

CSS MEDIATION RESOURCES

# Addressing Religion in Conflict: Insights and Case Studies from Myanmar

Angela Ullmann and Seng Mai Aung



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# Foreword

*“The Role of Religions in Building a Nation of Peace and Development”* Conference held in 2017 in Yangon, Myanmar, brought together government representatives, such as the Minister of Religious Affairs, members of parliament and high-level party members of the National League for Democracy, as well as religious and community leaders from Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh backgrounds from all over Myanmar. Hearing the voices of our fellow brothers and sisters in the quest for peace gives us hope for our country’s peaceful future: there is much wisdom in Myanmar how its religious leaders can engage themselves and their constituencies effectively in religious peacebuilding and address conflicts with religious dimensions. However, while the conference’s goal was for religious leaders to exchange their experiences on addressing intercommunal relations, such lessons and insights need to be collected in a more sustainable way so they can guide future efforts to address religion in conflict in Myanmar and elsewhere. This publication can be viewed as part of these ongoing efforts.

Six years after the beginning of the latest wave of outbreaks of intercommunal violence in 2012, this publication is therefore very timely. It presents an important overview of what we can learn from the experiences of three existing efforts to address religion in conflict in Myanmar since 2012. It is crucial that the role of religion in conflict is well understood, so that it can be addressed correctly. However, many lack the experience to do so in Myanmar. On the one hand, many of our peers in peace in Myanmar sometimes do not recognize religion, because it is such an integral part of their everyday life. On the other hand, our international colleagues engaged in peace support sometimes overlook religion’s role in conflict, because they are not used to religion influencing important peace and conflict dynamics – nor to dealing with religion in the public sphere generally. This publication is relevant because it fills the gap of showing how religion was taken into account in three concrete initiatives for peace and by pointing out how the case studies have moved from analysis to action in

religion-sensitive ways. Furthermore, this publication presents a synthesis of the case studies' collective learning organized into five key topics relevant to peacebuilders faced with conflicts with religious dimensions. These five key topics touch upon the interplay between religion and different elements, such as conflict analysis, ways of intervention, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, identity and the scope of engagement, as well as the principle of "do no harm".

Three messages of this publication particularly resonated with us as peacebuilders engaged in intercommunal harmony in Myanmar.

Firstly, if we as peacebuilders want to address religion in conflict in meaningful ways, we need to correctly understand its role in conflict. This is not an easy task, but we need to identify the different ways religion may be influencing conflict, neither by rationalizing religion away, nor by overestimating its role.

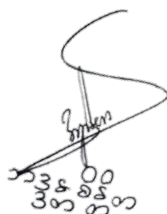
Secondly, religious actors need to be engaged alongside the many other civil society and state stakeholders. Only by creating spaces for dialogue and exchange across the societal silos, that really reflect the rich fabric of Myanmar's society with its multiplicity of actors, can we learn how to live together harmoniously and find comprehensive and inclusive solutions that last.

Thirdly, even well-intended initiatives addressing religion in conflict in Myanmar are in danger of doing more harm than good, due to the very sensitive nature of the topic. One strategy of "do no harm" can be to work in religiously and culturally balanced peacebuilding teams, in which decisions are taken together. Culturally and religiously balanced teams have a better chance of getting access to a broader range of actors, being seen as impartial and thus more widely accepted by various actors. This may also mean getting insiders and outsiders to work together, in order to use comparative strengths and approach difficulties in a culturally sensitive manner. Another very important strategy for minimizing



harm when addressing religion in conflict in Myanmar is to be patient and allow for things to develop according to their inner rhythm.

These are just three insights from this publication we found especially relevant for our work in Myanmar. However, there are many more reflections and helpful experiences that will enrich practitioners and policy makers addressing conflicts with religious dimensions in Myanmar, but also in many other parts of the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink. It features a large, stylized 'S' shape at the top, with a vertical line descending from its center. Below this, the name 'Ashin Seindita' is written in a cursive script. At the bottom, there are several small, circular marks or symbols.

**Venerable Ashin Seindita**, Asia Light Monastery, Founder of Asia Light Foundation and Chief Monk of Asia Light Monastery

A handwritten signature in black ink. The name 'Mahn Palmerston' is written in a cursive, slightly slanted script. The 'M' is large and prominent, and the 'P' is also large and loops around the start of the second name.

**Reverend Mahn Palmerston**, General Secretary of the Myanmar Council of Churches

A handwritten signature in blue ink. The name 'Al Haj U Khin Mg Than' is written in a cursive, flowing script. The 'A' is very large and loops around the rest of the name.

**Al Haj U Khin Mg Than**, Central Executive Committee Member of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council, Mandalay Region, Myanmar

A handwritten signature in blue ink. The name 'Kathleen' is written in a cursive, flowing script. The 'K' is large and loops around the rest of the name.

**Daw Kathleen Thein**, Chairperson of Hindu Women Network, Core Member of Interfaith Dialogue Group, Core Member of the International Women's Peace Group (South Korea), Co-Chair of the English Teachers' Association Myanmar



# Abstract

Peaceful coexistence between groups belonging to different religious traditions is under pressure in Myanmar today. At the same time, various peace-building 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 case 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 consciously.

# 1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to capture and highlight the learning points and good practices of selected peacebuilding approaches applied to religion<sup>1</sup> in conflict in interfaith or intercommunal relations in Myanmar after the violent incidents of 2012.<sup>2</sup> The insights are drawn from research on three case studies: the *Flower Speech Campaign* by Panzagar<sup>3</sup>, 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 with conflicts with religious dimensions:<sup>4</sup>

- a) How does religion drive the conflict?
- b) How do we address religion in conflict?
- c) How do we engage religious actors when they are excluded?
- 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.

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- 1 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 and the leaders that guide these communities, but also the institutions and power relations they build. See Woodhead, Linda (2011). *Five Concepts of Religion*. *International Review of Sociology*, 21(1), pp. 121–143.
  - 2 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.
  - 3 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.
  - 4 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 Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and CSS; and the Practitioner Exchange on how to train on religion and secularity in conflict for peacebuilding (<http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Ullmann-04242018-PractitionerExchange.pdf>) held in The Hague in 2017, jointly organized by CSS, the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain at Groningen University, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and the Al Amana Centre, with the support of the Swiss FDFA.

After a short introduction on the background of the conflict (section 2), this article will present a brief overview of approaches which are applied to address interfaith tensions in Myanmar (section 3). 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 4). The article will then present the three selected case study initiatives by Panzagar (section 5), Mercy Corps (section 6) and the Institute for Global Engagement (section 7). 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 8).



## 2 Conflict Background

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. 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.

The rape of a Buddhist woman in Rakhine State in May 2012, in which some of the key facts remain under dispute<sup>5</sup>, sparked a wave of hostility between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims of different ethnicities that quickly spread across the state, leaving dozens dead and several tens of thousands displaced.<sup>6</sup> The riots in Rakhine State were the backdrop to the developments in other parts of the country, and cities such as Meikhtila, Lashio, Kalaw, Myitkyina, and Mandalay (see map page 14) saw violent clashes between Buddhist and Muslim communities, often leaving several people dead, families forced out of their homes and many properties destroyed. 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.

Each incident of intercommunal violence is context-specific and needs to be understood as such. However, there are some dynamics which

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5 Mullen, M. (2016). *Pathways That Changed Myanmar*. London: Zed Books, especially chapter 8 "From Human Rights Rhetoric to 969" (pp. 193–205), p. 196.

6 Mullen (2016), p. 196; 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>.

reoccur and consist of a complex interplay of different factors.<sup>7</sup> The political transition brought an opening of political spaces, including more freedom of expression. These new spaces were claimed by Buddhist-nationalist movements, who sought to protect Buddhist practices for Myanmar's Buddhist majority during the socio-political changes the country underwent since the ending of the military rule. The socio-political transformation was accompanied by hope, but also by much uncertainty and fear about what the future would hold for Myanmar's (ethnically and religiously diverse) population. These fears of change tapped into previous experiences of political and economic hardships and historical memories dating back as far as colonial times. These grievances in turn fueled mistrust towards influences perceived as foreign, converging into a mentality of being under attack from Muslims. The nationalist movements thus focused their rhetoric on protecting and defending Buddhism (and Myanmar) against Muslim and other influences that were perceived to be foreign or strange. One of these movements was the 969, a campaign that started out as a "buy-Buddhist" answer to the 786 campaign that wanted to help fellow Muslims find shops offering halal products. The 969 campaign transformed itself into the *Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion*, better known by its Burmese acronym, Ma Ba Tha. Both the 969 campaign and Ma Ba Tha need to be understood as heterogeneous movements encompassing a plethora of different opinions, which makes it difficult to say who is, or was associated with the networks.

There is no tradition of criticizing monks and religious leaders in Myanmar, which made speaking out publicly against xenophobic voices, or in favor of protecting Islamic communities from acts of violence all the more difficult. Voicing support for 'inclusive approaches' or 'tolerance and coexistence'<sup>8</sup> was associated with being pro-Muslim and taking a stand against Buddhism and the country. This led many people, who may not have been strongly in favor or against anti-Muslim discourses, to remain quiet, as their

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7 For more comprehensive readings specifically addressing the background, drivers and ways of making sense of the recent intercommunal tensions and incidents of violence in Myanmar, the author recommends Walton and Hayward's paper on "Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar" (2014); Well's article on "Making Sense of Reactions to Communal Violence in Myanmar" (2016); chapter 8 from Mullen's "Pathways That Changed Myanmar" (2016); and Schissler, Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi's field research on "Threat and Virtuous Defense: Listening to Narratives of Religious Conflict in Six Myanmar Cities" (2015).

8 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>.



main wish was to build their lives free from military oppression. While all non-Bamar<sup>9</sup>-Buddhist communities felt the suppression and neglect of the Bamar-Buddhist regime, so did people belonging to the majority community. During the military regime, communities commonly kept to themselves, in an effort to stay out of the public eye. At several instances during its reign, the regime had strategically instigated religious and ethnic conflicts to prove and bolster the significance and imperative of having powerful armed forces. The resulting grievances and the secluded lifestyles led to few linkages across ethnic or religious community boundaries. Rumors that the share of the Muslim population was growing rapidly due to large families, forced conversion after interfaith marriage, illegal immigration and inappropriate economic power were easily propagated and even further nurtured by global discourses such as the ‘war on terror’, the fight against Islamic State (IS) and violent extremism.

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, 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.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Referring to the ethnicity of the majority of Myanmar citizens.

10 For 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>.

### 3 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.<sup>11</sup>

While much of the international attention 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 relating it 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.

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 in ‘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 to address religion in conflict through peace practice in

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11 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 touch on intercommunal conflict (notably Rakhine) from time to time too. (Thank you to Mercy Corps’ Jenny Vaughan for explaining the existing exchange mechanisms.)

Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> 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 were 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<sup>13</sup>, political dialogues, early 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 make the envisioned change happen.

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12 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.

13 «Intra-faith engagements can constitute a necessary pre-step to inter-faith exchanges, especially when there is disaccord within a rich diversity of voices within one community. One project in particular addressed the issue of representation and access to the majority Buddhist population through engaging Buddhist actors from outside of Myanmar. This project, led by the Buddhist Federation of Norway, together with religious studies scholar Dr. Iselin Frydenlund (and with funding from the Norwegian government) engaged with a large group of Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people from a wide range of traditions and perspectives, including the MaBaTha. The aim of the project was to address the question of religious minorities from a normative Buddhist point of view. For more information about this project, please see <http://www.buddhismreligiousminorities.org/project>.

## 4 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<sup>14</sup> approaches according to Adam Curle's 'Stages of Change'<sup>15</sup> 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) matrix<sup>16</sup>, 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

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14 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 more emphasizes transforming 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](https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning_resolution).

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

16 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>.

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<sup>17</sup> 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 (changing group behavior and group relationships in two villages) so that communities are more resilient against intercommunal violence.

In 2013, 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.

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17 Conflict resolution is understood as the process of creating a solution that "identifies and deals with the underlying sources of the conflict", while respecting the conflict parties' values and identities. See Spangler, B. (2017). *Settlement, Resolution, Management, and Transformation: An Explanation of Terms*. Retrieved from [https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning\\_resolution](https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning_resolution).

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

|                                     | Panzagar  | Mercy Corps  | Institute for Global Engagement   |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Specific conflict background</b> | 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 |
| <b>Methodological approach</b>      | Messaging (online & print media, information campaign)  | Alternative dispute resolution capacity-building, CSO capacity building  | Government and interfaith engagement through training   |
| <b>Specific goal</b>                | Challenging social norms supportive of hate speech  | Building local capacities to prevent intercommunal violence  | Creating a peace-builders' network, training key religious and governmental leaders in religion and rule of law                   |
| <b>Type of change</b>               | Awareness, attitudes, behavior  | Skills, relationships  | Knowledge, relationships  |
| <b>Target audience</b>              | General population  | Local mediators, local CSOs  | Religious leaders & government officials  |
| <b>Implementer</b>                  | A 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                       |
| <b>Geographic area</b>              | Countrywide   | Mandalay and Southern Shan   | Countrywide (training in Yangon & Mandalay)   |
| <b>Evaluation format</b>            | No evaluation   | Baseline and end-line study, external evaluation of entire project   | Evaluations of the two 10-day training sessions   |

# 5 Panzagar Campaign: Addressing Hate Speech

## Specific conflict analysis

In 2014, tensions against Muslim communities ran high. With the political transition in full process and the general elections of 2015 approaching, Buddhist nationalist voices had successfully created an anti-Muslim rhetoric that resonated with, and deepened fears and threat perceptions among substantial parts of the country's population. People enjoyed more freedom of speech and endured less censorship than under previous military regimes, and participation in social media platforms was on the rise since the opening of the country in 2011. During previous decades, there had been no information without propaganda from the military regime, which had used the restriction of information as a tool for power. People had needed to rely on their personal relationships to share news mouth-to-mouth. It was thus difficult for many people to differentiate between biased and unbiased sources in the information available on the internet. The plethora of information available now had overwhelming traits. Anti-Islamic propaganda, which already fell on fertile ground, was often understood to be true by many, who did not know how to verify information. Hate speech against Muslims was common both in live and taped speeches, print, online and social media, and the Buddhist-nationalist discourse seemed to extend beyond traditionally conservative actors into the mainstream of Myanmar society. Anti-Muslim sentiment started to become more socially acceptable, which was demonstrated by the four laws known collectively as the Race and Religion Protection Laws, discussed in 2014 and submitted to the parliament in December of the same year.

## The project

In March 2014, different community-based organizations marched together and placed flowers in their mouths as a way of speaking out against hate speech (through “flower speech”). Among these social and political activists were organizations like the Myanmar ICT Development Organization

(MIDO), Paung Ku, the Triangle Women, 88 Generation, the Yangon School of Political Science, as well as many interfaith groups. Together with others, they founded the Panzagar campaign (Burmese for “flower speech”).<sup>18</sup> The campaign that possessed little organizational structure, aimed at challenging hurtful language and religious stereotypes, with the goal of changing the social norms that made such comments acceptable. Panzagar soon realized, there were two types of people behind the hurtful and incendiary comments: those who did it on purpose, and those who did not know better. They directed their campaign specifically at the latter group. By having people reflect on what they were saying or sharing, Panzagar hoped to deprive those who used hate speech intentionally of their constituency. In order not to turn the second group against Panzagar, the campaign decided that they wanted to address dangerous speech not by attacking people, but by promoting flower speech instead. This excluded, for example, naming and shaming approaches. The Panzagar campaign chose its name because flowers have a very positive connotation in the Burmese language, and their symbolic nature of beauty and kindness can be understood beyond it too. Employing flower speech intended to challenge one’s family members, friends and co-workers when they used hurtful language, by asking them to reconsider what they had said, not by directly telling them that they were in the wrong.

MIDO was charged with the implementation of the campaign by Panzagar. Together with other volunteers, they developed different materials such as the campaign’s logos, stickers, posters, bracelets, short booklets for educational purposes and literary talks, as well as TV, print and online media coverage. All materials were available on the internet for free. USAID supported the campaign by covering some of the printing costs, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) supported the campaigners with travel into rural areas to gain more supporters. Furthermore, Panzagar developed 24 emoticon-style stickers specially designed for the flower speech campaign with Facebook, one of the most widely used social media outlets in Myanmar. The stickers included questions and statements like “Are you sure?” or “Think before you share”, which supporters of the campaign could tag below incendiary speech. While it had been possible before to report hurtful and

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18 See for example: Panzagar’s Facebook page, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/supportflowerspeech>; Dangerous Speech Project under <http://dangerousspeech.org/myanmar>; and Trautwein, C. (2015, March 2). Sticking it to hate speech with ‘flowers’. *Myanmar Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/business/technology/13308-sticking-it-to-hate-speech-with-flowers.html>.



discriminatory language to Facebook and have it taken off the website, the stickers relieved Facebook from having to check thousands of comments in Burmese and potentially taking them off the website. In addition, by leaving these comments online and addressing them with one of the flower speech icons, it created awareness that such language was hurtful and not acceptable to Panzagar's supporters. The Facebook stickers each referred to one of the six categories of hate speech Panzagar had created: threat, virtue, bullying through harassment, calling for violence, guilt, and dehumanization.

## Outcomes

Panzagar quickly spread to influential and public figures, such as religious leaders and politicians, as well as to many other community-based groups and youth activists. The amount of positive feedback and in-kind support came unexpectedly. The Flower Speech campaign is loosely organized, so that nobody knows how many people follow the campaign. MIDO is aware of approximately 70 branches in different parts of the country. Working collectively with many different stakeholders to produce the overall positive messages was crucial to the success of the campaign.

Panzagar was very successful in reaching out to people who had previously engaged in using discriminatory language in rural and remote areas. According to MIDO, this is due to the fact that people from rural areas often struggle more for their livelihoods and thus provide a more fertile ground for the fear-driven anti-Muslim rhetoric. Also information and education is more difficult to access in remote areas, adding to the lack of digital literacy and the difficulty of differentiating between biased and unbiased sources.

Panzagar reported that according to Facebook, the Panzagar stickers are among the most popular stickers in Myanmar. It was the first Facebook partner which tried to affect social change via stickers. Millions of Panzagar stickers are shared in Myanmar each month. They are used equally between men and women, however, the age group that sends the most stickers are people aged between 18–24 years, followed by those aged between 25–34 years.

Until now, Panzagar has not been engaged in evaluating its efforts, but was honored for its achievements with the *Citizen of Burma 2015 Award* and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' *Rice Bowl Award for the Campaign of the Year 2016*. MIDO believes that the campaign has helped to

bring about awareness that not all speech is good speech and increase people's abilities to recognize what hate speech is. Hate speech comments on social media websites such as Facebook have diminished. It is likely that the flower speech campaign has had a supportive influence on reducing the number of thoughtlessly shared discriminatory comments and incitements to intercommunal violence.

## Challenges and factors for success

The lack of both a centralized organizational structure and formal mechanism for joining the campaign were important factors in the success of Panzagar. From using a Panzagar sticker on Facebook, posting a selfie with a flower, wearing a bracelet, hanging up a poster, to eventually organizing a literary talk to discuss tolerance and reflect on hate speech, the threshold for supporting the campaign started out at a very low level. The fact that everyone could participate and that the campaign was initiated and driven by Myanmar grassroots activists gave it legitimacy and credibility, and likely motivated further supporters of the campaign to become active by showing the need for more support.

Another factor for success was the choice of approach in countering hate speech. Especially in Myanmar culture, where it is very important to stay respectful towards religious and societal leaders, as well as one's elders, it was important that the flower speech did not attack people for hurtful or incendiary language – especially when they wanted to convince them to change their behavior.

A challenge for the flower speech campaign were the attacks by extremist nationalist groups accusing Panzagar of being funded by, and biased in favor of Muslims (which is often interpreted to be essentially anti-Buddhist). These accusations were further strengthened by the fact that Panzagar had chosen not to use Pali words (the language holy Buddhist texts are written in) in its campaign, so as not to appear as a pro-Buddhist (and essentially anti-Muslim) campaign, instead focusing on a joint civic identity. Panzagar overcame these challenges by approaching their work not as Buddhists, Christians, Hindus or Muslims, but as citizens of Myanmar engaging themselves for peace in their home country. With time, the flower speech campaign was able to position itself further and further in favor of the public good, rather than as supporters of a specific political position or discourse.

Placing themselves as Myanmar citizens first was another important factor for trust building between the campaign and its local branches, as well as between the local branches and the local government.

However, reaching out to the different local communities did not always go smoothly. Not only were local branches of the campaign interrogated by the security institutions, but local communities suspected Panzagar of being sponsored by the central government with the aim of restricting freedom of expression. This suspicion was further strengthened when the Minister of Information posted the Panzagar logo on his personal Facebook account. While supporters could have argued publically that they were not supported by the government, they instead focused on promoting the campaign, which eventually outgrew the sensation around the Minister's Facebook page.

# 6 Mercy Corps: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace

## Specific conflict analysis

Outbreaks of intercommunal violence spread from Meikhtila to Mandalay, the capital of the Mandalay Division, in early 2014. Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State had not experienced religious clashes since those provoked in 1988,<sup>19</sup> but tensions were heightened in 2014 after the Mandalay outbreaks nonetheless. In 2014 and 2015, Mercy Corps (MC), a global aid agency engaged in transitional environments focusing on community-based approaches,<sup>20</sup> undertook analysis on how the international community could assist peacebuilding efforts in the context of intercommunal violence.<sup>21</sup> One of their findings was that the religious dimensions of these conflicts were often overshadowing opportunities to work on the non-religious dimensions. In Mandalay and Taunggyi, MC observed a local law and order organization, with affiliations to the police and Ma Ba Tha, becoming active when for instance a Buddhist and a Muslim neighbor were in disagreement over the border between their parcels of land. Usually such day-to-day conflicts would be referred to the village head, village administrator, or ward administrator for resolution. However, conflicts including parties with different religious identities were instead referred to Ma Ba Tha-affiliated monasteries, due to their religiously perceived nature. These referrals did not take place in conflicts between two Buddhist parties. This practice of labeling day-to-day conflicts in which conflict parties happened to belong to different religious communities as ‘religious’, raised the complexity of these conflicts as it activated the religious identities of the conflict parties, which may have not played a role otherwise. This transformed conflicts from being

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19 Moe Thee Zun (1999). Invisible Prisoners of Violence. *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 7, No. 8. Retrieved from: [http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=1672&page=1](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=1672&page=1).

20 See: <https://www.mercycorps.org/about-us/our-work>.

21 Gray, S., and Roos, J. (2014). *Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar. Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance*. Yangon: Adapt Research and Consulting and Mercy Corps. Retrieved from [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Intercommunal%20Violence%20in%20Myanmar\\_Mercy-Corps\\_Adapt\\_May%202014.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Intercommunal%20Violence%20in%20Myanmar_Mercy-Corps_Adapt_May%202014.pdf). Due to the differing conflict dynamics at play in Rakhine State and its extremely polarized political environment at the time, MC explicitly omitted this state from its study.

arguments over property boundaries between neighbors, to being intercommunal conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities.

## The project

In line with its assessment, MC collaborated with local actors and decided to address intercommunal violence without framing their work in religious terms: building conflict management capacities to better resolve conflicts of intercommunal nature and those perceived to be, and strengthening social cohesion within and across communities to prevent violence at an early stage. The two cities of Mandalay and Taunggyi were chosen for the initiative because they are traditionally inhabited by a Buddhist majority with the presence of minority communities, and have seen a powerful local Ma Ba Tha influence.

The first goal of MC's two-pillar program aims at training local networks of leaders from different religious faiths and ethnicities, as well as civil society and government leaders at township and village level in interest-based negotiation (IBN) and mediation. By improving the conflict resolution skills of influential and legitimate leaders, who are, or could be involved in resolving conflicts which would worsen intercommunal relations, means that the potential for escalation and violence is reduced.

Between 2015 and 2016, MC ran two rounds of two-day training programs with roughly 20 participants in each city. In Taunggyi, participants included the ward administrators from at-risk areas, religious leaders and civil society activists. In Mandalay, Mercy Corps trained members of a civil society-led network and of the Mandalay Peacekeeping Committee, which is formed by the Government to prevent and resolve intercommunal disputes. The negotiation and mediation training introduced the leaders in each city to basic conflict resolution concepts, as well as to the tools of interest-based negotiation and mediation. Subsequent quarterly group exchanges with the leaders were organized to monitor the number of disputes that were brought to them, to allow space for the leaders to reflect on and share their experiences of integrating the tools of negotiation and mediation into their daily practice of resolving conflicts.

The goal of the second pillar was to strengthen social cohesion by assisting local civil society organizations (CSOs) in their efforts to build resilience for peace. The reasoning behind this activity was that if people main-

tained friendships across religious communities, they would be more welcoming of diversity and hence more likely to reduce existing intercommunal tensions and prevent new ones from occurring. However, engaging on the topic of promoting tolerance and diversity was extremely sensitive and could be done only through insiders, so MC chose to team up with local actors who became the single point of contact for the CSOs. Four CSOs from Mandalay and three from Taunggyi received training and ongoing support on analyzing their chosen conflicts and designing an intervention related to relationship building in religiously diverse communities with heightened intercommunal tensions. Subsequently, MC funded and supported the implementation of the resulting proposals, which brought to life initiatives involving training and awareness raising relating to diversity and tolerance, interfaith tours, a public community dialogue and a peace festival. To create synergies between the two program pillars, MC organized a platform where the CSOs presented their work to the trained leaders in each city to raise their awareness and gain their support.

## Outcomes

According to an external evaluation commissioned by MC,<sup>22</sup> the leaders who had been trained in negotiation and mediation skills reported being more open, taking more time to share opinions and having increased effectiveness when addressing intercommunal conflict. Furthermore, a community between the different leaders had been built in each city through the training and biweekly exchanges among the leaders. Most of the ward administrators, for example, had had very few relationships with their peers and other leaders beforehand. The training enabled them to use each other as a resource when tensions between the communities rose. However, while communication and collaboration between the leaders initially increased, there was a downward trend in the overall number of instances of intercommunal conflict, which also decreased the interactions between leaders to jointly resolve such conflicts.

When interviewed for the external evaluation, a majority of the participating leaders explained that there had been a decrease in religious and

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22 The external evaluation entitled “End-line Evaluation of Local Resilience for Peace (LRP) in Taunggyi and Mandalay (Myanmar)” was submitted to Mercy Corps by ACAS Consulting in May 2016. The document is not public.

intercommunal tensions in Mandalay and Taunggyi, due to less provocation and hate speech online, a rise in initiatives promoting tolerance and inter-faith harmony, improved awareness to differentiate between biased and unbiased information, and a positive post-election atmosphere which realigned attention on the political transition and spread hope for the future. The impression of coming across fewer conflicts of a religious nature by the leaders may also be due to the training they had received from Mercy Corps, which enabled them to reframe conflicts between people from different religious communities as interpersonal and not necessarily religious.

For most of the CSOs, the project management training, resources and ongoing technical support had been the first opportunity to organize an initiative on a larger scale. MC observed that CSOs had become more tolerant towards people from different communities after the diversity training they had participated in. Several members of the CSOs and the communities reported newly formed friendships with people from different religious or ethnic communities since the project had started. The CSOs reported that even though there was still a lack of education about other religions, especially Islam, the communities they had worked with felt more knowledgeable and less afraid of people belonging to other religious communities. The reflection workshop that was organized in both cities three months into the project to exchange on the first developments from the social cohesion pillar between the CSOs and the leaders created linkages between these groups. In particular, the relationships between government representatives and CSOs were strengthened, which were important for the continuous approval of the CSOs' initiatives by the local authorities.

## Challenges and factors for success

One of the key challenges relating to religion in MC's initiative was that both international assistance in general and those who engaged in 'inclusive' approaches to peacebuilding carried a high risk of being perceived as biased in favor of the Muslim minority. Such perceptions based on the multi-religious and multi-ethnic nature of the project existed to some degree in the communities in Mandalay and Taunggyi, and they raised suspicions in the communities that the organizers were 'pro-Muslim'. It is likely that these perceptions have undermined trust between the project's partners and the local communities and slowed the project down. Hence engagement on the

basis of a very light footprint with both the ‘vulnerable majority’ and the ‘influential minority’ to prevent violence was necessary for MC.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, which is often seen as an ‘internal matter’ in Myanmar, efforts by international organizations or individuals to influence the dominant xenophobic discourse risk being ineffective or even counterproductive. This was also one of the reasons why MC worked together with and through local partners on the ground. However, because MC never engaged with participants in an institutional capacity and used logos only on a very low profile basis, MC’s identity and involvement became a bit unclear to participants.

The sensitive nature of the topic made it difficult to find relevant leaders and CSOs who wanted to participate. Many CSOs were afraid to be associated with the prevention of intercommunal violence. Even though MC aimed at including Muslim and women’s CSOs in the second program pillar, CSOs willing to participate could not be found, due to the persisting anti-Muslim discourse and the widely male-dominated field of religious and community leaders. Working with suitable CSOs thus started later than expected, partly also because religious and administrative leaders would not give their approval for the CSOs’ campaigns.



# 7 Institute for Global Engagement: Training on Religion and the Rule of Law

## Specific conflict analysis

The strategy of “divide and rule” employed by the military junta over decades, left deep trenches between the different religious and ethnic communities that impacted upon peaceful cohabitation during the transition. With the transition and the incidents of intercommunal violence that accompanied it, questions about reformed state regulation of intercommunal relations emerged. How would reformed policies and laws govern peaceful cohabitation in Myanmar’s multi-religious and multi-ethnic social fabric? Would the state’s approach to religious communities, the status of Buddhism,<sup>23</sup> or of the minority religions change? What rights would religious communities have for enacting their faith and how would the law protect these rights? Naturally, religious leaders needed to offer guidance and reflection to their constituencies on these and other questions in the changing legal environment. However, there were very few answers, as the spheres of religion and the rule of law had rarely been connected, nor received any attention in religious or state education in Myanmar’s modern times. Religious leaders thus lacked the knowledge of how a reformed legal framework could protect the rights of their communities to practice their faith and how to translate changes in the legal framework to their teachings and guidance of harmonious coexistence. Furthermore, most leaders were without sources of necessary information and resources to let policy and law makers know what they needed, as they lacked the connections to them.

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<sup>23</sup> Myanmar does not possess an official state religion, but Buddhism is regarded as the main and majority religion in Myanmar.

## The project

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), a Christian US-based NGO,<sup>24</sup> looked at the 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 was to focus on the Buddhist majority community, while including minority voices. IGE wanted to refrain from advocacy, and instead engage the Buddhist majority for the protection of minorities through relational diplomacy.<sup>25</sup>

After two years of trust and relationship building, IGE was able to win the support of the Asia Light Foundation<sup>26</sup> as well as those within the Mandalay Interfaith Mercy Group<sup>27</sup>, a group of religious and community leaders who have prevented intercommunal violence in the past, and a former president of the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC)<sup>28</sup>. Under the guidance of its partners, IGE, together with Brigham Young University's (BYU) International Center for Law and Religion Studies,<sup>29</sup> developed a ten day training program on 'Religion and the Rule of Law' (RRoL).<sup>30</sup> Within

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24 See IGE's homepage: <https://globalengage.org>.

25 Relational diplomacy is rooted in the Christian belief that all bear the image of God and possess inherent worth and dignity. Thus, there is a prime value placed upon personal relationships, integrity (doing what one says, and saying the same thing to all interlocutors), and a long-term approach that is not afraid to give away credit and help make the other look good (from IGE, May 2017).

26 The Asia Light Foundation (also called Asia Alinn Yaung Foundation) is located near Pyin Oo Lwin city, Mandalay Region. The foundation is founded by Venerable Ashin Seindhita, chief monk of the Asia Light Monastery. The foundation is well known for their active leadership in promoting peace, environmental protection programs, and social services for disadvantaged populations in the small villages nearby, such as free education services for orphans and pre-schooling children, as well as free healthcare for economically disadvantaged people in the villages nearby.

27 The Mandalay Interfaith Mercy Group (Bartar-Paungstone Karunashinmyar A Phwae – there are different spelling options for how to write Burmese in Latin letters) was established in 2010 with the goal of training youth from different religious backgrounds in Mandalay to collaboratively work in peacebuilding and social development in the region.

28 The MCC is a Christian ecumenical organization, and a member of the World Council of Churches, however its former president was engaged in a personal capacity in IGE's training program in Mandalay.

29 See the homepage of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies: <https://www.iclrs.org>. BYU is of Mormon background and possesses significant experience as a once persecuted religious minority in the U.S.

30 The training included topics such as "Historical Perspectives on Religion and the Rule of Law in Myanmar", "Religious and Ethnic Minorities: the Singapore Model of Handling Diversity and Conflict over Religion and Ethnic Minorities", and "Violence in the Name of Religion – Responding to Terrorism and Extreme Speech".

the safe space of the RRoL training, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Baha'i leaders, senior scholars and lay community peacebuilders as well as senior representatives of the National League for Democracy's (NLD) Mandalay office were able to improve their relationships; establish channels of open communication that would facilitate collaboration across religious and institutional divides in the future; and learn how to integrate minority perspectives in peacebuilding. IGE and its partners reached out to representatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). Due to changes in the political context after the NLD's election victory, no representative was able to join due to full schedules.<sup>31</sup> However the Chief Minister of the Mandalay region held the training program's closing ceremony.

Each of the partners nominated participants from its own constituency, including a wide variety of voices across the ideological spectrum. Because the Muslim and Hindu communities are not centrally organized in Myanmar, the Mandalay Interfaith Mercy Group and the Asia Light Foundation volunteered to reach out to the main branches within these communities. The goal was to find people who could act as multipliers of the knowledge and new relationships, and who would become active in trying to ease intercommunal tensions. The training session, held in February 2017 at a Mandalay hotel, brought together roughly 40 participants<sup>32</sup> and some prominent observers including Buddhist-nationalist voices and members of parliament. A first edition of the training was held in November 2015 in Yangon with 30 participants<sup>33</sup> and roughly 30 observers.<sup>34</sup>

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31 IGE held a similar training program on "Religion and the Rule of Law" in Yangon in 2015, where five high-level representatives of the MoRA joined for the whole training program.

32 Participants in the Mandalay program included a diverse group of religious and civil society leaders, lawyers, and scholars from the Mandalay region. Represented among the faith communities were Buddhist monks from various monasteries in Mandalay, Pyin Oo Lwin, and Meikhtila; Protestant leaders from Methodist, Anglican, and Baptist denominations; and representatives from the Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, and Baha'i communities. Other participants included lawyers and legal experts from Mandalay, lecturers in the International Relations and Law Departments of Mandalay University and Yadanapon University, and leaders from various civil society organizations in the Mandalay region. In total, 39 participants completed the training.

33 The 30 participants were made up of ten Buddhist monks from Sagaing, Mandalay and Yangon; five (Buddhist) government officials from the MoRA; two female professors from Theravada Buddhist Missionary University; four representatives from the MCC; five Catholics from the CBCM; one Hindu and two Muslim participants.

34 See: <https://globalengage.org/news-media/press-release/ige-expands-its-religion-and-rule-of-law-training-program-in-myanmar>.

## Outcomes

Whether or not IGE's RRoL program may have supported the advancement of religious freedom in Myanmar remains to be seen. However, IGE created a safe space for its participants to share their opinions and ask critical questions in the plenary, which is not common in Myanmar. A variety of Buddhist voices ranging from liberal to Buddhist-nationalist were constructively engaged in the training alongside Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Baha'i religious leaders, representatives of the MoRA, community peacebuilders and scholars. The depth of the discussions and the many questions asked during the training showed that participants felt safe and trusted the space.

The training managed to establish a network of peacebuilders, which was expanding gradually with encouragement from local authorities. The newly gained personal relationships across institutional and community boundaries started out by participants having tea together outside of the joint program during the training, and translated into brainstorming ideas and participating in each other's peacebuilding activities. In April 2017, most of the religious and community leaders then participated in Cardinal Bo's conference on "The Role of Religions in Building a Nation of Peace and Development" with the goal of better understanding religion's role in the country's peace process.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, some of the participants from the training were appointed to lead a religious peacebuilding event for the Mandalay region in preparation for the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference.

Learning about citizens' rights and the laws that protect them, was a first to many participants. In the written evaluations of the training, participants voiced that learning about religious laws in other countries was eye-opening and that after the training, they felt more equipped to jointly create a harmonious society in which religious communities know *that* and *how* they are protected by the law. Participants from minority communities reported having felt 'heard' at the training. In the aftermath of the training sessions, IGE observed participants becoming more actively involved in interfaith peacebuilding and handling cases of intercommunal conflict in a more sensitive manner than in the past.

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35 See John Zaw (2017, April 26). Cardinal Bo: Religious leaders have a role in dialogue, fostering peace. UCA News. Retrieved from <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cardinal-bo-religious-leaders-have-role-in-dialogue-fostering-peace/79057>, and Institute for Global Engagement (2017, May 11). IGE helps facilitate religious peacebuilding conference in Myanmar. Retrieved from <https://globalengage.org/news-media/press-release/ige-helps-facilitate-religious-peacebuilding-conference-in-myanmar>.

## Challenges and factors for success

IGE encountered three main challenges related to religion. The first was to engage and work with local religious leaders. It took two years to develop working relations, which continued to be fragile at various moments due to the stakeholders' different opinions and perspectives on the world. Reaching out to local actors required hiring a Myanmar national staff who could speak Burmese and who had a legitimate and relatable interest in supporting Myanmar's peaceful future. For building relationships and interacting with the religious leaders, it was more important that IGE's Myanmar national employee, who was a young Kachin Christian woman, should possess a very high degree of interpersonal skills and relationship capital, rather than having the identifiers of being Burmese, Buddhist and male. It was certainly difficult at times for a younger woman liaising with the often senior and all-male religious leaders. Communicating with the religious leaders also proved to be difficult because they were not all receptive to modern means of communication, either because they were not used to it, or because they regarded being reached out to without a face-to-face exchange as impolite. It was challenging to get these influential religious leaders to attend a ten-day training, due to their spiritual leadership positions and full calendars. IGE thus aimed at getting approval at the top leadership level, but realized they needed to get the direct representatives of the leaders to the training because some leaders continuously cancelled their participation at the last minute for other urgent matters, which delayed the training sessions.

The second challenge was to create a safe space for exchange which would not be hijacked by extremist voices. The way in which IGE built honest, transparent and eye-to-eye relationships with its organizing committee members (which they used as a sounding board), made their partners really buy into the RRoL training idea. Experiencing the safe space IGE created between itself and its partners was crucial to gain the partners' support regarding the open nature of the training space later on. Also, IGE made sure that its local partners belonging to the religious minority communities were absolute advocates for peaceful cohabitation between religious communities in Myanmar, but possessed the skills to transmit this message in a non-threatening way to their Buddhist counterparts. In the end, it was the partners who set the tone at the beginning of the training and encouraged participants to speak openly by doing so themselves. Holding the training behind closed

doors, and choosing participants of similar ranks so they could relate to each other, was also helpful.

The third challenge was explaining to donors why working with local stakeholders with different mindsets was key to the project. It was difficult for IGE's donors to understand why it was important to IGE to work with people who had very different worldviews and sounded biased against religious minorities. IGE tried to explain that they did not seek partnerships only to those who were 'on the same side', or who 'agreed to the same ideas', but instead wanted to reach out to important and influential figures and help them engage with minority actors to recognize their struggles and to engage for a more peaceful society in the future.

## 8 Learning from Practice

In the first section, 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 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 not to 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 and 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 the international level.** 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 world (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 engage religious actors when they are excluded?

**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 partners who may hold different worldviews than one self (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 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<sup>36</sup>. 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.

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36 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>.

**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 to their training sessions, but instead of applying quotas, they tried to include minority voices in non-threatening 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 which 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 which have a Christian identity (whether they are a faith-based Christian organization or merely have a culturally Christian background), are met with pre-conceptions 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 as such. IGE approached this difficulty by treading very lightly and working together with a strong, local Buddhist partner. Mercy Corps collaborated with local Buddhist partners. 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’.** Peace-builders of differing religious identities 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 less 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 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. 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 which 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 laid 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 conclusions 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.<sup>37</sup>

First, there are a **diversity of approaches** which 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 which 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.

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37 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](http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/2017/05/effective-inter-religious-action-in-peacebuilding-program-meets-in-vienna).

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