

Plan of Action for religious leaders/actors from the Americas to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes: Fighting acts of hate with love

INTRODUCTION

Atrocity crimes are usually preceded by incitement to violence that originates in the form of “hate speech” that targets particular communities, based on their identity. Incitement can both be a warning sign and a trigger of atrocity crimes. Finding the means to diffuse hate speech, or preventing it from reaching its target audience and presenting alternative messages, may help in preventing and curbing the violence that can lead to atrocity crimes.

With this objective in mind, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, in conjunction with the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and the World Council of Churches, held a meeting from 28 February to 1 March 2016 at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, DC, United States of America, on "The Role of Religious Leaders from the Americas in Preventing Incitement that could lead to Atrocity Crimes." The meeting brought together some forty religious leaders, representing different religions and faith traditions, as well as representatives of faith based organizations from North, Central, and South America to develop a regional strategy to prevent incitement, working individually and collectively.

The Washington meeting was the third in a series of regional meetings convened by the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect as follow-up to a meeting of religious leaders from around the world that was held on April 24, 2015 in Fez, Morocco. The outcomes of this meeting were a Plan of Action for the prevention of incitement and the Fez Declaration, a declaration of principles. At the regional meetings, the input of religious leader from across all regions is being sought on the Fez Plan of Action.

The discussions that took place in Washington clearly showed that the Americas are not a homogeneous entity, where one solution fits all. While all regions face some similar challenges, the reality on the ground in North, Central and South America is quite different vis a vis the different kinds and targets of incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes. Thus the regional strategy developed by the participants of the meeting reflects the great diversity that exists in the Americas. It also shows how much religious leaders are already doing and their commitment to working together to implement the recommendations in this document, working from the grassroots up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for religious leaders

Map existing initiatives to prevent and counter incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes

- Map existing initiatives so that they can be scaled up and supported¹, including by:
 - Academic institutions providing education and training for religious actors;
 - Social, print, and TV media companies;
 - Religious and secular institutions and organizations;
 - Institutions that carry out interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, education and training;
 - Organizations responsible for community based initiatives.

Denounce incitement and develop a strategy to counter the narrative that underscores incitement

- Amplify the stories of religious leaders and communities responding to hate with expressions of love and solidarity. Use social media tools and media engagement in order to promote these stories in national discourse²;
- Collect and tell positive stories of interfaith engagement and social change (e.g. by creating a shared reservoir of interfaith and intra-faith stories of courage and cooperation and using creative methods - art, music, graphic novels, videos, and films);
- Develop and share media strategies (using social media and print media as well as television and radio) to reframe narratives³. Consult with experts, to make sure that messages reach the right audience;
- Encourage religious groups and communities to speak out against intolerance and incitement to hatred and violence;
- Speak out not only when our community is targeted but also when a religious community different from our own is targeted.

Strengthen collaboration with media actors

Social media

¹ e.g. KACIID mapping of interfaith dialogue from historical and regional perspectives, the Bridge Initiative, Interfaith Youth Corps and Interfaith Center, Shoulder to Shoulder, Zeitouna, Institute for Islamic Christian Jewish Studies in Baltimore, Interfaith Centre of New York, Islamic Centre of Long Island/Interfaith Institute of Long Island, Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut, Auburn Seminary and Groundswell Movement.

² E.g. The Story of Self – Story of Us – Story of Now framework, Marshall Ganz, Harvard University.

³ E.g. social media messaging, such as the messaging led by the Bridge Initiative.

- Engage social media and internet technology companies (Facebook, Google, Twitter) to play a more active role in countering incitement to violence and promoting alternative⁴, positive messages;
- Encourage social media companies to engage with religious organizations and communities⁵;
- Encourage and work with social media companies to amplify positive speech and to actively promote tolerance;
- Generate (and work together with faith-based groups to generate) online material promoting positive alternative messages, and ask social media companies to promote this material;
- Encourage social media companies to disclose information about their policies (e.g. threatening content, cooperation with law enforcement vis-a-vis hate crimes, and practices on blocking content that is deemed to be threatening);
- Convene workshops with social media companies about threatening speech (what content is and what isn't threatening to members of religious groups); sensitize media to these issues;
- Petition social media companies to be responsive to complaints about speech that is threatening to individuals; to remove this content promptly; and to engage in proactive monitoring for threatening content.

All media

- Encourage local, grassroots religious leaders to engage with local online and offline media to affect local actors, e.g. local government officials and politicians;
- Engage with media sources (e.g. billboard companies) to produce counter/alternative messages; ask them to publicize alternative messages on a pro-bono basis and, if possible, offer incentives to do so⁶;
- Craft persuasive alternative and counter-messages to be disseminated through traditional and social media;
- Promote alternative messages as a broader supplement to counter-messaging (wide dissemination of positive messages with targeted counter-messaging);
- Consider creative, appealing formats for alternative messaging campaigns⁷ in response to negative billboard messaging;
- Widely publicize alternative messages.

⁴ Where a “counter-message” is simply a response that corrects or opposes a “hate message” by countering it, an “alternative message” is more sophisticated in so far as it reframes an issue, responds not with a mere opposite message, but provides an “alternative” way of understanding a situation or religious text (that might be used as a motive for hate) by reframing or re-assessing the situation, the religious text, and providing a measure of understanding to those who perpetrate hate.

⁵ E.g. Facebook’s faith-based forum.

⁶ E.g. In-kind invoices to enable a tax deduction.

⁷ E.g. New York campaign involving Muslim comedians.

Building Robust Multi-faith Social Action Campaigns

- Develop new innovative tools for religious communities to report and respond to hate crimes⁸;
- Train leading religious leaders and communities on how to organize multi-faith campaigns that combat hate using online tools and story-based strategies⁹;
- Refer to existing models and case studies that showcase positive examples of combating hatred, discrimination and violence¹⁰;
- Form issue-driven advocacy coalitions, rapid response networks¹¹ and disseminate messages in various forms, including through press conferences, press statements, blogs, op-eds, videos, films, music, visual art, etc;
- Use religious symbols and text as part of activism (ritual activism);
- Engage celebrity spokespersons and ambassadors;
- Ensure campaign leaders are diverse faith actors (women, young people, people of different professions);
- Build and sustain partnerships with government officials (state, local) and media reporters;
- Include the youth in faith-based campaigns (both junior youth, aged 11-15, and college and university students)¹²;
- Focus on obtaining specific and actionable policy changes in addition to long-term cultural change;
- Seek financial resources to address the financial disparity between hateful messengers and positive interfaith groups.

Foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation

- Encourage civic debate on social issues, including preventing and countering incitement and radicalization, and encourage diverse communities to engage;
- Build coalitions with other faiths as well as with non-religious and humanist groups;
- Develop shared alternative and positive narratives with other faiths;
- Promote interfaith engagement at the grassroots level about local issues to strengthen community cohesion and ability to resist negative media narratives;
- Encourage youth religious leaders and actors to foster interreligious engagement;
- Establish intercultural and inter-religious forums¹³;

⁸ E.g. The Sikh Coalition's FlyRights racial profiling app and website to collect hate acts.

⁹ E.g. "First we pray/mourn TOGETHER. Then we organize."

¹⁰ See: LGBTQ movement campaigning methodology.

¹¹ E.g. Interfaith Center of NY.

¹² Models: University of Toronto Multi-faith Center in Canada; Interfaith Youth Core in the US.

- Promote interfaith retreats;
- Establish open door places of worship;
- Encourage diverse communities to engage in civic debate.

Building and/or revising education, adult education curriculum and capacity building

- Encourage the development of interfaith seminaries;
- Support local education programs, courses, curricula for religious leaders who have received their religious training abroad to encourage their integration;
- Engage religious institutions to provide scholarships to train religious leaders locally;
- Encourage State accreditation of religious schools;
- Work with education institutions to develop school curricula that include religious education as a subject that is inclusive of different religious traditions, promotes respect for diversity, and is taught by people of different faiths.

Countering radicalization

- Reach out within own communities to people who are potentially vulnerable to recruitment by radical/extremist groups, including marginalized youth;
- Counter drivers of radicalization, such as feelings of oppression and hopelessness, using alternative narratives and incentives to those provided by violent extremists;
- Engage youth, also through inter-religious justice-focused initiatives, in tackling injustice in a constructive way;
- Encourage and promote tolerance as well as peaceful interpretations of the tenets of own faith;
- Promote dialogue with different sectors of the society to address issues related to violence against young people (or carried out by young people);
- Promote respect for religious and cultural diversity;
- Organize activities that engage youth. Open shrines/religious sites to youth;
- Advocate for inclusion of marginalized groups, including marginalized youth, in social and economic processes;
- Advocate for state institutions to provide youth employment opportunities.

¹³ E.g. Fort Lauderdale, Florida (Darloom); In Guyana, issues are discussed together at the Ethnic Relations Committee and community and religious leaders report back to respective communities; when a mosque burned down in Petersburg, Ontario, the local church opened its doors to people of the affected mosque for prayers.

Collaboration with State institutions

- Encourage governments to enforce existing laws that prohibit discrimination, and incitement to violence on the basis of religion, race, or other form of identity¹⁴;
- Facilitate dialogue between religious leaders/actors and State institutions involved in preventing and countering incitement to violence (e.g. ministries of education, information, the interior and senior law enforcement officials etc.);
- Encourage States to use transitional justice mechanisms (such as historical memory and truth seeking mechanisms) as a way to process past violence and prevent future conflict;
- Encourage States to work with religious leaders to enhance their protection, in particular when they engage in preventing and countering incitement to violence.

Collaboration with international organisations

- Build international partnerships, including with the United Nations, on issues related to the prevention of incitement to violence;
- Seek United Nations support to access social media companies at a high level;
- Encourage the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect to disseminate the Plan of Action for religious leaders from the Americas to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes to the Latin American Network for Genocide Prevention and advocate for government engagement in the implementation of the Plan of Action.

Collaboration with think tanks and non-religious organisations

- Encourage think tanks and non-religious organisations to develop and provide training on effective communication strategies¹⁵;
- Encourage and foster research on alternative messages by religious groups to reach target audiences¹⁶;
- Train religious leaders/actors in human rights monitoring and reporting;
- Develop reading material on diversity (racial, religious and gender) for religious leaders and actors.

¹⁴ Pursuing new hate speech legislation or government regulation of social media would however be detrimental.

¹⁵ E.g. Carter Center program bringing communications specialists together with threat specialists; US Holocaust Memorial Museum strategic communications guide for counteracting dangerous speech: ushmm.org/dangerous-speech.

¹⁶ E.g. Shoulder2Shoulder campaign.

Specific recommendations for religious leaders from Central and South America

- Develop a website to share experiences on initiatives carried out by Latin American faith-based organisations to counteract racism, xenophobia, islamophobia, gender-based violence, as well as radicalization and violent extremism;
- Promote debates among religious organizations and with the wider society on gender equality, focusing on the importance of preventing gender-based and domestic violence;
- Partner with national governments and international organizations, including the United Nations, to advocate for better gender equality and improve national legislation to prevent and counter gender-based violence;
- Establish a network of religious leaders/actors and civil society organizations for the prevention of gender-based violence. Use the network to denounce cases of gender-based violence through national, regional and international legal frameworks ;
- Disseminate information about existing national regional and international legal mechanisms to address violence (including gender-based and domestic violence) and violent extremism;
- Create a Central American Network specifically to address the problem of youth violence and narco-trafficking in Central America and seek the support of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and national governments;
- Reinforce the collaboration with national governments and international organisations, including the United Nations, on issues related to human trafficking in Latin America, as a way to counteract discrimination, radicalization and human rights abuses;
- Enhance cooperation with national governments and international organisations, including the United Nations, to promote and implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as well as the Convention on the Elimination of all Form of Discrimination;
- Strengthen engagement of the United Nations in regional processes to address territorial disputes as a way to avoid violence, conflict and radicalization.

North-South collaboration

Foster engagement and information sharing on initiatives aimed at the prevention of incitement to violence between religious leaders and faith based organisations from the North, Central and South American regions.

Tell me a fact and I'll learn.

Tell me a truth and I'll believe.

But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.

- Native American Proverb

Every social movement has told a new story.