

Shared Futures

INTERFAITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC
COOPERATION FOR PEACE



kerk
in actie



Religious identities can become a complicating and aggravating factor in conflict situations. An isolated focus on religious tensions, however, hampers working on the underlying root causes of these conflicts.

Root causes of conflicts often lay in a combination of political, social, economical and cultural processes of inclusion and exclusion. Individuals and groups exercise power and decide who is in and who is out, who enjoys the full economic and political benefits as a member of society and who does not. Group identity characteristics like ethnicity, gender and religion can deepen such processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Identity tends to have a freezing effect, consolidating the unjust status quo. This can have a negative effect on marginalized youth who are eager to earn an income and build their own future, but feel excluded from job opportunities and discriminated by the power of society. In situations of mistrust and exclusion, it is vital to overcome patterns of religious stigmatisation and discrimination in the community and to strengthen the socio-economic position of young people, as individuals and as a group.

Kerk in Actie wishes to contribute to a just and peaceful society by applying a balanced view of the role of religion in sustainable development. Shared Futures is the name of the program in which we enable young people and their communities to build their own futures and to contribute to the common future. Together, youth from different faith groups are trained and supported to improve their individual employment perspectives and to improve the social cohesion in their community. Shared Futures is developed based on our long history of working with faith actors and civil society organizations to support marginalized people suffering from violence and exclusion.



Shared Futures IN A NUTSHELL

Exclusion and scarcity, created and aggravated by unequal power balances, are the main drivers of conflict. Shared Futures does not merely want to end conflict, but also wishes to address the root causes of it. That is why it seeks to ignite a conflict transformation process. Conflict transformation attempts to build new systems and relationships that address structural causes of conflict, such as power inequities or cultural norms and beliefs which perpetuate discrimination and exclusion of minority groups. This requires a complete package of interventions.

Sectoral boundaries, however, often stand in the way of such holistic approaches. Theologians, for example, tend to fall back on interfaith dialogue when seeking to resolve interfaith conflicts. They focus on text and language and seem to have less attention for the socio-economic aspects of divisions. Development actors, on the other hand, seem to underestimate the role of religion in society.

Shared Futures builds on the assumption that...

a combined approach of interfaith dialogue and social-economic cooperation creates a multiplier effect that can increase community resilience to interfaith tensions and conflicts.

Targeting youth can ignite a conflict transformation process in the community

Youth experience a stage of life in which they are seeking an identity while looking for approval and validation. Religiously and ideologically inspired struggles for justice can help them discover and express who they are. Enforced by economical disadvantages, youth are often drawn to join activist and – unfortunately also – militant groups.



“From their religious drive, people of different faith, take joint responsibility for each other’s futures, by working together in activities that contribute to just and peaceful coexistence”

These can provide them with a means to identify with others and make themselves known to the world. Youth are often characterized as either disengaged consumers or radicalized threats to peace and security. Such (mis)representations ignore the fact that young people have an acute sense of justice. They long to build their own, economically independent, futures. They have a thirst for knowledge and a desire to contribute meaningfully to society.

Shared Futures believes that the energy and aspirations which drive youth in their struggle for a better future have the potential to ignite a broader transformation process in the community, one that can help to overcome interfaith tensions and increase social cohesion. That is why it places youth at the heart of its approach.

We need new narratives on religion and development. In today’s public debate, religion is frequently framed as a source of violence. Although certain religious teachings and leaders do indeed spread the seeds of intolerance and hatred among their followers, such generalizations also bear risks and blot out opportunities. Where tensions and conflicts are seen as religiously inspired, faith-based organizations may experience even more restrictions than secular civil society organizations, while they are often the first to notice it when their followers misuse religious convictions for political gains. Besides, this approach undervalues the positive role religious values and actors can play in support of just, resilient and peaceful societies.

Religious beliefs and practices can be a source of consolation and inspiration in times of crisis. They can propel people to look after the poor and marginalized, to act in solidarity with the oppressed, and to struggle for peace and justice. They appeal to the common human desire to belong, to do good and be part of (and participate in) society. New narratives on the constructive and peaceful power of religion are needed to nuance and complement the dominant narrative which casts religion as the culprit of violence. That is why Shared Futures also builds on the assumption that...

new narratives on the constructive power of interfaith cooperation can uncover and stimulate the positive contributions of faith and faith actors to peace and development.



Pathways and ACTIVITIES

The Shared Futures approach aims to create space for interfaith socio-economic cooperation between youth from different religious backgrounds. The approach is such that it can accommodate any religious groups and denominations. The Shared Futures Program applies a comprehensive approach which intervenes on three levels:

Community Pathway

The community pathway seeks to create space for interfaith dialogue and socio-economic cooperation for youth within the context of the community. Activities do not target youth in isolation, but seek to mobilize the community as a whole, including important figures who surround and accompany the youth in their everyday life – such as parents, teachers, religious leaders, local administrators and elders. Examples of activities are interfaith vocational training, business start-ups, sports tournaments, parents’ dialogues and visiting each other’s religious celebrations.



Public Policy Pathway

Supported by the implementing organizations, youth and community representatives hold duty bearers to account to prevent discrimination of religious minorities and ensure equal access to governmental support schemes, such as scholarships for marginalized youth and socio-economic support packages for religious minorities. Examples of activities are lobby and advocacy, theatre road shows, public debates and radio talk shows.

Knowledge Pathway

A new narrative on the constructive and peaceful power of faith and faith actors is needed to nuance and complement the dominant narrative which casts religion as the culprit of violence. To help build such a narrative, Shared Futures developed a monitoring method which supports the collection of evidence-based data at all project locations (see section below). Knowledge institutes can feed the public debates and inform decision makers at local, national and international level.



“Shared Futures intervenes in communities of mixed faiths that suffer from lack of economic opportunities for youth, rising interfaith tensions and increased manifestations of (violent) religious extremism”

Monitoring and evaluation

Change monitoring is a method designed to trace the personal, relational, socio-economic and normative changes that occur within and between beneficiaries as part of the conflict transformation process. Implementing partners take up roles as ‘field researchers’ in an approach similar to action research. As a result, their capacity to notice change increases, their reporting style improves, and their knowledge on the how and why of change in complex conflict transformation processes increases.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF A CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

1. Personal change...

refers to changes in attitude and behaviour and to changes in conflict transformation skills of individual participants.

3. Socio-economic change...

refers to changes in the socio-economic position of marginalized youth from different faith communities.

2. Relational change...

refer to changes in the level and quality of contacts, and to levels of trust and tolerance between members of different faith groups.

4. Change of (normative) discourse...

refers to changes in cultural norms as reflected in the prevailing discourse on religion and violence amongst beneficiaries, and in public debates which involve the wider community.

Source: adapted from Reflective Peacebuilding (2007), a guidebook written by John Paul Lederach, Reina Neufeldt and Hal Culbertson.

PAKISTAN

Business start-ups as inroads to conflict transformation

Although Islam is the majority religion in Pakistan, it may be called religiously diverse because of the variety of Muslim sects (such as Sunnis, Shia, Sufis and Ahmadiyyah) and religious minorities (such as Hindus, Christians and Sikhs) inhabiting the country. The Shared Futures project in Pakistan is implemented in two areas: in the urban setting of Islamabad and Rawalpindi and in the rural districts of Rahim Yar Khan and Ghokti, South Punjab.

The South Punjab districts are amongst the least developed in the country. The inhabitants of this rural area struggle against poverty, have little access to education and economic opportunities, and Hindu and Christian communities suffer severe forms of discrimination. The 'twin cities' of Islamabad and Rawalpindi are home to a variety of ethnicities, religions and lifestyles. Despite this cosmopolitan outlook, however, members of minority religions mostly live in segregated semi-formal settlements and have little interaction with other faith communities.

In both areas, Shared Futures partners Rural Education and Economic Development Society (REEDS), and the Pakistan Mission Society (PMS) provide vocational training and business support to unemployed youth who might otherwise feel tempted to join criminal or extremist groups. What discerns the Shared Futures approach from other programs targeting unemployed youth is that it also seeks to establish business relations across different religious groups. New interfaith relations are emerging already at the vocational institutes where students from different faith groups share classes, write CV's and develop business proposals.

Although most youth seek individual employment following the training, in some cases students from different faith groups decide to establish a business start-up together. Thus, local businesses and shops begin to emerge where members of different faith groups mingle and meet. Such interfaith trade and business locations may ignite a conflict transformation process in the wider community. They increase the familiarity between faith groups and help to reduce intergroup anxieties and prejudices.

“Markets can contribute to processes of exclusion when prohibiting access to certain groups, but they also have the potential to bring people together. They create interdependence, for we all need to earn and eat. They can provide space for the daily encounters and small talk that ‘cements’ a community”



I am Urfa Habib, a beautician by profession from the Rahim Yar Khan district. I have been an active participant of the Shared Futures project for the last two years. Normally girls in my village are not encouraged to travel alone to go to school or work. Girls of my age remain at home or just get married. The Shared Futures team convinced our parents and elders. They told them that skills education allows girls to earn a living and support the family household.

After joining Shared Futures, I completed an advanced beautician training, developed a business plan and received a grant to open my own beauty parlour. This was an uplifting experience. Besides the income I could generate thanks to this support, it increased my self-esteem and made me a confident entrepreneur.

I am a Muslim, but I share the beauty parlour with my business partner who is a Christian. Sharing our business increases the number of customers: members from both the Muslim and the Christian community

are now visiting our shop. Customers see the benefit of interfaith harmony with their own eyes because we all serve them in the same place. Our peaceful behaviour has a positive effect on our income as well; we can now divide the expenses between us.

We had to close our beauty parlour during the Covid-19 lockdown and could not cover our monthly expenses. We could survive thanks to the Micro Entrepreneurs Development Network that was established by alumni of the Shared Futures project. As members of this network, we are all saving on a voluntary base and support each other by providing loans for medical needs, school fees and business expansion.

We established our beauty parlour only just a year ago, but it already attracts customers from afar. I earn between PKR 18,000-20,000 (90-100 Euro) per month and can cover my family's expenses. I am already expanding my business, adding the sale of female undergarments and cosmetics.

KENYA

Christian and Muslim youth strengthen community cohesion

In Kenya, Shared Futures is implemented in Mombasa and Kwale County, two regions along the Indian Ocean. Although most Kenyans are Christian (84.5%), Muslims (10.5%) form the majority in Mombasa and Kwale. Due to their minority status and the outward location of this region, they suffered decennia of socio-economic exclusion. Youth unemployment rates are high and unschooled radical Islamic preachers are popular.

As a result, some Muslim youth feel drawn to join gangs engaging in drug abuse and illicit practices. Others are tempted to join radical Islamic groups operating across the border in Yemen and Somalia, such as the militant group Al-Shabab ('Mujahidin Youth Movement'). Christians are a minority in this coastal region and often feel discriminated against, but also tend to stigmatize their Muslim neighbours, labelling them all as 'terrorists'. Overall, communities in this region are characterized by religious segregation and intolerance.

JAC trainings

Jamii Action Centre (JAC), a Shared Futures partner in Kenya, provides training and support to mixed groups of Christian and Muslim youth.

Together, they discuss misconceptions about each other's religions and are trained in conflict resolution and sound debating techniques. Besides, they are motivated to jointly initiate activities which help to improve their individual employment perspectives and to increase the social cohesion in the community.

Following the JAC trainings, youth launched a variety of community activities, such as garbage collection, small scale farming, theatre road shows, modelling, body painting, chicken rearing and the distribution of food to families affected by Covid-19. Apart from helping the youth to generate some small income, these activities also improved their relations with and within the community. Before the project, youth were often perceived as 'troublemakers' by elderly community members. That perception has changed. 'Youth are no longer viewed as disrupters of peace but as ambassadors of peace', a beneficiary remarked.

Thanks to the proposal writing training provided by JAC, some youth groups recently managed to secure funds from the government and private sector. This increases the sustainability of their projects. Besides, it raises their self-esteem and their social-economic position in the community.



I participated in a training organized by Jamii Action Centre (JAC), a partner of the Shared Futures program in Kenya. The training brought together members of different faith groups and this was challenging in the beginning, but I thank the trainers for their patience in helping us to understand each other. The sessions were very interactive. At the end of the day, everyone felt free to speak and was willing to listen and respect everyone's opinion. Before joining the Shared Futures project, we tended to point fingers at each other. Someone would not support you based on your argument, but because you belonged to the same faith group. Now, the arguments are based on facts, not on religious background.

My religious upbringing was very one-sided. I am a Muslim and other religions didn't matter to me. I never had an interest to learn about them. I saw members of other religions as people who are lost, their opinion did not matter to me at all. During the training, I learned that religion is like a vessel which guides us through life. Your faith can grow when you respect the beliefs of others, for it brings peace of mind knowing that you are at peace with your neighbours and that you are praying for one another.

Members of my community used to be very hostile to interfaith initiatives. As part of the training, we established a youth group that initiated some small-scale farming, not for commercial purposes but

just to support the community. Now, anyone can come by to pick a few tomatoes and collect some vegetables instead of buying them at the market. Our initiative was lauded by the community, including older members of our own faith groups, who used to see us wandering idly around the village and keeping bad company. It motivated them to give us some communal land that we may use for free. In turn, this motivated us to help the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. We started some sensitization to teach the community how to stay safe.

Ever since I was introduced to the Shared Futures project, the whole experience has been amazing. It made me realize that all along I was wrong in judging others based on their religion. This insight motivated me to re-examine myself and reflect on the way I used to think. I realized how much time and opportunities I had lost - opportunities that emerge when you view others as partners in development.

I now have a positive feeling about the members of other faiths. We jointly initiated economic activities in the community and this has contributed immensely to my economic and personal growth. I now feel confident and peaceful whenever I interact with members of other faiths. It has also made me eager to learn more about other religions. Not because I want to convert, but because I want to enrich my faith by learning from each other.



"I thought that Muslim women who wear make-up would not want to be treated by a Christian. But here I am, painting them – and getting paid!"

Story of Change
Marion

I was born and raised in a Christian family, but surrounded by Muslims in my community. I felt discriminated against and expressing myself was difficult. During the Shared Futures training, I learned to overcome such discrimination and to solve conflicts through dialogue.

Because I grew up in a community dominated by Muslims, I thought I knew a lot about Islam. I thought it was a religion that supports terrorism, but now I know that is not true. I learned that Islam is a religion of peace. I got to know the Muslims with whom I participated in the training as peaceful and accommodating people. They did not fall into the hands of religious teachers who are not certified to preach and make their followers believe that they should engage in acts of violence. I learned that Muslims too have their differences: that some of them believe in teachings which other Muslims oppose. It is the same with Christians, we have so many different churches but we all serve one and the same God.

My feelings about my Muslim brothers and sisters have changed. My trust in them has increased and now I feel more comfortable whenever

I am in their company. This helped me to feel accepted as a member of the youth group we formed with Shared Futures. We worked together to set up several community activities, such as acting, drama festivals and modelling - my favourite activity. Before, I did not dare to attend such events because they are mostly organized by Muslims and I feared they would not welcome me. Now I attend these events and am treated just like the other participant.

Artwork, especially body and facial painting, is my passion. Before joining Shared Futures, I only applied make-up for fun. It are mostly Muslim women who want to wear make-up or henna paintings, and I thought they would not want to be treated by a Christian. But here I am, painting them and getting paid!

It takes such a small intervention to realize that all along you have been wrong. I thank Jamii Action Centre for helping me to revalidate and express myself and for helping me change the way I feel about Muslims. I have made friends with Muslims and we are working together to make our lives better and build a more peaceful community.



What makes SHARED FUTURES WORK?

Based on a cross-country comparison of the change monitoring data compiled by the Shared Futures partners in Kenya and Pakistan, the following tentative conclusions can be drawn about the main features that contribute to Shared Futures' success.



INTERFAITH COOPERATION

Doing things together, working on common problems and goals. Examples: interfaith consortium, business start-ups, community activities.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Targeting multiple actors, multiple generations and multiple domains of life. Examples: parents dialogue, sports tournaments for school children, commissions of youth and elderly peace agents.

RELIGIOUS LITERACY

Changing misconceptions about others' and one's own faith. Examples: interfaith literacy training, joint religious celebrations, excursions to cultural sites.

CHANGE MONITORING

Tracing personal, relational, structural and cultural changes contributing to conflict transformation. Examples: staff diary, MSC interview, beneficiary survey.

Interfaith cooperation in addition to dialogue

Although interfaith dialogue can certainly help to reduce interfaith tensions and solve problems, doing things together – working on concrete projects with members of other faith groups – is just as important as it emphasizes joint needs and responsibilities, rather than differences of identity. Thus, interfaith dialogue and cooperation can mutually reinforce each other.

Religious literacy in class and on location

Religious literacy trainings help to counter misconceptions about other faiths and about teachings of one's own faith that are (mis)used to promote intolerant behaviour towards women, minorities and other faith groups. Excursions to places of devotion and joint religious celebrations are important complementary means to acquire religious literacy. These activities allow participants to learn more about the meaning, symbols and joy that members of other faith groups experience during religious practices. Affecting people on an emotional and spiritual level can be an important channel to personal and relational change.

Targeting multiple actors, multiple generations and multiple domains of life

Changing deeply held beliefs and prejudices about other faith groups is difficult, especially if they are based on anxieties and upheld by community norms and social control. If people are invited and challenged to change their views and attitudes in different domains of life – at school, at work, at home – and by different people in their everyday life (children, teachers, parents, leaders), such changes tend to accelerate and deepen.

**“Your faith can grow
when you respect the
belief of others”**

Story of Change

Zainab

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