



# 5 Religion and Conflict: strengths and weaknesses of faith-based peacebuilding

*A summary of the findings of five studies conducted for the Dutch Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Policy*

## 1 Introduction

Depending on the context, religion can be either a catalyst of violence towards other groups or a reconciling factor, bringing people together with a message of forgiveness and peace. The main question here is how religious organisations – ‘faith-based actors’ – can help prevent conflict and build peace.

As part of its contribution to the Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Policy, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned four studies, which were conducted by researchers working for the Netherlands Institute of International Relations at Clingendael:

- 1) *Faith-Based Peacebuilding: Mapping and Analysis of Christian, Muslim and Multi-Faith Actors*, by Tsjeard Bouta, S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, November 2005 (‘Mapping study’);
- 2) *Stuck in Change – Faith-Based Peacebuilding in Sudan’s Transition*, by Ulrich Mans and Osman Mohammed Osman Ali, September 2006 (‘Sudan study’);
- 3) *Faith-Based Actors in Ituri, Democratic Republic of Congo: a Case Study of Religious Actors in a Conflict Setting*, by Pyt Douma, December 2006 (‘Ituri study’);
- 4) *Inter-Faith Peacebuilding: a Map of Religious Leaders in the Middle East*, Pamela Scholey and Teije Hidde Donker, yet to be published (‘Middle East study’).

In addition, a fifth study was conducted by IKV Pax Christi (an NGO member of the Knowledge Forum) and BBO (the NGO secretariat of the Knowledge Forum). The study, *Religion during the Conflict in the Balkans: the Role of Religious Leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (the ‘Balkan study’), was conducted by Albert van Hal (BBO) and Dion van den Berg (IKV Pax Christi), 2007.

The Mapping study presents an overview of the peacebuilding activities of several faith-based actors. The Sudan and Ituri studies examine the role of faith-based actors in post-conflict areas. The Middle East study (yet to be published) concentrates on the potential role of local religious leaders in supporting the Middle East peace process. And the Balkan study presents a historical overview of the role of religious leaders in the Balkan conflicts.

This summary outlines the findings of these studies, their accounts of the role of faith-based actors in conflicts, their conclusions and their policy recommendations.



## 2 The strengths of faith-based peacebuilding actors

What are faith-based peacebuilding actors? The Sudan study divides faith-based peacebuilding actors into five groups: active promoters, constrained contributors, silent supporters, potential spoilers and active spoilers.

On the positive side, active promoters are deeply involved in the peacebuilding process; constrained contributors are committed to peacebuilding but struggle to translate their positive attitude into concrete activities (for reasons such as lacking the necessary means); and silent supporters are committed to peace but remain inactive.

On the negative side, potential spoilers may not support the peacebuilding process and have developed a reticent attitude; and active spoilers do not support the peacebuilding process and actively undermine it.

The following subsection deals mainly with the first three positive, constructive, faith-based actors. According to the studies, faith-based actors can provide both social and moral/spiritual assets, making them potential contributors to conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.

### Social assets

For a number of reasons, the studies largely regard faith-based actors as social assets.

One reason is that most faith-based actors have a long history of involvement in the societies they serve. This is true not only of local actors but also of international actors, who tend to operate in countries for a long time. These actors are often very familiar with the context and history of conflicts, and they are able to engage in long-term peacebuilding before, during and after conflicts.

Moreover, faith-based actors have wide networks in the regions they serve and are able to use them to mobilise large numbers of people. This is emphasised in the Middle East study, which points to the credibility of faith-based actors among large groups of people.

The studies show that faith-based actors do not confine their attention to religious conflicts. Nor are they concerned only with coreligionists. This means that they can also help build peace in secular conflicts. In any case, boundaries are unnecessary between faith-based and secular peacebuilding. They can be interrelated and complementary.

According to the Sudan study, faith-based peacebuilding is not confined to 'religious moderates'. In certain circumstances, 'religious conservatives' can also encourage change and play a role in peacebuilding. The study says that individual leaders of faith-based organisations are most likely to encourage change.

As well as single-faith actors, multi-faith actors can also help build peace, depending on the local situation. The Sudan study concludes that, in Sudan for instance, multi-faith actors are the more suitable for organising inter-faith dialogue.

Faith-based actors are often involved in advocacy. They use their influence on education positively by incorporating peace modules into school curricula. On a bigger scale, too,

faith-based actors have devised activities to promote reconciliation, inter-faith dialogue, disarmament, demilitarisation, and reintegration.

#### Moral and spiritual assets

First, faith connects people in search of a situation in which superior values – values like peace and human rights – are respected.

Second, faith-based actors have a moral and spiritual authority that gives them the leverage to ease tensions in religious conflicts and to serve as platforms for mutual understanding in non-religious conflicts. The Middle East study says that religious leaders, potentially and ideally, have the leeway to broker relations and build peace that political leaders often lack.

Third, the Mapping study emphasises peacebuilding activities organised by faith-based actors. These activities include encouraging coreligionists and others to change their behaviour, become less violent, and rehumanise the ‘other’. Faith-based actors can sometimes challenge traditional perceptions and introduce new ways of thinking. This enables them to provide emotional, psychological, and spiritual support to communities affected by war. The Balkan study sees a similar role for religious leaders, since they can assist in the return of displaced persons and refugees by creating a common understanding of the needs of returnees, irrespective of religion or ethnicity.

Fourth, the studies show that faith-based actors spread ideas about peace, peacebuilding, justice and development in their communities and mobilise their coreligionists and others for peacebuilding. They mediate between conflicting parties, and they connect coreligionists and others worldwide. The Middle East study emphasises that faith-based actors can give grassroots legitimacy to peace agreements by politicians by sanctioning such agreements and creating support for them. The most powerful endorsement for any agreement is popular support on both political sides. Endorsement by faith-based actors can reinforce that support powerfully.

### 3 Caveats

But faith-based actors also have weaknesses that can prevent them from cooperating effectively in peacebuilding. These weaknesses sometimes relate to problems endemic to faith-based actors and sometimes to problems caused by their political connections.

#### Problems endemic to faith-based actors

First, faith-based actors may use their commitment to peace in order to proselytise, especially if they do not distinguish between their missionary work and peacebuilding. Even if they do not explicitly proselytise, others might perceive them as doing so. According to the Ituri study, the peacebuilding efforts of constrained contributors and active promoters are undermined when they are perceived as using the extra influence gained via these efforts as a vehicle for proselytisation. According to the Sudan study, Muslims and Christians there still tend to concentrate on their own constituencies before considering or engaging with other faith-based groups.

Second, the programmes of faith-based actors often lack a focus on results. Since they tend to concentrate on long-term peacebuilding efforts – in themselves beneficial – they may fail to produce shorter-term peacebuilding deliverables.

Third, as the Balkan study observes, faith-based actors are often less professional than other peacebuilding actors. They are not, after all, professional peacebuilders. In other words, their efforts cannot serve as a substitute for political and diplomatic peacebuilding efforts. And the Mapping study shows that international Muslim peacebuilding actors are less developed than international Christian and multi-faith actors. This makes Muslim peacebuilding actors less visible in international relations.

#### Problems caused by the political connections of faith-based actors

Faith-based actors may have strong ties to political movements or governments, as in Sudan. The Sudan study maintains that religion there is part of the political power game and that faith-based actors, like the rest of civil society, have to struggle within a highly restrictive environment imposed by government control.

When this is the case, as the Middle East study shows, faith-based actors run the risk of losing legitimacy among adherents of other political movements. When conflicts arise, religious communities tend to follow political initiatives, and not vice versa. Every issue perceived as religious is somehow connected with politics. Many observers argue that intra-faith dialogue must not be allowed to become a substitute for justice achieved via political means. If faith-based actors become too involved in dialogue on political issues, it may undermine respect and support for them among their followers.

Similarly, certain religions may be so closely connected with certain ethnic groups that they lose their credibility among members of other ethnic groups. The Balkan study calls this a major risk. In Bosnia, ethnic and religious communities overlapped widely. In the Bosnian wars, ethno-religious commonality was the basis for alliances between nationalist and religious leaders. Nationalist political movements used religious leaders and their communities, which then radicalised, applauded the violence and escalation, and supported nationalism.

As to the international church-related organisations, their desire for dialogue can prevent them from adopting clear-cut positions on war atrocities. Dialogue can be misused by politicians and religious leaders. According to the Ituri study, most faith-based actors there were clearly less successful in their peacebuilding efforts during the conflict than afterwards, mainly because they themselves were heavily divided on tribal lines.

## 4 Conclusions and recommendations

Why and how should faith-based peacebuilding be supported?

### *Active cooperation*

Most of the studies regard faith-based actors as potential partners in peacebuilding. They recommend that donors should address the potential of faith-based peacebuilding when devising policies for promoting peace, security, and stability. Donors should also cooperate

more closely with faith-based actors in peacebuilding and examine the role of faith-based actors in stability assessment frameworks (an analytical tool used by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for drawing up stability strategies).

The Sudan study concludes that the international community has access to various entry points for supporting faith-based peacebuilding. International actors could actively promote a more enabling, less restrictive, political environment, so that faith-based actors will enjoy greater freedom to develop their activities.

#### *Supporting reconciliation and overcoming divisions*

The Ituri study maintains that the connections between religion and politics can also give the international community a major opportunity. It advises the international community to support the activities of faith-based actors to reconcile their followers, overcoming the tribal divisions among them. Once faith-based actors have overcome such internal difficulties, they will be better able to help reduce ethnic tensions in society at large. This process will help sustain peace from within.

The Balkan study calls on faith-based actors to become more self-critical. All the actors involved in a conflict should evaluate their own actions and interventions and announce their findings publicly. The search for truth is also a task for religious leaders and their communities. The Middle East study points out that, where religion and politics are almost indistinguishable, human rights should be a topic for dialogue within and between religious communities.

#### *Recognising less visible, less measurable results*

The findings of the Mapping study were discussed at a conference held in The Hague in November 2005. Although the study's overall analysis was not contested, delegates pointed out that governments sometimes concentrate too narrowly on short-term results. The demand for quantifiable results sometimes goes too far, especially when imposed as a condition for aid money. Governments should appreciate the benefits of the less visible, less measurable, progress achieved by improving relations between different groups. This, too, is essential for sustainable results.

While governments are best placed for preparing and concluding official peace agreements, faith-based actors can play a very useful role in the parallel process of reconciliation and long-term stabilisation. This division of tasks reduces the impact of the weaknesses of faith-based actors and fully recognises their strengths.

#### *Demanding international attention*

Governments should draw international attention (in the EU, OECD-DAC, OSCE, and UN) to the contributions of faith-based actors. They should also sensitise and train their foreign missions to include faith-based peacebuilding in their annual and multi-annual plans.

The Balkan study points out that IGOs and diplomats often know little about the position and role of religion in communities. Diplomats, like politicians, often underestimate the influence of religious leaders and are unaware of the deeply rooted dynamics that motivate religious communities.

IGOs and foreign missions need to gather information on how religion affects communities: not only the facts and figures, but also the ‘language’ of religion. Even though religious leaders adopt political positions, they are not politicians, and they need to be addressed as such. The Balkan study therefore recommends special attention for religious communities in the assessment frameworks and context analyses that IGOs and foreign missions regularly draw up. IGOs and foreign missions should also develop working relationships with religious leaders and others who could play a key role in dialogue within and between religious communities.

### *Rebuilding places of worship*

The Balkan study adds that the reconstruction and preservation of religious heritage merits attention following conflicts in which religious sites and places of worship have been destroyed.

Who needs to be involved?

### *Hardliners*

The Mapping study says that both ‘religious moderates’ and ‘religious conservatives’ need to be involved. The Middle East study agrees, emphasising that religious and political ‘hardliners’ should be included in peace talks. This can add to the legitimacy of negotiations and avoid spoiling the peace process. Experienced Middle East watchers say that negotiations in the region are often flawed because they involve a relatively closed group of moderates who reinforce each other in their thinking and approach. If hardliners are included, new ideas will be generated and popular support will grow.

### *Multi-faith actors*

The Sudan study recommends emphatically that external donors should encourage multi-faith as well as mono-faith actors in attempting to promote dialogue.

The Balkan study similarly recommends that support for inter-faith dialogue should be based on an approach whereby the external partner has an equal relationship with all the religious communities involved. If the external partner has a special relationship with one of the communities, it will have less leeway for facilitating dialogue.

The Ituri study says that the international community needs to understand the dynamic between different religions in a region. It also says that all actors, religious or not, should be judged on their ability to perform activities transparently and inclusively. For faith-based actors, this means that they need to dissociate peacebuilding from proselytisation.

### *Muslim peacebuilders*

The Mapping study says that special attention is needed to develop tailor-made approaches for identifying Muslim peacebuilding actors, since they tend to be less visible and sometimes take the form of relief or humanitarian agencies. Tailor-made approaches could be developed for strengthening Muslim actors.

### *International church-related bodies*

Finally, the Balkan study emphasises the importance of international church-related bodies, which have the potential for facilitating dialogue within and between religions. When

conflicts arise, a stronger international network of religious bodies could help prevent radicalisation while supporting members of religious communities who favour peace. In the Balkans, such a network could have provided the religious communities with an alternative to alliances with nationalists and isolation – in the form of international partnership.