



## Peace and Stability in Kenya: The role of religious actors

The so-called “peace sector” in Kenya is booming with many players and approaches, and the challenge for building lasting peace has complex links to Kenya’s dynamic religious communities. A wide range of faith actors and institutions in Kenya have long worked to foster peace and curtail or prevent different threats and forms of violence. Mounting violent extremism in Kenya and the region, however, has unsettled inter-religious relations, exacerbating long-standing ethnic, political, and socio-economic divisions. World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) research on faith-based peace efforts in Kenya focuses specifically on inter-faith organizations or collaboration. Responding to suggestions during interviews with practitioners and faith leaders, WFDD hosted a workshop on August 4, 2015 at Hekima Institute for Peace Studies and International Relations in Nairobi titled *Peace and Stability in Kenya: The role of religious actors*. The day-long event gathered faith-inspired and secular actors/organizations that are actively working for stability and social cohesion in Kenya. The purpose was to gain new insights into the complexities and opportunities of working with multiple religious traditions toward common goals.

The workshop was designed to offer a rare working space where local peace practitioners could openly discuss pressing issues, brainstorm innovative approaches, learn from each other, and network across sectors as well as faith traditions. Over 60 peace practitioners based in Kenya, including 43 faith-inspired organizations (FIO) or faith leaders, attended the event. They represented various types of organizations including international, regional, national, and grassroots FIOs and NGOs; government parastatals/agencies; multilateral organizations; and education institutions offering degrees in peace studies. Faith participants represented Protestants, Catholics, African Instituted Churches, Muslims, and Hindus. Youth and women were also present, including 28 women.

Drawing upon expertise in Kenya, a group of speakers and facilitators framed the issues and led specific discussions; as the event was conducted under Chatham House rules to create a safe space for honest sharing, speakers and facilitators are not identified by name in this summary but are listed in the annex.

An overview of current trends in conflict and peace in Kenya launched the day, followed by a panel that explored lessons from historical instances of division and moments of strategic collaboration for peace. The stage set, a series of workshops allowed participants to discuss their own work and begin to problem-solve on the issues of youth and extremism, women’s role in peacebuilding, the usefulness of intra-faith work for stability, and using media strategically to foster social cohesion. At the close of the day, one secular and one faith-based peace practitioner each responded to the days’ process and content, suggesting key areas for immediate intervention and a longer view pointing to larger faith actor roles in peacebuilding.

### FRAMING THE DAY AND OPENING THE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

From the start of the day, different speakers called on religious actors to take the lead on healing and reconciliation in Kenya, an area, it was strongly asserted, not sufficiently addressed by peace practitioners with sufficient urgency or skill. The keynote speaker argued that Kenyans must recognize that true healing and lasting reconciliation have not taken hold. This is evident when communities segregate along identity lines, becoming isolated, exclusive, and claiming that they are safe only when with “my people.” Who is best

situated to lead healing in Kenya and do it well? Some say the main purpose of religion is to reconcile people to God, to neighbors, and also to nature. Taking this perspective, religious leaders have the capacity to deal with hurt, not only at the individual level, but the healing at all levels of society that is needed for lasting peace.

Conflict in Kenya is rooted in exclusion, it was asserted (and repeated throughout the day). When people feel denied their identity, freedom, or resources, they may express anger through violence. This emotional outburst is related to the heart; for religious people, a change or transformation of the heart stems from faith. But another key question is whether Kenya's religious leaders themselves are healed, or are they still consumed by anger? If healing means bringing people and communities together, across cultures, the first step must be forgiveness. The opening speaker emphasized that reconciliation means creating new relationships and this begins by healing past hurts and framing a vision for a better future. Kenya's faith communities have not invested enough in trauma healing and that is a place to begin to trace a new path, and to welcome the neighbor.

Faith leaders' involvement in peacebuilding among their communities also helps laity better understand the dynamics of the conflict. This is particularly necessary to address the historical grievances around cultural and ethnic tension that are Kenya's historical legacy. A deep dialogue on this pattern of recurring inter-group tension is lacking. In order to be effective, religious leaders need to foster or rebuild trust in their own community at the same time that they engage in multi-level dialogue and collaboration; credibility is built on intra-denominational integrity and inter-religious harmony. This counters the human tendency to become isolated if threatened or hurt. As a final recommendation, the speaker urged religious leaders to work at the justice-forgiveness-reconciliation nexus in order to release them, and their nation, from feelings of revenge. Instead, faith actors can blend forgiveness and mercy to join with justice.

## **LEARNING FROM THE PAST**

Katherine Marshall (WFDD) moderated the next panel that focused on history, positive and negative, bringing the discussion to present challenges. Delving into past instances of social division and faith-based peace responses in Kenya offered practical reminders and some new insights. There were vivid stories of the 1991 land clashes that brought Catholics and Protestants together at Ufungamano House, where they decided to confront the President to end the violence. Individually, the faith leaders could not rouse a response, but their unified voice (and example of courage)—with a purpose—garnered the attention of those in power who could bring the violence to an end. Again, religious leaders united in June 1999 to protest the President's effort to shift the constitutional review process to the Parliament. Together with civil society actors, faith leaders gathered to pray and march toward Parliament. This nonviolent demonstration was met with violent attack and attempts by politicians to reshape the message, but there was strong solidarity from Christian, Muslim, and Hindu leaders, as well as the civil society, to return the process to the people. These events of the 1990s are evidence of the strong witness of faith to justice. Similarly, religious leaders reacted to random acts of crime that could have triggered wider violence, such as the church burning in South B in 2000, claimed to have been perpetrated by Muslim youth. Muslim and Christian leaders responded quickly to prevent retaliation and further violence.

Faith leaders in Kenya and across Africa have met to discuss pathways to peace in the wake of often politically motivated violence facilitated by religious actors. The panel doubted, however, that much of the wisdom of these peace forums had been translated down to religious communities. The group focused on the BRAVE (Building Resistance Against Violent Extremism) initiative. A recent Kenyan effort, it illustrates the potential for localized intra-faith efforts to build peace. BRAVE mobilizes the Muslim community in Kenya for introspection and action to address the challenges youth are facing. The initiative responds to killings perpetrated by Muslim youth in Garissa, Mandera, and Nairobi. The leaders are researching the narratives

used to recruit youth, working with mothers to pinpoint early warning signs and define appropriate reactions, and addressing the increasing misinterpretation of scripture for violent ends by self-styled charismatic clerics. Since earlier responses of Muslims in Kenya have tended to be rather muted, BRAVE seeks to motivate faith leaders to create counter narratives and thus to examine the values inculcated in Muslim youth. Christians are also organizing for intra-faith dialogue; there was a recurrent theme that such intra-faith engagement should precede more interfaith dialogue. Given the aggressive recruiting via social media that reaches Muslims but also non-Muslims, both Muslim and Christian leaders need to stand against criminal activity and hold firm that violence in any form is wrong. Silence or inaction deepens division and suspicion, while retaliation or blame does not address the root issues.

The panel explored in depth the current need to focus on the pull and push factors that explain why youth join radical groups (including those that engage in violence). All religious leaders (not just Muslims) need to understand what narratives are persuading youth to join. They must try to understand what youth are looking for. Some have listened to youth by hosting dialogues with vulnerable youth in the Coast region to better understand their grievances and the lure of extremism. A recurring response is that these youth feel that neither the government nor local community leaders are listening to them. Profiling or criminalization of identities compounds marginalization for various populations: Somalis are presumed sympathizers, suspects are treated so poorly they choose to support Al-Shabaab, or Muslim youth are too often denied identity cards. If youth feel they have no options for a positive future, can peace interventions offer them training and access to resources to start an income-generating activity? Also, how can Kenyans move beyond the securitization of peace and instead engage with dialogue that can transform hearts, minds, and spaces?

The panel highlighted their conviction that legitimate grievances, as well as unhealed historical wounds, lie at the heart of conflict and violence in Kenya. Given this history, how can religious communities listen to people's grievances, work for communal healing, and also work to better educate youth on local history? One panelist asked, what lessons can religious leaders learn from peace efforts in Senegal, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast? Kenya is only now waking up to problems that have been slowly eating away at its social fabric, and therefore Kenyans must work together in a concerted effort. Religious leaders have special roles and responsibilities to deal with the narratives, as well as the misinterpretation or abuse of faith.

## **WORKSHOP: ENGAGING YOUTH**

Young people are directly involved in violent extremism and have become the target of radicalization. This workshop was therefore designed to foster conversation among multiple faith actors, as well as secular peace practitioners. The facilitators built on earlier references and went more deeply into inherited bitterness and current grievances. Some grievances that youth in Kenya face cut across demographics. These include especially limited access to employment opportunities. Still, mosques have been used to whip up emotions and madrassas have been a place where messages of hate are conveyed and reinforced. The context is complicated further by recent returnees seeking reintegration into communities and shifting location of extremist activities as a reaction to government security efforts focused on the Coast and Northeastern. Funding from extremists is plentiful and even scholarships to study abroad have brought narrow ideologies back to Kenya. The facilitators asked participants to discuss the causes of radicalization, ideas for how Muslims can prevent or discourage these trends among youth, and effective solutions for Muslims to engage with non-Muslim partners on this issue.

- Participants highlighted that the major causes of radicalization include coercion, seeking social belonging, incentives for employment or money, ideology, marginalization, poor distribution of resources, poverty, revenge, a sense of adventure, poor parenting, madrasa teachings, and attraction through social media.

- Ideas for Muslims to prevent or discourage youth from taking part in violent extremism include: demystify use of the words “jihad” and “kafir”, re-read scriptures, prepare religious leaders to respond to violence, regulate or certify preachers in mosques as well as their Friday messages, provide central counter approaches for online recruitment, encourage entrepreneurship among youth, address grievances at the county and national government levels, desocialize violence, involve families, and encourage parents to inculcate values of forgiveness. Religious leaders need to rebuild trust in community and with other local religious leaders, and organize counter narrative forums. Non-Muslims can also reduce drivers of radicalization by strengthening the education system, addressing historical grievances, appreciating diversity, countering narratives in social media, using devolution to address social disintegration locally, and reading English or Swahili versions of the Qur’an to be more knowledgeable about Islam.
- Multi-faith collaboration can counter violent extremism by providing a space for honest dialogue, delinking religion from the issue of violence, addressing underlying grievances, providing socio-economic opportunities, reclaiming trust, devising a common narrative, remaining true to religious teachings, identifying common identities and strengthening them, building capacities for interfaith engagement, focusing on healing, taking responsibilities to address specific issues, taking ownership of the problem as a collective responsibility, instilling positive values, promoting a culture of peace, and lobbying for peace education.

## **WORKSHOP: ENGAGING WOMEN**

The gendered elements of violence and peace have gained significant attention since UNSCR 1325 (2000), but progress is slow. In this workshop, participants discussed the reasons why women’s engagement in peace is necessary, ideas for increasing the number of women working for peace, and questions about the role of faith actors in preventing gender-based violence (GBV) more broadly. Participants argued that women are indeed well placed to engage in peacebuilding as they can cut across all groups – women, men, and youth – and also have influence at the personal, family, and social levels. The group admitted that women should not be essentialized as naturally more peaceful, because women can indirectly support violence or directly perpetrate it. But in some places where men have failed to bring about peace, women may be more likely to see the pain caused by their community and speak out with urgency to call for an end to violence. Several participants told stories demonstrating that many women in Kenya are engaged in peace, especially at the community level, but their efforts or voice go unnoticed. Based on this experience, the group recommended targeted capacity building and increased visibility for women’s peace efforts. Since many different peace initiatives with women are happening with little documentation, it would be valuable to have a platform to share stories of women’s peace efforts to learn from others and celebrate successes.

Increasing the number of women is fair, as it helps to more closely represent the population, but the quality of women’s involvement should be monitored closely. As Kenya enacts quotas across the country, some women are selected but remain quiet once in place or act as proxies for the men who got them there. It was suggested that if women in leadership are not engaging on issues important for other women, encouraging them to do so is an opportunity to engage them more explicitly. The group also emphasized the need to work with men, especially when it comes to changing attitudes toward women’s roles. If culture continues to demean women’s domestic work as less valuable or inculcates women to be submissive to men, then women’s empowerment will not happen. While one person recommended education as key to empowering individual women and girls (which will ultimately trickle down to the family), others critiqued the content of current education that perpetuates inequality and the lack of role models for women.

In terms of gender-based violence, it was unclear how and to what extent faith communities and actors were engaged. FECCLAHA’s Tamar Campaign was noted as a Bible-study resource for Christians, but most often faith leaders lack the capacity to respond to incidents of GBV. In most instances families remain quiet about

domestic violence and even faith leaders can encourage silence, claiming it is an evil thing that should be avoided. Some faith leaders think that marriages should never be broken for the greater goal of retaining the family unit, ignoring ongoing abuse. The session ended with a call for an interfaith women's network that draws from existing women's groups within faith communities. This would allow a space for women of faith across faiths to jointly advocate for issues they see and care about in terms of countering violent extremism and GBV.

## **WORKSHOP: INTRA-FAITH DIALOGUE FOR PEACE**

In multi-faith Kenya, peacebuilding in collaboration with other faith traditions is important, but sometimes there is need for internal peace work before engaging with a different tradition. Earlier in the day the BRAVE initiative illustrated the need for and benefit of Muslims gathering to reflect on peace and violence prevention within their own faith tradition. In this spirit, this session encouraged participants from various faith traditions to speak from their experience about the need for, value of, and challenges to resolving conflict and finding common ground within a single denomination. An intra-faith approach provides a safe space for people from the same denomination to address difficult, often avoided, issues that cause recurring tension or prohibit healing. Free from outside judgment, intra-faith dialogue uses familiar language and history for self-critique and constructive inner work. Some denominations have existing structures or mechanisms that allow for or facilitate regular intra-faith assessment and dialogue. Similarly, focusing on a common history can create unity and working collaboratively can lead to strength through numbers and networks. After coming to a common ground, denominations are then better equipped and unified for ecumenical or multi-faith work.

The group identified some gaps and areas for future focus in intra-faith activities. Inward focus can foster isolation or exclusion, so it should be used wisely to deal with internal challenges such as wrong teachings, false theology, or contextualizing faith responses. Inherited history or effects of globalization may also pose challenges to peace and can best be dealt with internally. Similarly, intra-faith documentation of historical markers helps build community identity and unity. It also provides a safe space to study and explore negative aspects of history, promoting education on doctrine and scripture. Faith-based peace activities are strengthened by intra-faith healing and reconciliation; if the micro-level is not addressed, national healing will not be long-lasting. Intra-faith work that strengthens mechanisms for peace and also identifies connectors will help cultures of peace within, preparing people to work for peace in society.

## **WORKSHOP: MEDIA AND RELIGION FOR PEACE**

Messages that mobilize for violence or peace are transmitted through various channels, but media coverage of violent incidents, peace interventions, and peace campaigns also play a role in communicating information or framing mindsets. The workshop on media was designed to cover both the use of media by faith actors to promote their peace agendas, as well as the media's coverage of religion. Facilitators spoke about positive and negative media usage by religious leaders in the past, then asked participants to describe how they see the media cover religion. In general, the media cover religious leaders or events quite rarely, but when they do the coverage is often negative. At times coverage promotes a narrative us "us versus them", reinforcing divisions along religious lines. More worryingly, media language portrays Islam as a radical religion when in fact radicals can come from any faith traditions. Other concerns included corruption in the form of brown envelopes of cash to ensure coverage and media response limited to sensational issues or outlandish actors. In sum, this has created distrust between religious leaders and the media.

After assessing the challenges, the group devised recommendations to work with the media constructively to promote peace. Religious leaders have used the media wisely in the past to advocate for social justice issues, but it seems that current coverage or engagement is fragmented on many issues. Participants recommended that religious actors be proactive in using the media, rather than reactive, and also use new media to broadcast important messages instantly. Another recommendation is to provide training both for religious leaders on

how to use the media, as well as training the media on how to better cover religion. If religious leaders are given regular media space, such as weekly columns, they can use this platform to promote peace. Alternatively, faith-based peace practitioners can approach journalists and media owners to discuss including peace articles or scheduling themed sections such as faith-based peace pullouts. Faith-based media outlets should strategically use their own media by carefully designing content and timing.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND WAY FORWARD**

Closing remarks highlighted faith actor roles in a future, peaceful Kenya. Drawing from demographic statistics of religious affiliation in Kenya, a first speaker emphasized the importance of religion in Kenyans' lives and the wide social influence and respect commanded by religious leaders (even after the 2010 constitutional referendum challenges). As part of civil society, their long-term presence and commitment in communities affords religious actors trust and access in places many others cannot reach. They are uniquely placed to act and support broadly and quickly.

Unfortunately, Kenya has seen conflict masked with religion or religion used as a proxy for social and political battles. Religious differences may thus be what is most visible and religion is blamed for conflict. In value-based conflicts, which tend to be framed as mutually exclusive and polarized, opposing parties believe there is no common ground on which to resolve conflict. Religious actors and faith communities, however, can intervene by reversing value-based conflicts – and building on peace components found within religious traditions.

The second speaker urged Kenya's religious actors to build preventative measures, exercise their capacities for peace, and use early warning systems to extinguish fires before they start. "We are short on healing and reconciliation capacities in Kenya, but we need wounded healers who can offer trauma healing." Using religious teachings, faith actors can rebuild relationships destroyed by violence and conflicts, healing communities, especially through psychosocial support.

Kenya is a fractured and fragmented society. Therefore we must tell and teach history differently; religious leaders can reorder this. Education for peace has been set in place, but there is need for follow up. Accountability for implementation and evaluation is vital. Going beyond hardware to software, such approaches can address issues of formation, values, and ethics that change mindsets to evolve and imbibe a spirit of patriotism. "We [as Kenyans] have very poor understanding of our traditional heritage and our faith, but religious leaders can deepen and broaden our understanding and appreciation of all faiths." Religious communities can use existing structures and safe spaces to host dialogues on diversity, engaging men, women, girls, and boys to appreciate differences and accept the other. This will help Kenyans discard prejudices and histories that are negative and undermine the human dignity of the other. "Instead, let us promote positive religious identity elements in the face of division along identity lines."

Faith actors can also facilitate dialogue with central and county governments, to acknowledge historical injustices. Justice must be sought transparently. "We need to facilitate common platforms, like Ufungamano House, that create unity and cohesion for a common purpose. Sustainable multi-faith platforms that use faith and a religious lens allow us to see each other with respect, trust, and keep moral questions in the open."

## **CONCLUSION**

The day's discussions were captured in this statement: "As we create and journey together to a better understanding, stability, healing of our nation, forgiveness of one another, acceptance and respect of the other, we will need to give a center stage to the young people in our nation." This note aims to capture the many diagnoses of problems that were put forward throughout the day's discussions, the outlines of specific

opportunities and dilemmas facing peacebuilding actors, and numerous calls for action, both in general terms but also specific in focus. The workshop, participants agreed, met a need, bringing together very different actors and giving them the opportunity to test and explore hypotheses and new ideas. “Safe space” for such testing is much needed, as is public discourse, media focus, and strong leadership. Among other virtues of such spaces are the opportunity for self-criticism and an unraveling of narratives that can perpetuate anger and misconceptions that exacerbate divisions. Examples of youth leadership on peace were pragmatic and courageous, highlighting some paths towards translating what is too often rhetoric on the topic into feasible action. Similar comments apply for women’s peacebuilding roles.

As to follow up, WFDD’s forthcoming report on conflict and religious peacebuilding will be made available, as will interviews with many peace practitioners that highlight both their work and their insights.

### **ANNEX: LEADERSHIP DURING THE DAY (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

Agnes Abuom, World Council of Churches

Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali, Global Network of Religions for Children

Nardos Bekele-Thomas, UNDP Kenya

Fatuma Kamene, Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance

Paul Karanja, Waumini Communications

Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, Presidential advisor on matters on Peace, Cohesion and Conflict Resolution

Dr. Francis Kuria, Inter-Religious Council of Kenya

Walter Odhiambo, Nairobi Peace Initiative Africa (NPI-Africa)

Dr. Elias Omondi Opongo, SJ, Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations

Katherine Marshall, World Faiths Development Dialogue

Fadhilee Msuri, Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance

Fred Nyabera, End Child Poverty—Arigatou International

Shamsia Ramadhan, Catholic Relief Services

Samuel Waweru, Waumini Communications