's religious identity influence the scope for engagement?

e) How do we work on religion in conflict without making it worse?

While the insights are context-specific, there are relevant lessons for the wider community of practitioners and policy makers working on peace, conflict, and religion.

This article will first present a brief overview of approaches to address interfaith tensions in Myanmar (section 2). Following this, the selection criteria for the three chosen initiatives will be introduced and the three case studies will be compared across key process design criteria (section 3). Finally, this article will reflect on what peace practitioners and policy makers can learn from the three case studies when designing projects to support transformation in conflicts with (direct or indirect) religious dimensions in Myanmar and in other contexts (section 4).

[7] These questions were compiled from concerns peace practitioners and policy makers shared when attending past editions of the Religion and Mediation Course (http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/think-tank/themes/mediation-support-and-peace-promotion/religion-and-mediation/rmc.html) jointly organized by the Swiss FDFA and CSS.

## 2. Approaches to Addressing Interfaith Tensions

A rough overview of existing initiatives addressing interfaith tensions in Myanmar was carried out between 2015 and 2016. The original intention had been to collate a full mapping, but due to sensitivity issues this was not possible.[8]

While much of the international attention has focused on Rakhine State and the deteriorating humanitarian situation after the outbreaks of violence in 2012, this article looks at peacebuilding initiatives outside of Rakhine State for a couple of reasons. First, while the events in Rakhine State have been leading the way for developments in other areas of Myanmar, there are factors at play here which are different from the rest of the country, so categorizing Rakhine-based initiatives together with initiatives from other parts of Myanmar is not ideal. Second, initiatives tackling religion in conflict address an already delicate topic in Myanmar, but this issue is even more sensitive when related to Rakhine State. It was thus not possible for existing initiatives in Rakhine State to share information publically without endangering their ongoing efforts and this article did not want to narrow their space. Third, a long-term solution of the situation in Rakhine State involves a change in attitudes towards Muslims in the whole country, which makes learning from initiatives from and for other regions in Myanmar important.

[8] For those interested in ongoing projects addressing interfaith tensions, the Intercommunal Harmony Working Group, chaired by the Peace Support Fund, is highly recommended as a starting point to coordinate and link up. It meets monthly and brings together both national and international actors. There are several other fora in Yangon for peacebuilding practitioners, analysts, and advisors, and they also touch on intercommunal conflict (notably Rakhine) from time to time. (Thank you to Mercy Corps' Jenny Vaughan for explaining the existing exchange mechanisms.)

The overview thus remains incomplete and limited in different ways. First, the geographical focus and the organizational time constraints limited the number of initiatives the authors learned about. Second, community-based initiatives that may be less formally organized into 'projects' and can seem more diffuse are underrepresented in the spectrum of interlocutors the authors met with. However, the overview served the purpose of choosing three complementary initiatives to draw learning from.

Through broad exploratory research, the authors found eleven different sectors of activity addressing religion in conflict through peace practice in Myanmar.[9] These included interfaith exchanges, awareness raising and countering hate speech, alternative dispute resolution training, peace education, media engagements, organizational capacity building for civil society organizations (CSO), economic co-development, early warning networks, intra-faith dialogues, political dialogues, and rights-based advocacy and training.

The most frequent sectors of activity employed to improve intercommunal relations known to the authors are interfaith exchanges and dialogues, followed by peace education (including tolerance and diversity training, especially for the youth), and awareness raising and countering hate speech. Among the less widely employed activities to address intercommunal violence and build social cohesion are approaches such as intra-faith engagements, political dialogues, early

[9] There are different ways of categorizing these approaches. The goal of this paragraph is to show that different approaches exist, not to promote an ideal system of categorization.

warning networks, economic co-development, media engagements, and alternative dispute resolution training.

The high number of interfaith engagements may be due to the religious background of the conflicts, the high level of personal motivation to engage for peace and harmony among many people of faith and faith-based organizations, and because these engagements provided a good starting point for reaching out and getting to know different religious communities. This article argues that the analysis of what is driving the conflict should define the choice of approach, and all the above mentioned approaches have a value in specific conflict settings. Interfaith exchanges seem to be the main methodology applied in Myanmar, and while these exchanges can present great opportunities to address specific conflict situations, they are not a universal remedy for conflicts with religious dimensions. It is thus good to look beyond the most commonly employed methodologies to find what best transforms the conflict at hand and makes the envisioned change happen.

## 3. Choosing Three Case Studies

While there were many other interesting initiatives that we can learn from, this article chose the Flower Speech Campaign by Panzagar, Local Resilience for Peace by Mercy Corps, and the Religion and Rule of Law Training by the Institute for Global Engagement. These initiatives were selected for a few reasons. First, because they had gone on for enough time to be able to draw lessons from. Second, the project implementers were willing to share their work and experiences publically, as the write-up of these initiatives did not endanger the projects or anyone involved in them. And

third, the selected case studies are very good examples for showing a diversity of methodological approaches.

The case studies span the entire range of conflict transformation[10] approaches according to Adam Curle's 'Stages of Change'[11] from education, to constructive confrontation, to negotiation and mediation, and restructuring the formerly unpeaceful relationship. Panzagar raised awareness and confronted hate speech, while Mercy Corps and the Institute for Global Engagement offered a training component, as well as techniques and spaces for their participants to exchange and start addressing the conflicts together through peaceful and constructive methods.

The focus was put on creating case studies with different theories of change that encountered diverse challenges and factors for success, offering valuable and complementary lessons learned. Comparing the case studies' theories of change against CDA Collaborative Learning Projects' Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP)

[10] In the authors' understanding, conflict transformation perceives conflict as something inherent to human interaction and seeks to transform not only the content of the conflict, but also the relationships between the actors. Conflict resolution aims at ending conflicts usually in a shorter timeframe, applying problem-solving approaches focusing on the content of conflict. See Lederach, J.P. (2003). *Conflict Transformation*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation; Sinh Nguyen Vo, D. (2008). *Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/vo-reconciliation; and Spangler, B. (2017). *Settlement, Resolution, Management, and Transformation: An Explanation of Terms.* Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning_resolution.

[11] Curle, A. (1971). *Making Peace*. London: Tavistock Press.

matrix[12], one can see that the case studies' target change at different levels.

Panzagar's analysis was that hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiments became more socially acceptable in mainstream society in 2014, and that many of those reproducing incendiary comments did not do so strategically, but simply didn't know better. The Flower Speech Campaign is thus targeting the wider public ('more people' cluster) to challenge hurtful language and religious stereotypes across both levels of individual change (attitudes, perceptions, and behavior) and socio-political change (changing the public opinion and social norms) with the goal of making hate speech socially unacceptable.

From its analysis of 2014 and 2015, Mercy Corps found that the religious dimensions of conflicts in Mandalay and Taunggyi were often overshadowing opportunities to work on the non-religious dimensions. The Local Resilience for Peace program thus builds conflict management capacities to address intercommunal violence without framing it in religious terms. Mercy Corps engages local networks of leaders and builds their conflict resolution capacities ('key people' who can transform conflict at the local level), as well as local civil society organizations, and strengthens their efforts to build resilience for peace in their communities ('more people'). Mercy Corps aims to bring change on both the individual level (attitudes, perceptions, skills, and behavior) so that conflicts involving different religious identities are better resolved, and at the socio-political level

[12] For CDA's RPP matrix see: http://cdacollaborative.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RPP-Change-Matrix-Plus.pdf. For their Reflecting on Peace Practice Program and program report see: http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/reflecting-on-peace-practice-project/.

(changing group behavior and group relationships in two villages) so that communities are more resilient against intercommunal violence.

In 2014, the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) found that the changing legal framework that governed intercommunal relations and religious freedom in Myanmar brought up many questions and insecurities to religious and community leaders, who were not equipped to guide their constituencies on these matters. IGE engaged a mix of actors from religious and community leaders to key ministry representatives (some from the 'key people' category to address intercommunal relations, others from the 'more people' cluster) in a training program on Religion and the Rule of Law. IGE aims at bringing change on the individual level (attitudes, perceptions, skills, and individual relationships) by creating and equipping a peacebuilders' network knowledgeable in questions relating to religion and the rule of law so they can facilitate solutions to intercommunal violence; and on the socio-political level (institutional change and group relationships) by reforming the country's legal framework to improve intercommunal relations in the future.

The table below compares the three case studies across key process design criteria.

| | Panzagar | Mercy Corps | Institute for Global Engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Specific conflict background** | Hate speech is becoming more socially acceptable, many people who engage in it are not aware of what they are doing | Community leaders need conflict resolution capacities, communities are not resilient enough against intercommunal tensions | Legal framework governing intercommunal relations needs reforming, majority and minority communities should address this together |
| **Methodological approach** | Messaging (online & print media, information campaign) | Alternative dispute resolution capacity-building, CSO capacity building | Government and interfaith engagement through training |
| **Specific goal** | Challenging social norms supportive of hate speech | Building local capacities to prevent intercommunal violence | Creating a peacebuilders' network, training key religious and governmental leaders in religion and rule of law |
| **Type of change** | Awareness, attitudes, behavior | Skills, relationships | Knowledge, relationships |
| **Target audience** | General population | Local mediators, local CSOs | Religious leaders & government officials |

| | Panzagar | Mercy Corps | Institute for Global Engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Implementer** | Collective of Myanmar non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), with one key implementer developing materials | International non-governmental organization (INGO) in collaboration with one local NGO, and seven CSOs | INGO in collaboration with three national faith-based organizations (FBOs) and one international university |
| **Geographic area** | Countrywide | Mandalay and Southern Shan | Countrywide (training in Yangon & Mandalay) |
| **Evaluation format** | No evaluation | Baseline and end-line study, external evaluation of entire project | Evaluations of the two 10-day training sessions |

## 4. Learning from Practice

In its introduction, this article introduced five frequently asked questions related to addressing religion in conflict. This section aims to highlight learning and reflections from the experiences of the case studies in approaching these questions for peace practitioners and policy makers when they design and support other projects addressing religion in conflict.

### *a) How does religion drive the conflict?*

**A sound analysis of the complexities of religion in conflict is crucial.** Religion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon can touch upon many aspects of conflict. Exploring how religion shapes systems and actors in the conflict can bring more depth to analysis. By asking how religion was driving or influencing certain aspects of conflict, the three case studies were able to establish theories of change targeting specific aspects of the conflicts they wanted to address. The Panzagar Campaign (Burmese for *flower speech*) specifically addressed hate-speech with a focus on anti-Muslim propaganda informed by certain Buddhist-nationalist discourses. The campaign asked people who shared hurtful and incendiary comments to reconsider what they had said. This counter-messaging was done through promoting gentle and "flowery" language, without naming and shaming, or telling someone directly that they were in the wrong. This way, Panzagar hoped to educate those who did not know better and deprive those who used hate speech intentionally of their constituency.

One of the findings in Mercy Corps' analysis of local intercommunal conflicts was that the religious dimensions of these conflicts often overshadowed opportunities to work on the non-religious dimensions. Mercy Corps thus addressed intercommunal violence without framing their work in religion-related terms. By improving the conflict resolution skills of influential and legitimate leaders, who are, or could be involved in resolving conflicts of intercommunal nature, and by strengthening social cohesion within and across communities, Mercy Corps sought to reduce the potential for escalation and violence at an early stage.

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) aimed to address interfaith tensions through the lens of respect for religious freedom. To promote religious freedom in Myanmar, IGE wanted to create and equip a peacebuilders' network knowledgeable in questions relating to religion and the rule of law, so they could facilitate solutions to intercommunal violence. To approach the sensitive topic in a prudent way, the peacebuilders' network focused on the Buddhist majority community while including minority voices.

**Understanding how religion is influencing the conflict also means to not over-emphasize it.** The idea of 'right-sizing' religion aims to attribute the correct amount of influence to religion. However, different drivers of conflict can be integrated into one dominant religious narrative. This can include a discourse which frames a conflict as a "religious conflict", when in fact the label is doubt-worthy. In Mercy Corps' analysis, local-level conflicts over material issues were starting to be framed as "religious conflicts" due to a wider national narrative about intercommunal Buddhist-Muslim conflict. By recognizing that the underlying causes of the conflict were not religious, Mercy Corps was able to identify that there was a need for basic conflict resolution skills training, despite the wider religious narrative.

***b) How do we address religion in conflict?***

**Religion in conflict needs a multi-faceted response.** The analysis of what is driving the conflict should define the approach. The three case studies are excellent examples to show that there are many different useful methodologies to address religion in conflict: Panzagar employed a messaging approach, Mercy Corps built alternative dispute resolution and CSO capacities, and IGE engaged

government and faith-community representatives through training. Classical interfaith approaches, where participants exchange about their beliefs and visit each other's places of worship, are one option among many, and they can be linked with other elements, such as training on religion and the rule of law in IGE's case.

**Religion in conflict needs to be addressed on multiple levels.** The three case studies illustrate that religion is not just a "community-level problem", but has implications at the national level too. This raises the complexity of the situation. While no organization can address the local, regional, and national levels alone, it is important to coordinate, know who is doing what, and to link one's initiative to existing work so that different engagements can complement each other. While not planned as such, the projects described in the three case studies supported each other in a mutually beneficial way: Mercy Corps worked on the local level by supporting local leaders and CSOs while IGE brought together the leadership of different communities at a national level and Panzagar gained support from the grassroots to the leadership level across many parts of the country.

**Religion is a transboundary phenomenon and efforts addressing religion in conflict need to consider the interlinkages between the national and international levels.** The case studies show that religion can easily link local, national, and global discourses: Myanmar's anti-Muslim discourse is nurtured by the global discourse on the war against (Islamist) terrorism, both in the online and offline worlds (see Panzagar). It would be interesting to see if a more positive perception of Islam in international discourses might take some wind out of the sails of local anti-Muslim narratives in the longer term.

**Reflection on how to address structural limitations needs to be included in the project's design.** While it is difficult to effect change on a sociopolitical level, when thinking about how to bring change on a wider scale or linking up with other efforts to do so, it becomes important not to lose sight of the structural issues. IGE's theory of change, for example, included enhancing people's knowledge about the rule of law relating to religion so that they would support ending discrimination based on religious grounds, such as reversing discriminative legislation.

***c) How do we address the interplay of religion and exclusion when engaging religious actors?***

**For comprehensive and inclusive solutions, religious actors need to be engaged alongside the multiplicity of other societal and state stakeholders.** The risk is that faith-based organizations and individual peacemakers engage primarily religious stakeholders, and secular organizations or individuals mainly secular actors. Especially for Western organizations or their donors, it can be difficult to engage with religious actors because their ways of understanding and acting in the world can be very different from the prominent secularist paradigm in the West. This adds a challenge to working with non-like-minded stakeholders (what IGE did), even though engaging the unfamiliar actors can make a difference and pay out in the longer term. The initiatives by IGE, Mercy Corps, and Panzagar are different examples of how to engage stakeholder groups across these silos of conviction and promote collaboration between representatives of government, civil society, faith-based communities, academia, and the corporate world (see Panzagar's partnership with Facebook).

**Religious actors' legitimacy is not necessarily connected to certain institutional positions.** It can be difficult to identify those religious actors who are seen as legitimate by their communities. Religious legitimacy in the eyes of the constituencies is not merely a result of holding institutional leadership positions, but more often of possessing sound religious knowledge, an orthodox or ortho-practical lifestyle, and remaining incorruptible to the tradition's values, even when under stress or threat. IGE's work illustrates that religious actors with in-depth knowledge about their faith traditions, who are leading an orthodox lifestyle by example enjoy high degrees of legitimacy from their faith-communities. Local partners even helped IGE to find the right participants from less institutionally organized communities. While the relationships to government institutions of some stakeholders were important for IGE's project, they were not a decisive element for those stakeholders' religious legitimacy.

**Engaging religious leaders can take time.** To win the support of religious leaders for their initiatives, the case studies took different routes. IGE engaged in relationship building for two years, de-politicized the topic by offering training on religion and the rule of law aiming at improving the participants' leadership skills, and brought high-level people on board. Panzagar (who did not target religious leaders specifically, but rather all of society) dealt with this difficulty through pointing out people's civic responsibility to engage on the social (and not political) issue of harmonious coexistence[13].

[13] Coexistence is understood as described by Angela Nyawira Khaminwa: "Coexistence is a state in which two or more groups are living together while respecting their differences and resolving their conflicts nonviolently." Khaminwa, A. N. (2003). *Coexistence*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/coexistence.

Mercy Corps did not single out religious leaders when reaching out to them, but made sure they engaged a mix of community leaders. Furthermore, Mercy Corps approached religious leaders without framing the topic in terms of religion or intercommunal violence.

**Balancing norms for religious and gender diversity with cultural or religious sensitivity and respect for local customs can be difficult.** Religions are sources of norms and values, which can conflict with other values. Promoting diversity without feeding internal divisions is challenging in Myanmar. Mercy Corps' work offers insights into how important it is to engage religious actors without deepening polarizations. Mercy Corps had planned to include women's and Muslim CSOs in their training, but could not find any that were willing to engage publically on this sensitive topic. Instead of pushing for normative religious and gender diversity, which would have likely endangered the whole project, Mercy Corps decided to make the most out of the diversity training with the Buddhist CSO participants they had. They found them to be more tolerant and open to a more inclusive vision of Myanmar's society at the end of their program than when they had started. Even though Mercy Corps was not able to reach its goal of including Muslim or women's CSOs in the training sessions, they still reached their goal of creating more awareness and willingness to engage for diversity and interfaith harmony. IGE could have held on to a religiously balanced selection of participants for their training sessions, but instead of applying quotas, they tried to include minority voices in unthreatening ways. Both organizations have chosen not to force their own values onto their partners and people they worked with. Instead of pressuring the majority community to include the excluded actors, Mercy Corps and

IGE let them see their gain in letting minority voices in. This shows that ideally the different values are not confronted in a trade-off, but considered as different interests that can be approached creatively and flexibly in regard to timelines and spaces, as well as respect for the other.

***d) How does the implementer's religious identity influence the scope for engagement?***

**In Myanmar, initiatives promoting tolerance, diversity and inclusivity are met with suspicion, especially those supported by international actors.** Mercy Corps' and IGE's work shows that international organizations that have a Christian identity (whether they are a faith-based Christian organization or merely have a culturally Christian background), are met with preconceptions and assumptions in Myanmar of being biased in favor of Muslims. This may be due to human rights advocacy from Western organizations or those perceived to be such. IGE approached this difficulty by treading very lightly and working together with a strong, local Buddhist partner. Mercy Corps also collaborated with a local Buddhist partner, and decided to engage with participants only under their local partner's name. There are thus limits to outside engagement. It would be interesting to see if external Buddhist implementers had more options, but even Panzagar, an entirely Myanmar-born and -based initiative, faced accusations of being pro-Muslim after deciding not to emphasize a Buddhist identity in their campaign.

**Supporting initiatives aimed at creating change from within, such as intra-community dialogues, is especially difficult for 'outsiders'.** Peacebuilders of differing religious identities and/or national backgrounds are met with even more suspicion and are

seen as meddling in internal Buddhist affairs. While intra-community/ intra-faith exchanges can be an important pre-requisite for inter-faith exchanges, there seem to be fewer initiatives employing an intra-faith approach to religion in conflict in Myanmar.

**One's own perceptions, views, and norms can limit the scope for engagement.** Everyone has certain beliefs and understandings of how things are, or ought to be. However, if these beliefs and preconceptions are not taken into account, they can result in an incorrect or incomplete analysis of the conflict, effectively limiting the options to address the conflict. When analyzing religion's role in the conflict, all three case studies were aware of their personal and institutional blind spots and preconceptions, which is why Panzagar, Mercy Corps, and IGE engaged in joint analysis and program design with their local partners and local campaign branches.

***e) How do we work on religion in conflict without making it worse?***

**Find language acceptable to all.** Mercy Corps have reflected that they might have gained Muslim and women's CSOs for their initiative had they chosen less confrontational wording for their overall program, which included the somewhat stigmatized terms 'intercommunal' and 'interfaith'. Another strategy could have been to frame their initiative in very broad terms. However, this could have risked blurring the goal and having CSOs apply to be part of the training which aimed to address unrelated topics. Western mindsets often aim at naming the problem, while the culture in Myanmar is more about weaving peace through softer wording.

**Possess a project-specific strategy to do no harm.** Initiatives addressing the sensitive topic of religion in conflict in Myanmar's polarized environment need to have a strategy to do no harm. Every initiative risks doing harm and narrowing the space for later engagements on this sensitive topic. Examples of the strategies to do no harm applied by the three case studies are:

**Focus on a joint identity.** Panzagar's campaign did not use any Pali words or specifically Buddhist symbols and images and thus de-emphasized religious identity and difference, focusing instead on a joint civic identity. By turning hate speech into a social issue, they successfully de-politicized the topic and supported the prevention of further sectarianism.

**De-construct the religious framing of conflicts not rooted in religious causes.** As mentioned under the first question of how to analyze religion's role in conflict, Mercy Corps deconstructed the religious narrative of the local neighborhood conflicts about material issues, etc. This enabled Mercy Corps to address religion in conflict without using religion-related terms (building conflict resolution and organizational capacities).

**Engage the majority community through mediative approaches.** IGE dealt with the danger of doing harm by engaging with the majority community through their relational diplomacy approach. Getting high-level buy in from respected Buddhist religious leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs was

crucial to the project. Not only IGE, but also Mercy Corps and Panzagar show the importance of working with the majority. There is a danger of over focusing on religious minority communities. By creating a space to listen to the majority community's story, as well as their grievances and difficulties, is very important for interfaith peace. Intra-faith approaches that can help in providing these spaces are often overlooked, but they are an important pre-requisite for interreligious peacemaking. Mercy Corps and IGE abstained from rights-based and advocacy approaches, allowing their partners to decide for themselves to listen to voices advocating for diversity once they felt that their own community's needs were heard. IGE's success on working in support of the freedom of religion and belief lay in giving the majority community the space to reflect on how to protect Buddhism, and through this they were also able to protect the minority communities.

Despite the small sample of case studies, this article draws three valuable insights for practice and policy. However, it is important to note that many more initiatives exist from which experience can be learned in Myanmar and elsewhere. Investing in feasible and low-cost evaluation methods aimed at disseminating learning (and less at reporting to donors) would greatly benefit

and streamline cross-project education in the future.[14] First, there is a diversity of approaches that can be used to address religion in conflict and it is important to match one's approach according to the analysis of what is driving the conflict. There is no one cure-all approach when it comes to addressing religion in conflict and it is worthwhile to look beyond the widely applied interfaith exchanges. It may even be useful to choose an approach that does not label the conflict in religious terms, even if religion factors in the conflict analysis and the process design. Second, peace practitioners' religious identity impacts their scope of engagement, which makes working in religiously and culturally balanced teams and working together with insider peacebuilders all the more important. The case studies have shown different ways of dealing with this, such as working in multiple religious identity teams and partnerships and putting greater focus on building trust and relationships to overcome identity prejudice. Third, religion can play the role of a divider and connector across local, national, and international system boundaries and discourses. This has implications for process design, even if a practitioner is only focusing on one arena, and thus should be looked at specifically. In a nutshell, initiatives addressing peaceful coexistence between different religious communities in Myanmar and elsewhere need to take account of the multiple ways religion can influence conflict and there are various approaches for doing so.

[14] Different efforts to find more useful ways of observing change in peacebuilding for learning are ongoing. One initiative that specifically focuses on peacebuilding related to religion is the Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding (EIAP) Program by the Alliance for Peacebuilding in partnership with CDA Collaborative Learning and Search for Common Ground. They are currently testing and revising their EIAP draft guide. For further information see: www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/2017/05/effective-inter-religious-action-in-peacebuilding-program-meets-in-vienna/.

## References

Alliance for Peacebuilding with CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Search for Common Ground. *Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding (EIAP) Program*. Retrieved from http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/our-work/about-our-work/peacebuilding-evaluation/effective-inter-religious-action-in-peacebuilding/.

Berlie, J.A. (2008). *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*. Bangkok: While Lotus.

CDA Collaborative Learning (2002/2015). *The Reflecting on Peace Practice Program*. Retrieved from http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/reflecting-on-peace-practice-project/.

Center for Diversity and National Harmony (2015). *Rakhine State Needs Assessment*. Yangon, Myanmar: Center for Diversity and National Harmony.

Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (2014). *Portraits of Diversity*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7Ho86Mzr4g.

Cheesman, N., & Farrelly, N. (eds.) (2016). *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

Curle, A. (1971). *Making Peace*. London: Tavistock Press.

Dangerous Speech Project (2017). Retrieved from http://dangerousspeech.org/myanmar/.

Gray, S., & Roos, J. (2014). *Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar. Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance*. Yangon: Adapt Research and Consulting & Mercy Corps. Retrieved from https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Intercommunal%20Violence%20in%20Myanmar_MercyCorps_Adapt_May%202014.pdf.

Institute for Global Engagement's homepage. Retrieved from https://globalengage.org/news-media/press-release/ige-expands-its-religion-and-rule-of-law-training-program-in-myanmar.

Justice Trust Policy Report (2015). *Hidden Hands Behind Communal Violence in Myanmar: Case Study of the Mandalay Riots*. Justice Trust.

Khaminwa, A.N. (2003). *Coexistence*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/coexistence.

Kymlicka, W. (2001). *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lederach, J.P. (2003). *Conflict Transformation*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation.

Mercy Corps homepage. Retrieved from https://www.mercycorps.org/about-us/our-work.

Mullen, M. (2016). *Pathways That Changed Myanmar*. London: Zed Books, especially chapter 8 "From Human Rights Rhetoric to 969" (pp. 193-205).

Panzagar's Facebook account. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/panzagar/.

Schissler, M., Walton, M.J., & Phyu Phyu Thi (2015). *Threat and Virtuous Defence: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities*. M.MAS Working Paper 1:1. St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, and Myanmar ICT for Development Organization.

Shwe Lu Maung. (2005). *The Price of Silence: Muslim-Buddhist War of Bangladesh and Myanmar*. Columbia: DewDrop Arts & Technology.

Sinh Nguyen Vo, D. (2008). *Reconciliation and Conflict Tranformation*. Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/vo-reconciliation.

Spangler, B. (2017). *Settlement, Resolution, Management, and Transformation: An Explanation of Terms.* Retrieved from https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning_resolution.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2013, June 7). Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2013/6/51b1af0b6/year-displacement-rakhine-state-myanmar.html.

Walton, M.J. (2016). *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walton, M.J., & Hayward, S. (2014). *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*. Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Center.

Woodhead, L. (2011). Five Concepts of Religion. *International Review of Sociology*, 21(1), pp. 121-143.

Woodrow, P., Garred, M., with assistance from Chigas, D., Steele, D., and Wilson-Grau, R. (2017). *Effective Inter-religious Action in Peacebuilding. Guide for Program Evaluation.* CDA-Alliance for Peacebuilding. Retrieved from http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EIAP-Guide-Pilot-Phase-Draft-03.08.17.pdf.