



THE “CIRCA” INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING PROJECT IN AFRICA

Building skills for peace

INTRODUCTION

The Capacity for Interreligious Community Action program (CIRCA) was a three-year capacity-building program financed by GHR Foundation and supplemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). The overarching goal of the program was to contribute to human development and more peaceful coexistence among Muslim and Christian communities in Egypt, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. The program had two components: training and practical application by the participants of the knowledge they had acquired from the trainings. The program focus was knowledge, skills, and attitude (KSA) for interreligious action, and sought to strengthen the capacity of: a) individuals through deeper knowledge, more positive attitudes, and enhanced practical skills, and b) organizations, through growing engagements, networking, and effective cooperation with others.

The program operated at local levels, although a few of the partners were national-level actors. The criteria for connector project selection was a multireligious area —particularly Muslim and Christian — where there had been conflict. This was not uniform across all participating countries and was not based on a formal written conflict analysis. In Kenya, the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) elected to return to a conflict it had worked on previously with limited success. Other places based their selection on convenience.

The program operated in environments with numerous drivers of conflict. These included:

- Discrimination and marginalization
- Loss of recognition, access, and power
- Isolation from the other faiths
- Ignorance and fear
- Deteriorating influence of the state
- Impunity
- Political instrumentalization of religion
- Violent extremism

CRS developed the following theory of change for CIRCA: “If key CRS and partner staff develop more positive attitudes, improve knowledge and skills for Muslim-Christian cooperation, and have opportunities to develop and implement joint Muslim-Christian projects focused on the common good, then they will contribute to human development and peaceful coexistence through interfaith networks and practical action.” The CIRCA program theories of change were the focus of one of the evaluation questions and will be discussed in greater detail under the section on evaluation findings.

THE PROGRAM APPROACH

According to the CIRCA training manual, interfaith or interreligious action is “the deliberate union of different faith groups who agree to forge an alliance in order to jointly carry out activities in society.” Interreligious action may operate in the spiritual, cognitive, and practical dimensions.

Religious sensitivity was another important component within CIRCA. The training manual explains that “an interfaith collaboration has to consider any religious sensitivities of all faith groups involved in the collaboration. These include, but are not limited to, common and divergent faith values, religious calendars, and rituals. This collaboration is founded on respect and trust that the perspectives of each faith group will be acknowledged.”

CRS defines capacity as “the ability of individuals and organization units to perform functions effectively, efficiently, and in a sustainable manner.” In CIRCA, the key function referred to the facilitation of interreligious action.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Broadly, the program activities fell into two categories, implemented consecutively: training and practice. The first two years were devoted to an extensive eight-module training covering peacebuilding, partnership, and collaboration for Christian and Muslim leaders as well as staff and volunteers of faith-based NGOs. Additional training/accompaniment was carried out during the implementation of the connector projects. The participants applied their newly enhanced knowledge and skills in interreligious actions in support of local Muslim, Christian, and community leaders, including youth and women, who worked together on practical local projects of shared interest, known as connector projects (CP). As a result, the program envisioned partner organizations engaging more effectively in interreligious development and peace initiatives at an organizational level.

The training covered faith-based teachings on 1) peace and justice; 2) conflict sensitive interreligious community action; 3) partnership and collaboration; 4) transformative leadership and change management-facilitating workshops, and 5) consensus building (these five were the foundation for interreligious action and paved for discussion on the connector project); 6) cross-cultural and cross-religious communication; and 7) mediation, negotiation, and interreligious peacebuilding. The methods included lecture, practical exercises, discussion, and experiential learning. Listening to the experiences and perceptions of “religious others,” joint reflection, and learning through active mutual

Organizations participating in CIRCA

Kenya	CRS-Kenya, Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics, Malindi Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, Garissa
Niger	Diocese of Maradi/Niger, Islamo-Christian Dialogue Commission
Nigeria	Diocese of Sokoto, Diocese of Kano, Diocese of Maiduguri, Jama'atu Nasril Islam, Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria
Tanzania	Tanzania Episcopal Conference, The National Muslim Council of Tanzania (BAKWATA), Christian Council of Tanzania
Egypt	Coptic Catholic Diocese of Sohag, Coptic Catholic Diocese of Luxor, Nour El Islam Community Development Agency
Uganda	Nile Dialogue Platform, Uganda Joint Christian Council

engagement were fundamental parts of the training.

In order to provide participants an opportunity to practice newly acquired and enhanced skills, CRS and partners worked with Muslim and Christian organizations and community leaders to identify and jointly plan for the implementation of grassroots interreligious connector projects. Most of these projects took place over the final year (between one year and six months) of the three-year time frame and during the extension into 2017.

The connector projects varied considerably in several ways. In some cases, youth and women were integrated fully in the project committees. In other cases, because of cultural sensitivities on gender, they had their own projects. In some cases, new project committees were formed. In other cases, existing organizations were modified to take on responsibility for the connector project. The joint committees' composition was Muslim and Christian members of the community. CPs cut across several sectors, including potable water, natural resource management, poultry keeping, income generation, and environmental sanitation. In one case, the committee was removed and new representatives were appointed by their respective communities. Kenya and Uganda worked with Muslims, Christians, and traditional faith leaders, whereas the rest focused on Christians and Muslims. They also varied, even within the same country, in their proximity to violence. This affected mobility, security, mental health (e.g., trauma), and risk.

A total of 118 participants went through the CIRCA training: 45 Muslims, 71 Christians, and 2 traditionalists. Twelve connector projects were launched, involving 18 partner organizations dispersed over six countries.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The purpose of this final evaluation was twofold: to assess the merit and significance of the project and to glean lessons about the processes and enabling/constraining factors for strengthening interreligious (specifically Muslim-Christian) cooperation and social cohesion.

The evaluation departed from the routine Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee evaluation objectives in order to generate knowledge and capture learning that the evaluation commissioners believed would be useful in the design of a second phase of the program.

The bulk of the evaluation questions were qualitative in nature. The evaluation addressed the following evaluation questions, which were clustered into two groups: effectiveness and learning.

FINDINGS RELATING TO EFFECTIVENESS

EQ 1: To what extent did partners effectively support Muslim and Christian leaders, particularly youth, to work together on practical connector projects in their communities?

Finding 1: Across the four connector projects visited, there was a wide range of types of support. CIRCA trainees identified more pastoral roles, while CP participants had a more practical, nuts-and-bolts perspective on the support received during the connector project.

EQ 2: To what extent were partner organizations more effectively engaged in interreligious development and peace initiatives?

Finding 2: They were able to engage more effectively in interreligious action (IRA) through new partnerships with faith-based organizations from other religions, enhanced confidence in being able to engage effectively with the other out of a deeper understanding of their faith, and increased knowledge of and skills in facilitation and communication.

EQ 3: To what extent did CRS partners develop/strengthen organizational strategies for interreligious engagement?

Finding 3: CIRCA had little influence over broad organizational strategies for IRA in the participating organizations. Instead its influence focused on individual uptake of IRA processes, skills, and content.

FINDINGS RELATED TO LEARNING

EQ 4: How valid was CIRCA's theory of change?

Finding 4: The theory of change contained incomplete results chains and outcomes unsupported by activities, and was not user-friendly.

EQ 5: What additional lessons could be drawn from the CIRCA experience to enhance interreligious—specifically Muslim-Christian—social cohesion efforts in the program areas?

Finding 5: Effective IRA requires personal preparation and accurate up-to-date information about the people, issues, conflicts, culture, and religion of key stakeholders. It also requires strategic choices, transparency, and patience.

EQ 6: What were the gender dynamics at play in the CIRCA project, and how did the project respond to these?

Finding 6: The program considered gender dynamics at key moments and involved more women in the connector projects than the CIRCA training.

EQ 7: How do the participating partners understand the success or effectiveness of their peace work?

Finding 7: Understandings of success were split, with one camp focused on how work was done (e.g., through interreligious collaboration), and the other camp focused on achieving the central development action in the connector projects (e.g., finding water).

EQ 8: How do the participating partners understand the religious dimension of their peace work?

Finding 8: CIRCA established a balance between the spiritual, cognitive, and practical motives for engaging in IRA, enabling participants to find a place fitting their motivation, whatever that might be.

FACTORS INFLUENCING EFFECTIVENESS

The enabling and constraining factors that came up over the course of the evaluation are listed in the table on the following page. These stem from the different understandings of success and issues raised in the interviews, as well as discussions during the workshops, and they are presented as a composite rather than lessons specific to each country.

Taken as a whole, these factors represent a lot of considerations with which program designers and implementers had to contend. Permission, legitimization, and modeling all require high-level religious leaders to act. Partners need to be strategic and effective, and observe good practices in working on issues of faith, communication, and conflict transformation.

Implementers also need to contend with some formidable constraining factors. These include the inertia of the status quo in terms of isolation and ignorance. Closed mindsets often need to be addressed early on for IRA to advance. Insufficient security, spoilers, NGO ways of working, rapid staff turnover, and external influences can all slow, if not derail, IRA.

With a few notable exceptions, CIRCA managed to overcome the constraints and integrate various enabling factors. It is

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESS

	ENABLING FACTORS	CONSTRAINING FACTORS
Within the program's sphere of influence	<p>Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission from religious leaders • Legitimization by local authorities • Modeling-interreligious collaboration modeled at all levels <p>Partnership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships among FBOs from different faiths • Focus on shared religious values rather than dogma or theology • Effective interreligious communication • Multi-skilled, well-trained human resources • Financial support <p>Good practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rightsizing: matching the skill sets/ capacity to the severity of the conflict • Transparency • Local ownership of CPs • Space for spiritual, cognitive, and practical dimensions 	<p>Dealing with the status quo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional and cultural constraints restricting women's participants • Spoilers such as hardliners <p>Scarcity of skilled personnel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes two skill sets: one for interreligious engagement and another for the practical action <p>Mindsets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking of one faith as superior to the others • Fear of conversion • Belief that engagement with other makes one a bad member of their own faith <p>NGO modus operandi</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation headaches from connector projects • Thinking in terms of projects, instead of windows of opportunities • Many trainees had full-time jobs and oversight of CPs represented a considerable burden to some
The broader environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space for FBOs and NGOs to operate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient security to access • Spoilers including hardliners • Incidents in Niger reacting to Charlie Hebdo • Large geographic areas uncovered • Rapid staff turnover in the FBO and NGO spheres

worth noting that at least two CPs were reinforced by recent or concurrent peacebuilding programming: Dialogue in Action Project II in Kenya and TA'ALA in Egypt.

Site selections helped control other variables that might have adversely affected the program. The program stayed with the Abrahamic faiths, creating an opening for Traditionalist religious leaders in Kenya. Even with the proximity to armed actors in Maiduguri, Nigeria, and AOSK's early efforts in Garissa, Kenya, at the time of the program, religion was neither the cause of conflict, nor was it being appropriated for violent political purposes at the sites chosen. The sites chosen certainly stood to benefit from peacebuilding. CIRCA remains to be fully tested in a climate of overt physical violence and highly elevated religious tensions, such as Central African Republic.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROGRAM

The IRA training and practical experiences offered by CIRCA were significant. The curriculum alone may be of value to many for years to come. The training workshops opened space for participants to explore the spiritual and cognitive dimension of IRA. The workshops not only

increased understanding of the faith of the other, they also pushed participants to examine the role of peace in their own faith. This deeper, richer understanding fueled personal transformation, a necessary precursor to working with one's organization or facilitating in the community.

The group of CIRCA trainees only came together for the trainings. Some knew each other from other endeavors, and some were peers from the same areas. They were not a group that had planned to have ongoing gatherings after the program, if for no other reason than the associated costs. The significance of the training and capacity-building portions of the program depends largely on whatever niche or opportunity CIRCA trainees can create within their own organizations.

The significance of the connector projects will depend on how long people see the project as testimony of what different faith groups working together can accomplish. It will also depend on whether or not they can build on their experience to use IR collaboration to address emergent needs and conflicts.

In designing the evaluation, a rubric was developed to assist in determining the significance of the program. It consisted



CIRCA participants strategize together on the implementation of their connector project during a reflection session in uxor, Egypt.
Shamsia Ramadhan/CRS

of a 6-point scale of the success areas laid out in the original proposal: peaceful coexistence, effective interfaith action, learning, catalyzing networks and platforms. Initially, the evaluator was to determine the rubric rankings for the countries visited, leaving out half the group. To have at least one means of looking at all six countries as one program, completion of the rubric shifted from the evaluator to the CIRCA trainees in each country, becoming, in effect, a self-appraisal. The rankings were discussed and agreed upon in the CIRCA trainee workshops.

Peaceful coexistence was one of the criteria for success and was a goal-level change. In five countries, CIRCA trainees reported significant improvements in Muslim/Christian relationships among direct participants in the overall program. Data from the interviews and change stories further validated this conclusion.

Effective interreligious action was a criterion for success and was closely aligned with both CIRCA's strategic objectives. Kenya and Niger maintained that areas external to and independent of the project initiated interreligious actions based on CIRCA's experience. Here, the rubric focused on IRA in addition to or beyond CIRCA. For Niger, that included the Maradi engagement with the Ministry for Religious Affairs. Nigeria cited multiple IRAs enjoying widespread support among both communities. Egypt reported isolated, one-off IRA in addition to CIRCA.

In terms of catalyzing networks and platforms, things got a little murky. Kenya reported involvement in networks and platforms that were linked to and working beyond the

reach of the program. Given that CICC was an umbrella of membership organizations, these networks and platforms predated and operated independently from CIRCA, making it hard to identify CIRCA's contribution. Even if we left the designation of catalytic influence, it was not something that improved over the course of the project. Niger and Egypt reported that networks they were associated with had expanded the types of issues they dealt with to include IRA.

In Uganda, the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC) and the Nile Dialogue Platform (NDP) had worked together previously, and over the course of CIRCA, their relationship grew to the point where UJCC invited NDP to join them in several national-level fora. These were not connected to CIRCA per se, but were independent efforts to bring IR collaboration into other fora. They worked on a forum advocating for parliament to adopt policies on issues of biotechnology and small arms and light weapons. They also collaborated with the Ministry of Education on a comprehensive sexuality curriculum. Inviting another IR actors into an existing forum is another example of IRA not based on projects.

The learning criteria in the rubric focused on the content and application of lessons learned. Of the four criteria of success, this seemed to be the weakest for CIRCA as a whole, but still positive. Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya reported that their learning was focused primarily on implementation issues. The Kenya CIRCA participant interviews supported this in that their learning focused on how to do things and what to do, rather than on exploring how change happens.

The program was most significant where it touched those

most directly involved—community CP committee members and CIRCA trainees. The relational changes reported were testimony to the program's effectiveness in promoting peaceful coexistence. Greater clarity and intentionality on how the program catalyzed network and platforms — and how organizational capacities deepened — will need to be part of any future design.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain high-level public modeling of interreligious collaboration as an entry point and for reinforcing the value of IRA as needed.
- Continue to pair leaders who carry authority and convening power with activists who operate with dexterity when selecting CIRCA trainees, as was done in Niger.
- Build in a strategy for including state actors relevant to the conflict being addressed.
- Conduct a conflict analysis that can be used to link local action with societal concerns.
- Insist on the inclusion of women leaders who are religious and promote them as ideal candidates for the CIRCA training.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement CPs in program areas already covered by the host organization so that there are greater chances of continuation and more opportunities to rub shoulders with non-participants and interest them in integrating IRA into other activities.
- Explore options for dealing with structural violence in addition to the work on individual and relational change.
- Anticipate participants wanting to offer the same training to colleagues. Consider including trainers as CIRCA trainees in addition to those with authority and dexterity.
- Make program theories of change user-friendly and encourage staff to explore them early on.
- Mainstream gender in the CIRCA training manual.

- Provide opportunities for staff and participants to develop their own evaluation rubrics early in the program.
- Preserve the programmatic space for diverse spiritual, cognitive, and practical motives to coexist.
- Complement the training and practice experienced by a few organizational representatives with strategies to strengthen organizational capacity for IRA.

The IRA training and practical skill strengthening experiences offered by CIRCA were significant. The curriculum alone may be of value to many for years to come. The training workshops opened space for participants to explore the spiritual and cognitive dimension of IRA. The training workshops not only increased understanding of the faith of the other, they also pushed participants to examine the role of peace in their own faith.

The program was most significant where it has touched those most directly involved — community CP committee members and CIRCA trainees. The relational changes reported are testimony to the program's effectiveness in promoting peaceful coexistence. The long-term significance of the connector projects will depend on how long people see the project as testimony of what different faith groups working together can accomplish. It will also depend on whether or not and they can build on their experience to use interreligious collaboration to address emergent needs, opportunities, and conflicts.

The prospects for a second phase involve a number of considerations, including who to involve, which conflicts to take on, whether to add new processes and/or depth to key interreligious and peacebuilding processes, and how to institutionalize IRA. Choices around these issues will also help in determining whether to remain focused on the community level or to add or substitute issues related to policy and/or larger societal issues.

Excerpted from CIRCA evaluation report written by Mark M. Rogers:

<https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/building-capacity-interreligious-action-final-evaluation>



Cover photo: Representatives from the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics, including religious leaders and staff, participate in a CIRCA workshop. *Richard Mutinda/CICC*
For more information about our work, please contact pqpublications@crs.org
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