**How to work with religious scholars and leaders? How to construct authentic relationships; set dynamics and build constituencies for change?**

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During the last two decades the Government of Egypt and several INGOs developed and implemented programs to protect the environment. These programs cover a wide range of issues, from air and water pollution to pest management and control and many more.

Several years of failure led most of the INGOs to a radical new approach. Egypt is a deeply religious Muslim society. They believed that the key to cultural change lay in influencing religious leadership. They teamed up with faith based institutions to increase the awareness of local communities about the importance of environmental protection and sustainability.

Workshops were held with scholars initially and then the community to sensitise the community to their religious responsibilities to the environment and the creation based around a set of key Qu’ranic principles and sharia instruments. The workshops were a remarkable success in bringing about grass roots change in attitudes and behavior.

**In the words of a local farmer; ‘We never cared about breaking the law, but we cannot break the law of God’** .

In Yemen three years ago Islamic Relief implemented a conflict transformation programme to address the rise of communal and community violence. Working with scholars and CTPB specialists we integrated faith teachings and principles around the avoidance of violence and peaceful resolution to remarkable success. During the joint evaluation of the programme with DFID we discovered that Imams and Shaykhs had used these teachings to remarkable good use, with one Imam in the Muflahi District negotiating an agreement for non-violence in the continuing political dispute between southern secessionists and unionists in the district.

I could point to many other examples related to health messages, livelihoods, Hiv/Aids, gender empowerment and rights issues where IR and other agencies such as the UN have brought around positive cultural change by the use of engagement with scholarship and religious leaders.

What’s important for us here is to draw out the lessons and principles of this engagement.

1. The first point is an important one. We cannot assume that a particular behaviour or cultural tradition practised by Muslims emerges from faith teaching. It may be conflicting with faith principles and it may be confused with faith teaching. Very often remote and less economically developed Muslim communities are not well educated either generally or in their religion.
2. Within a state having a secular law, there will very often be a parallel legal process operated by the Muslim community, not necessarily conflicting with the law but usually symbiotic. Obviously there is a spectrum of integration of sharia law in Muslim countries, and in sharia based legal systems such as Yemen, Iraq and many other nations engagement by NGOs with sharia issues is even more essential. About 7 years ago Islamic Relief developed a project with legal scholars from Sana’a University and the Islamic Foundation in the UK to examine the faith references around the UDHR to support the promotion of human rights in Yemen such as issues of early marriage, denial of female inheritance rights, rights of minorities and refugees etc. Yemen itself has had a successful education programme for terrorists in prison based on faith teaching and the Ministry of Awqaf was supportive of involving material on human rights in the training of imams. So the principle emerging here is engagement with religious law and religious leaders even though secular law may be in place.
3. There is also a critical principle to understand that sharia is not fixed in stone but based around a set of principles or priorities, involving the protection of life, faith, livelihoods, the family and future generations and the intellect. A cultural practice like early marriage after puberty that was allowed a thousand years ago under a very different cultural context is not allowed within most Muslim countries today based on these principles. The difficulty exists around the level of religious education required to rule on these issues. Religious leaders at a lower level, including imams, will not normally be equipped to make these judgements and will usually not accept them unless emerging from their own school of jurisprudence. Therefore the principle here has to be engagement at a senior level with religious scholars from that school of jurisprudence in order to influence cultural change at a lower level .
4. The fourth point surrounds the level of dialogue that may be needed between the senior scholars and local imams and community leaders. Leadership has to come from within and impulses for change have to emerge from a person’s own heart to be effective. Therefore engagement and dialogue on values and belief is essential and it is essential that they feel that their own tradition and religion supports this change. A famous verse of the Quran says **‘You will not change a people until you change what is in their hearts’**. Culture and behaviour is dynamic and rooted in the interplay between ethics & belief, inherited culture and external influence. We can see from the Arab Spring and cultural change in the Arab world over the last 50 years how Muslim culture is continually under negotiation, with the rise of global media and the integration of European values of governance with generally a strong adherence and love of Islam being extremely important factors. However this influence has affected urbanised and educated elites more than the communities Islamic Relief commonly work with, who have usually very low levels of education and access to other media and cultures.
5. Finally, in some developing countries, the formal imams are government employees. They are expected to follow the orders of Sr. government officials and protect their images and interests. In some communities the official imams are not from the local area. All this may lead to mistrust between the local communities and the formally appointed imams. The ‘independent religious leaders’ of the communities may not be liked by the government officials, but they are the TRUE leaders of their communities and they have their full trust. This is a sensitive issue but Islamic Relief had lots of success partnering with the independent religious leaders.