

Small Group 4: Working with religious actors

Guiding questions

1. How could the potential contribution of religious actors to peacebuilding and conflict prevention be collectively harnessed?
2. What risks are associated with the involvement of religious leaders in peacebuilding and conflict prevention processes, and how can they best be mitigated?

Participants' comments and recommendations

- The EU has considerable experience of working with religious leaders, primarily due to the latter's importance in local communities. Since tackling violent extremism and radicalisation have become priorities in its external policies, the EU has also started to engage with religious leaders specifically on the basis of their religious role.
- It is very challenging to engage and to have an open debate with religious leaders due to their influential position in societies and local communities. For this reason, trust-building is crucial. Religious leaders should be challenged in an environment in which they would not be overly exposed. Counter-narratives and a confrontational approach should be avoided. Safe spaces can help to reduce disruptive behaviours and incentives for spoilers.
- It is important to bear in mind that religious leaders are not necessarily helpful in dialogues. In some cases, they might be disruptive and interested in maintaining divisions.
- Context analysis and knowledge of the field is crucial. All religious leaders are different in terms of their interests, priorities and openness to external influences. Their individual characteristics determine the type of engagement which is possible.
- Youth organisations often lack the authority to talk with religious leaders. Young people often avoid engaging with religious leaders for fear of repercussions in their communities in which deviant behaviours may be viewed with hostility.
- Individuals who report on religious minorities should be further supported and international actors should make more efforts to understand why and how religious minorities are persecuted in specific regions.
- When working with religious leaders, hierarchy is very important. High-level religious leaders and local groups and/or individual actors should be engaged at the same time.
- Religious leaders are particularly keen to engage with faith-based organisations. Even when they do not share the same religion, there is a common component in values and language, which helps to facilitate trust-building.
- Engagement is often more successful when it is done through existing networks of actors rather than consortia which have been created "ad hoc".
- Engagement with religious leaders should be accompanied by a parallel engagement with other authorities (e.g. local governors, police etc.). Coordination with public authorities is essential because religious leaders can be exclusionary.
- Approaches should be as inclusive as possible. Inclusivity is particularly important as politics and religion are strongly connected in many countries. In these cases, separation might lead to or exacerbate sectarianism.
- Religion plays a crucial role in many societies: it is often the first source of identity for people and its networks and structures provide services where the State fails. At the same time, it is important not to overestimate the influence of religious leaders. In many countries, bishops and archbishops have a strong influence on local

communities, but none at the political level. Sometimes tribal allegiance is stronger than faith, especially in Christian communities.

- Dialogues should be both inter- and intra-religious because conflicts also exist between factions of the same religion.
- It is important not to label phenomena such as terrorism to a specific religious group. This can stigmatise communities and make them more exposed and endangered.
- Local and newly-established organisations often lack capacities to manage grants and significant amounts of donor funding can be lost in administrative costs. The EU should try to meet these organisations' needs with more manageable grants.
- Local religious leaders often have a narrow perspective on issues. They should be encouraged to take the broader context more into consideration rather than just focusing on their own constituencies.
- The inclusion of women goes hand in hand with trust-building. When dialogues include a significant number of female participants, power dynamics are automatically challenged. When women are not outnumbered by men, they are more likely to intervene and their views taken into consideration.