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Tapping the Potential of Religious Actors in Formal Peace Processes

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Background: Religious Actors in Formal Peace Processes

Despite the clear impact – both real and potential – that religious actors and communities have on formal peace processes, there has been relatively little research or analysis to show when, whether, how, and to what extent religious actors could be engaged as part of these processes. This briefing note shares some of the findings from a research and consultation process to better understand the roles religious actors can play in all phases of peace and political transition processes. Based on a categorisation of types of roles religious actors have taken up across different phases of peace processes (pre-negotiations, negotiations, and implementation), the research examines the extent to which, how, and with what kinds of impact religious actors and communities have been engaged in formal peace processes. It also examines the key factors that affect religious actors' influence and impact on these processes. The research draws on 43 country case studies in Inclusive Peace's database and 45 country case studies in relevant academic and policy literature, both covering a time span of the last 30 years, and a series of regional consultations with religious actors involved in peacemaking and peacebuilding and other peace practitioners.

The Untapped Potential of Religious Actors in Peace Processes

Findings from the research and consultation series suggest that mediators, facilitators, and funders seem to largely engage religious actors and communities in peace processes in an ad-hoc or cursory manner that does not leverage their full potential. Moreso, when religious actors engage in formal peace processes, they could often do this more strategically.

Strategic work for peace by religious actors and pro-active engagement of and with religious actors in formal peace processes thus constitutes a large untapped potential, given the legitimacy, organisational capacity, and influence of religious actors over powerful elites and people at all levels of society, both in a national context and their ability to leverage international regional and global networks.

Summary of the Overall Findings

Overall, the research found that religious actors are highly influential in peacemaking and can be a major asset for formal (track one) processes, provided that they mobilise for peace. Religious actors are especially likely to engage in peace processes when their own communities are involved in the conflict. But religious actors from outside the country conflict context can also be involved, often as mediators Religious mediation has been most common when religion is not a defining factor in differentiating the identities of the conflict parties.

A significant majority of the cases where religious actors were involved in track one and track one-and-a-half processes were not conflicts directly over religious issues or differences but were conflicts where the parties were divided along ethno-religious lines. In these contexts, religious actors have been highly trusted and respected by the parties involved, and religious values and ideas have proved important in political mobilisation toward peace.

Religious actors can be involved in all phases of a peace or political transition process, performing many different peacebuilding functions: protection, monitoring, advocacy, socialisation, social cohesion, (inter)mediation/facilitation, and service delivery. The research identified by far the most common function being (inter) mediation/facilitation, followed by advocacy. In several country contexts certain religious actors performed all peacebuilding functions. Religious actors can also be involved across all of the modalities through which additional actors can be included in negotiation processes and the implementation of agreements: as part of negotiation teams, as observers to talks, in consultations, in commissions, in high-level problem-solving workshops, in public decision-making processes (elections and referendums), and through mass action. However, a set of factors make or break religious actors' influence on peace processes.

The Factors that Enable or Constrain Religious Actors' Engagement and Influence in Formal Peace Processes

- Unity – internal unity within groups of religious actors or religious communities has a pronounced effect on their ability to influence peace processes. Unity is essential not only to political influence, but also for physical security, preventing one group or actor from being singled out and targeted through intimidation or violence.

- Coalition building – the ability of religious actors to build coalitions among religious actors of different faiths. In certain cases, religious actors' ability to build coalitions among other groupings, particularly the primary negotiating parties, strongly contributes to their capacity to influence peace and political transition processes. Coalitions can be built within inclusion modalities as well as between groups included in different modalities.

- Early/long-standing engagement – early involvement of religious actors in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts establishes a precedent for and bolsters the legitimacy of their (continued) involvement in a formal peace process. The results clearly show that the involvement of religious actors in the pre-negotiation phase serves as a catalyst for involvement in a subsequent formal process. Long-standing engagement in a peace or political transition process or preceding peacemaking or peacebuilding efforts can confer legitimacy on religious actors, which in turn can serve as a rationale for their inclusion.

- Legitimacy – participating groups and individuals are better able to influence a negotiation or implementation process when they are perceived as more legitimate, especially by the conflict parties. Religious actors are often respected by opposition actors and nonstate armed groups. Religious actors can tap into values, principles, norms, and rituals rooted in religious traditions to encourage parties to embrace a new reality, change their behaviour, and

form new relationships. Religious actors also have spiritual and moral leverage that is unavailable to secular mediators, based on their moral and spiritual authority.

- Influence as powerful societal organisations – the social influence wielded by religious actors is one of the key sources of their legitimacy and also significantly contributes to their ability to impact upon peace processes. Religious actors can often reach, educate, inspire, and mobilise the public. As the most prevalent form of civil society in many contexts, they can draw on specific social-psychological emotions and perceptions to mobilise religious convictions, qualities, and behaviours in support of peacebuilding goals.

- Resources and organisational capacity – religious actors, particularly large powerful social organisations such as churches, often have important material, infrastructural, and political resources that facilitate both their inclusion and their influence in formal peace processes, particularly because these organisations can rely on their own resources instead of being dependent on others. Time is also a key resource and one that religious actors possess to a much greater degree than other peacemaking actors, as religious actors are, for example, less beholden to short-term electoral cycles.

- Process design features – selection criteria and procedures establish both which actors are eligible to participate, and the way these actors will take part in which aspects of a negotiation or implementation process. Besides official quotas and power-sharing formulas specified in agreements, a range of unofficial sociodemographic criteria, including religion, ethnicity, class, gender, and kinship, come into play as well as political factors, such as political orientation and patronage networks. Religious actors also frequently engage in self-selection, especially in terms of activities related to formal and informal mediation and facilitation, back-channel diplomacy, and advocacy efforts.

- Socio-political context – the socio-political context in which religious actors operate, the size of the constituency and how politically aligned with or independent from the state or the general population they are perceived to be all affect their legitimacy and in turn their influence as peacemakers. The relationship between religion and the state is often complex, and in conflict contexts, religion is frequently entangled in the national and international power dynamics that contribute to a conflict and possibilities for its resolution. Especially in contexts where political and military power are closely aligned with a dominant religion and its leading institutions, religion may influence the conflict pervasively. Other sociopolitical factors that affect religious actors' legitimacy and influence related to peacemaking include the role and perception of religious actors in society in general, ideological divisions within societies, and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of religious communities.

Key Takeaways for Practitioners, Policymakers, and Funders

The research and consultation series gave rise to a number of conclusions that are important for religious actors engaged in peace processes as well as for policymakers, funders, and actors leading or supporting official peacemaking efforts to carefully consider:

- Religious actors have considerable influence – particularly within their own constituencies – to both enhance and undermine peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts and formal negotiation processes.

- Religious actors are powerful influencers of public opinion. When religious actors support a given peace process they can shift popular opinion towards peace and conflict resolution. Conversely when religious actors oppose a peace process they can also be powerful influencers in the opposite direction, rejecting peace agreements and prolonging conflicts. This highlights the importance of engaging with religious actors to ensure that they will be more inclined to use their influence to mobilise public pro-peace support.

- When religious actors have decided to engage for peace their inclusion into formal peace processes can generate greater buy-in, increase the likelihood of successfully reaching a negotiated settlement, and increase the chances of moving towards inclusive, peaceful and just societies and polities.

- The particular characteristics of religious actors that make them an asset for peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts include their moral inclination to support peace and alleviate suffering and hardship, their importance as powerful societal organisations, their legitimacy, and their organisational capacity and resources.

- Early involvement of religious actors is important for their long-lasting effective engagement. In some cases, a lack of engagement of religious actors can even spur religious actors to become spoilers of a peace or political transition process.

- In certain circumstances, religious actors can voluntarily reduce their influence in one facet of a peace process to ensure their continued influence in other facets.

- Proximity to political power can be a double-edged sword in terms of the influence and effectiveness of religious actors, as it can both strengthen influence or lead to co-optation and reduced legitimacy. This might be true even for the same religious actor and even (at different times) in the

same process. As a result, in certain contexts, minority or less prominent religious actors may have greater scope to actively engage in peacemaking than high-level religious officials.

- Religion (like ethnicity and to a lesser extent clan) can be a uniting factor across conflict parties and or across a peace-seeking third party (such as the general public) which can push for peace. Relatedly, religious dimensions can be used for mobilisation: political and ethnic leaders can manifest grievances through a religious lens as a means of either generating support for peace or stoking conflict and tensions. Religious symbolism, rhetoric, and legitimacy can be deployed either to support or to undermine formal peace processes. This phenomenon can become a hindrance to peace processes when religious leaders feel ignored but can serve as an asset if religious actors are constructively engaged.

- The cases show that even if religion or ethnicity is not a naturally 'common' or uniting factor (many women's organisations are involved more at grassroots level), pro-peace mobilisation with an inter-religious or an inter-ethnic mandate has proved successful.

- While there are some women of faith or religious women's organisations active at the track one level many more are not (many women's organisations are involved at more grassroots level). Mediators, facilitators, and funders could do more to explore ways to ensure women of faith can participate in and influence formal peace processes.

This briefing note was written by Alexander Bramble.

About the Research Project

This briefing note presents findings from an ongoing collaborative project by the United States Institute of Peace, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, and Inclusive Peace examining the role of religious actors in formal peace processes. This project includes both a research component and an exchange of information between peace practitioners and religious actors. It aims to understanding more precisely how religious actors influence the course of formal peace processes, both negatively and positively, to understand how policymakers mediation support actors, and funders can more effectively support the work of religious actors in formal peace processes. The project findings are presented in more detail in a USIP Peaceworks report Religious Actors in Formal Peace Processes, written by Alexander Bramble, Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, and Thania Paffenholz.

About Inclusive Peace

Inclusive Peace is a 'think and do tank' supporting peace and political transition processes. Inclusive Peace undertakes comparative research on peace and political transition processes and draws on this knowledge to provide advice in global political change processes.

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