



LEARNING BRIEF

The Role of Faith in Building Peaceful Societies and Combating Xenophobia

This is one in a series of three learning briefs presenting findings of an updated review of faith-based action for children on the move. A set of briefs was first published in 2018¹ to support the evidence base for the Faith Action for Children on the Move Forum, held in Rome 16–19 October 2018. To maintain an understanding of the current academic and practitioner landscape, those briefs have now been updated with recent literature and good practice examples. When developing the original briefs, which included an extensive literature review and review of case studies submitted from around the world, three key themes around faith engagement with children on the move emerged: Continuum of Child Protection, Spiritual Support and Peacebuilding. This brief is an update to the brief on Peacebuilding and similarly draws on data collected through literature review, ad hoc searches and direct submissions from faith actors. These briefs do not intend to provide an extensive overview of all available evidence on faith and children on the move. Instead, they aim to help faith actors, development and humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and donors increase their understanding of faith communities' contributions to supporting children on the move, and shape policy and practice.

The term “faith actors” is used to reflect a broad understanding of a diverse group of actors who are commonly referred to in different ways, including, but not limited to, local, national and international faith-based organizations (FBOs), faith communities and religious leaders.

The term “children on the move” refers to children (under the age of 18) who have been uprooted from their homes, for example international child migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and internally displaced (IDP) children.

Faith actors are engaged in a wide range of activities aimed at building and sustaining peace as well as countering xenophobia, which is often interlinked with other types of discrimination and violence. Faith actors can help influence changes in attitudes and behaviours, both within and beyond their faith communities. While most of their activities focus on prevention, advocacy and awareness-raising, sometimes faith actors also offer concrete support to victims of xenophobic attacks, such as shelter.

In the past few years, faith actors have been engaging both host and newcomer communities in their efforts to support social cohesion. Faith actors have also fine-tuned their advocacy and awareness campaigns to target specific groups, for example through social media campaigns, in order to focus on pressing issues such as increasing levels of hate crime.



Supporting Peacebuilding and Countering Discrimination against Children on the Move

Faith groups can **raise awareness** and advocate for children on the move, **influencing both social attitudes and behaviours**. Faith actors are highly active in advocacy and awareness-raising work, with religious leaders worldwide speaking out for the rights of children on the move.² For example, in 2018, a range of faith actors denounced the family separation policy targeting people on the move in the United States³, and Pope Francis has publicly advocated in support of children on the move. In 2017, on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, he addressed the situation of children

on the move, stating, ‘we need to work towards protection, integration and long-term solutions. We are primarily concerned with adopting every possible measure to guarantee the protection and safety of child migrants.’⁴

It is important to recognise that religions and their followers have sometimes **perpetuated attitudes and behaviours that are harmful** to children.⁵ Religious and ethnic discrimination can be a **root cause of displacement**, as evidenced by the Yazidi and Christian displacement from Northern Iraq following the expansion of ISIS in 2014,⁶ the 2017 persecution and mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar⁷ or the increased persecution of religious minorities in Afghanistan after the Taliban’s return to power in 2021.⁸ At times, such tensions are brought into new contexts through migration and displacement. To help prevent that, there must be awareness of the complex, positive and negative, role of religion, and faith actors should work within their own communities and create partnerships across religious traditions.

Nonetheless, faith actors have also been known to offer protection to displaced children and adults targeted by xenophobic attacks. In South Africa, xenophobic attacks against Zimbabweans in 2008 led the Central Methodist Mission (CMM) in Johannesburg to offer protection and assistance to 3,000 refugees at its peak and ‘publicly challeng[e] local government, the police, and other observers, including its own umbrella organisation, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.’⁹ Research found that CMM’s leadership, as well as the involvement of other churches¹⁰, was central to protecting refugees.¹¹ Research following xenophobic attacks in 2015 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, found that local churches were often central places of protection and services for Congolese refugees.¹² In the Central African Republic (CAR), religious leaders and their communities have protected people of different faiths against attacks that are based, in part, on religious difference.¹³ In Johannesburg, South Africa, Mercy College, a Catholic-run school, operates the Refugee Bridging Programme. This aims to support refugee children’s transition into the South African school system, while also offering protective support to promote their resilience.¹⁴

Furthermore, there are several examples of faith-based awareness-raising campaigns engaging the general public to promote peace and counter xenophobia. These include #faithoverfear,¹⁵ from Religions for Peace with several partners, and #sharethejourney,¹⁶ from Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. UNHCR’s #withrefugees campaign has featured stories of faith actors’ efforts

to support children on the move, highlighting interfaith collaboration and hospitality.¹⁷ In the USA in recent years, faith-based organisations involved in resettlement work have been key advocates on issues such as the rights of unaccompanied minors, attracting widespread visibility and support¹⁸, and religious leaders have spoken out against immigration bans targeting Muslim-majority countries.¹⁹ There have been similar initiatives in other countries, such as Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo (International Volunteers for Development) which works with school children in Italy, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia to raise awareness about the importance of accepting others.²⁰ In the Damara sous-prefecture in the CAR in the mid-2010s, World Vision partnered with Caritas, local government, and local male and female faith leaders to establish and maintain child peace clubs promoting themes such as acceptance and reintegration.²¹



To promote public awareness, faith actors have offered education to combat xenophobia. The Jesuit Network for Migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean (RJM LAC) developed an activity handbook, with separate volumes for children in primary²² and secondary education,²³ to challenge perceptions of people from other backgrounds, to encourage hospitality, to promote acceptance and respect for others, and to build an appreciation of diversity. The two volumes of the “Journey towards Hospitality” handbook were published in 2015 and emerged from the RJM LAC’s “Campaign for Hospitality”. In Kenya, the National Council of Churches, in collaboration with UNHCR, ran the “Peace Education Programme” for children in the Dadaab refugee camp.²⁴ In another example, prompted by their experience responding to xenophobia in South Africa, the Salvation Army published a positional statement arguing why xenophobia should be rejected by followers of Jesus. The statement was used to educate congregations and communities.²⁵

In addition, faith-based actors **advocate to policymakers** on child protection issues at international levels. For example, the interreligious Global Network of Religions for Children, one of the main initiatives of Arigatou International, issued the “Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children” in 2017.²⁶ Another example is the growing number of faith-based organisations supporting the “Global Campaign to End Child Immigration Detention”, a global network of 150 civil society organisations from 49 countries, supported by CARITAS, UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR.²⁷ Other recent examples of faith-based advocacy targeting policymakers include the 2019 Jesuit Refugee Services’ campaign “Her Future: Challenges and Recommendations to Increase Education for Refugee Girls”;²⁸ the 2018 interfaith call in the USA for an end to family separation at borders;²⁹ and the 2020 open letter to EU governments to “Immediately Honour Commitments to Relocate Unaccompanied Children from the Greek Islands”,³⁰ signed by faith- and non-faith-based organisations. Another recent example is the 2022 call for equal treatment of black and brown people stranded at the Ukrainian border, signed and publicised by the World Council of Churches (WCC)³¹ in response to reports that refugees of non-Western origins fleeing Ukraine were not receiving equal treatment to Ukrainian and European refugees.³²

Faith actors hold events to advocate for children on the move in international policy centres, such as New York³³, Geneva and beyond. For instance, the National Council of Churches in Australia supported advocacy by the WCC through the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative on Violence against Children.³⁴ In response to such efforts, the UN has increasingly highlighted the importance of cooperation between faith and secular actors. Several UN agencies published partnership guidance for work with faith actors.³⁵ Bringing together the threads of child protection, faith actors and combating discrimination, UNICEF called for ‘coalitions of NGOs, communities, private sector, religious groups and political leaders [to] take responsibility for influencing public opinion to prevent the rise of xenophobia and discrimination towards refugees’.³⁶ In 2018, it published guidelines

titled “Partnering with Religious Communities for Children”,³⁷ and started the “Faith and Positive Change for Children” (FPCC) initiative, in collaboration with “Religions for Peace and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities”.³⁸

Faith actors are actively involved in influencing global policy on forced displacement, contributing to such initiatives as the “Global Compact on Refugees” and the “Global Refugee Forum”. In 2013, the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Faith and Protection with representatives of major religious traditions resulted in the publication of “Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders”.³⁹ More recently, faith actors were mentioned as potential and actual promoters of reconciliation and conflict prevention in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the UN ‘framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing’ in response to displacement, including for child protection systems and the empowerment of young people.⁴⁰ It acknowledges the roles of faith-based actors in ‘planning and delivery of arrangements to support refugees and host communities, including in the areas of conflict prevention, reconciliation and peacebuilding’.⁴¹ Finally, the GCR’s programme of actions, which aims to ‘ensure the best interests of the child; and combat discrimination of any kind while promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence’,⁴² was included following several advocacy engagements by faith actors, such as the “Joint Recommendations on the Role of Local Faith Communities in Refugee Response.”⁴³ At the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, faith actors made at least 27 pledges to contribute to the implementation of the GCR. For example, the Lutheran World Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide and HIAS complied with their pledge by organising the 2022 “Welcoming the Stranger, Shaping the Future” conference.⁴⁴ Several members of the Multi-Religious Council of Leaders, a high-level group formed in 2021 through a collaboration between UNHCR and Religions for Peace with the aim of supporting displaced populations, have recently expressed their commitment to advocate and act for children on the move, including at the forthcoming 2023 Global Refugee Forum.⁴⁵



Key Trends

In recent years, faith actors have continued their work to promote peace in contexts where migration and related tensions are on the rise by working alongside various different stakeholders to promote tolerance and acceptance.

1 Faith actors are responding to rising xenophobia, Islamophobia and hate speech. An increase in xenophobia targeting people on the move had already been flagged by the UN in 2016,⁴⁶ but there are indicators that it is further on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in many contexts, exacerbated xenophobia and discrimination against displaced people⁴⁷ linked to their nationality, race, ethnicity or religion. There were also pre-pandemic reports of Muslim refugees struggling to access mosques⁴⁸ and of attacks on Christians in refugee shelters⁴⁹ in Germany, as well as a rise in political parties holding anti-Islamic views.⁵⁰ Recent evidence points both to the physical and mental health impacts of Islamophobia on children.⁵¹



Faith actors continue to address these growing challenges. A 2021 initiative by the UN Human Rights Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (OHCHR- ROMENA) launched a booklet on “Engaging Religious Actors to Counter Hate Speech, Prevent Incitement to Violence, and Build Inclusive and Peaceful Societies”.⁵² A 2022 article by Emina Frljak, Programme Coordinator at Youth for Peace and Board Member of the European Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, summarises the ways in which religion has been linked with hate speech but can also be influential for promoting peace. The article offers recommendations for faith actors of different religious traditions⁵³ which include using sacred texts and new faith-inspired resources to counter hate speech, such as the German Christian “11 Commandments” for digital civility.⁵⁴ The recommendations also include a call to speak out when other religious traditions are attacked and to highlight positive examples of mutual respect and positive speech.

Countering discrimination by targeting xenophobia and hate speech and creating opportunities for encounter: the Central Council of Muslim’s “Wir Sind Paten” (We Are Mentors) initiative in Germany

The Central Council of Muslims’ “Wir Sind Paten” initiative has provided opportunities for local and displaced youth to establish relationships of mutual support and friendship bonds in different cities in Germany since 2016.⁵⁵ Activities include mentorship for refugees (such as one-to-one support with access to jobs, housing, legal advice and health services), language classes, intercultural events and workshops on various issues that are relevant to both host and newcomer communities. For example, in 2020, they implemented a workshop on countering racism and online hate speech in Erfurt.⁵⁶ They also regularly organise visits to museums and memorials of the Holocaust (especially in Eastern Germany) for hosts and newcomers alike, with opportunities for dialogue and exchange.⁵⁷

Key learnings include:

- It was often challenging **to build trustworthy and supporting partnerships** between faith actors and local authorities - a prerequisite to start the programme’s activities.
- **Gaining media attention for the project was often difficult.** This might be linked to success stories not receiving enough attention, but also to faith actors’ lack of resources for dissemination.
- Long-term planning was affected by funding unpredictability. **Diversifying sources of financial support** was found to be potentially beneficial.
- Government-led evaluations, consisting of quantitative data on the number of signed mentorship agreements and interviews with volunteers and participants, were complemented with additional qualitative interviews to document the effectiveness of the initiative. However, staff members highlighted a need for **more systematic and comprehensive documentation** and evaluation practices.



2 Faith actors foster social cohesion processes by engaging with both host communities and newcomer communities. In recent years, research has increasingly highlighted how faith actors help foster integration⁵⁸ and social cohesion by contributing to helping build bridges of acceptance between more established and newly arrived communities and individuals. Multi-religious cooperation has been identified as particularly beneficial in such initiatives.⁵⁹ For example, from October 2017 to December 2020, in Iraq and Lebanon, Christian Aid, in collaboration with Bread for the World, ran a programme to assist refugees, IDPs and host communities. Through vocational training, education, material support and psychosocial services, they brought together ‘beneficiaries from different communities, ethnicities and religious groups.’⁶⁰ Such initiatives support both integration and social cohesion in changing communities.

Supporting social cohesion by working with host and newcomer communities across religious traditions: The “Goda Grannar” (Good Neighbours) and the “A World of Neighbours” multi-religious initiatives in Sweden and Europe

The “Good Neighbours” initiative is a collaboration between Islamic Relief Sweden, the Church of Sweden and the Stockholm Mosque. It started in 2015 as a response to the so-called “migration crisis” in Europe. While it was initially based in a makeshift shelter, it later evolved into a range of different activities, including language classes and healthcare assistance. Children and their families are supported through tailored services, including pre-school activities, and opportunities to create bonds among them and with other members of the local community, such as language cafés, communal kitchens and counselling sessions on jobs and healthcare. In 2020, the initiative received the prestigious Swedish Martin Luther King award.⁶¹

Drawing on this experience, the Church of Sweden launched the European interreligious network “A World of Neighbours”⁶² in 2019. Its first steps were to gather practitioners from different countries and various religious traditions working with forcibly displaced people in Europe. The grassroot actors involved in the network first met in 2019, clustering around five working groups: Strengthening Receiving Communities; Practitioners; Media and Narrative; Social Cohesion; and Policy Frameworks. The network’s first annual meeting took place in 2022 and involved members of Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities, students, theologians, practitioners and researchers.⁶³

3 Faith actors increasingly speak out for children on the move within their communities. Faith actors recognise that much needs to change within faith networks themselves to improve practices for children on the move. They are creating more fora in which to address this issue and developing more resources to strengthen initiatives supporting children on the move. In one example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) partnered with UNICEF as part of its “Churches’ Commitments to Children” initiative.⁶⁴ Following the 10th General Assembly of the WCC in 2013, a series of consultations took place around the world to inform commitments.⁶⁵ In 2021, the Movimiento con la Niñez y la Juventud (Movement for Childhood and Youth) published a pastoral guide to defend the rights of migrants, which includes a chapter specifically focusing on children and youth on the move.⁶⁶



Raising awareness within faith communities through social media engagements: Movimiento con la Niñez y la Juventud (Movement for Childhood and Youth)'s "Somos Iglesia Somos Refugio" (We Are Church, We Are Refuge) advocacy campaign ⁶⁷

The "Somos Iglesia Somos Refugio" campaign was launched by Movimiento con la Niñez y la Juventud (MNJ) in 2019. It followed a pastoral consultation held in Lima, Peru, on the challenges faced by the church in responding to the displacement of children and youth in Latin America, especially from Venezuela. The campaign targets Christian communities across Latin America and uses social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, to spread messages of hospitality and support towards children on the move.

MNJ found particularly high levels of interaction were sparked by the use of messages including ethical, spiritual and theological reflections, such as the Bible quote 'The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt' (Lev. 19:33-34). The campaign was well received, including by refugees. Members of local and international organisations, including several local and international faith-based NGOs and networks, also took part in and shared the campaign.



Recommendations

1. **Build multisectoral partnerships in the struggle against xenophobia:** Faith actors are working and should continue to work to combat xenophobia, hate speech and other forms of discrimination and attacks that affect children on the move at local, national and international levels. In particular, faith actors should speak out for the protection of children and advocate for better practices, both among people of the same faith and in interreligious environments. Faith actors, governments and other humanitarian actors should work together to understand and address root causes of xenophobia.
2. **Promote educational environments that protect children from hate crimes or discrimination and promote social cohesion:** Children experience xenophobia-related attacks, even in educational settings. In contexts where faith actors are involved in educational institutions, they should therefore contribute to upholding high standards of protection and combating xenophobia. Furthermore, educational environments for adults and children can promote faith-related values of welcoming the stranger, embracing the vulnerable, and supporting inclusive and equitable communities.

3. **Build interfaith interventions, partnering with and supporting both host and new communities:** Faith actors can play key roles in processes of (re)integration and in working towards social cohesion among new and established communities. In particular, they can provide services simultaneously to host and displaced communities. Involving a range of multi-religious and secular actors in peacebuilding and community cohesion initiatives has proved to be beneficial.
4. **Strengthen funding for programming and learning about effective, strategic religious engagement in peacebuilding, social cohesion and addressing xenophobia.** Increasing time and resources to understand the role of faith and faith actors in building peace and social cohesion, and documenting and sharing good practices will lead to more effective funding and programming support for children on the move.

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End Notes

- 1 This brief was published in November 2022. To read the 2018 version of this brief, please visit: <https://jiliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-the-role-of-faith-in-building-peaceful-societies-and-combating-xenophobia/>
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