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Training on Religions and Development Research Course

Learning Paper



Joint Learning Initiative
on Faith & Local Communities

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Introduction

Many religious actors implement programmes related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Yet many religious actors would benefit from building their understanding of:

- how to use research evidence to increase their influence in the international humanitarian and development sectors,
- how faith engagements are understood in those sectors,
- what the research evidence says about the role of faith engagement,
- how basic research training can help religious actors understand how to create and use evidence for programming, policy and advocacy.

For religious actors, being able to speak up with an evidence-based approach in donor, policy and practice spaces will significantly contribute to more equal partnerships and improved social action.

It is with these objectives in mind that the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) embarked on a multi-year process of synthesising evidence and using evidence for training, including a one-year pilot aimed at the development and implementation of training on religions and development research course. The pilot project was implemented in collaboration with five Anglican colleges and seminaries in Africa and Asia. This learning paper summarises the approach and key learnings of the pilot, with a view to share insights gained from our collaboration with others working on similar initiatives in the areas of teaching religions and development, improving evidence literacy and strengthening research capacity.



Cathedral Institute for Education and Formation, Sri Lanka, 2024

Background to the course



Previous work

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) is an international network of researchers and practitioners who produce and disseminate research and evidence on the roles of religions in development, humanitarian action and peacebuilding. In 2022, JLI published its first flagship report on the evidence base in religions and development (broadly speaking) called [The State of the Evidence in Religions and Development](#). This report provides an introduction to the research field of religions and development and then dives deeper into several key topics in each chapter (religions and health, environment, ending violence against children, gender, refugees and forced migration, and peace and conflict). The JLI was then supported by [Trinity Church Wall Street Philanthropies' Leadership Grants](#) to bring the information in this report to a wider audience around the world through seminar series with Anglican institutions (and their partners) in the Philippines, Malawi, and Zambia, which were implemented in 2022. The Training on Religions and Development Research represents the latest stage in this work, namely to create a course for future Anglican leaders to learn more about religions and development research.



Course development

The course was developed in a collaborative, participatory process by the JLI team with an advisory group from five Anglican institutions around the world. The five institutions were Leonard Kamungu Theological College in Malawi, St Paul's University in Kenya, St Andrew's Theological Seminary in the Philippines, College of Transfiguration in South Africa, and the Cathedral Institute of Education and Formation in Sri Lanka. The institutions were consulted to understand their interests in terms of content, format, and activities in the courses. They reviewed course materials and gave feedback. They are also the first testers and adopters of the course, delivering the course materials as part of a pilot in 2024. While the course was developed for/with Anglican leaders in Kenya, Malawi, Sri Lanka, South Africa and the Philippines, the JLI team co-developing it included people of various faiths and the course covers a range of different religious traditions in the readings and can be used by people of all faiths or none, with adaptations where required.

Expected learning outcomes for the course

1

Gain knowledge about the roles of religions in social action, with an introduction to the topic of religions and development, followed by the study of religions around a range of development topics, such as climate, gender, health, decolonisation, and peacebuilding.

2

Build research literacy and capacity by learning about core skills for ethically designing, conducting, analysing, and disseminating research, supporting students to better understand research and incorporate evidence-based approaches into their work.

3

Apply knowledge through practical research activities that encourage students to analyse and research development issues as they relate to religions in their own environments.

Course outline and session structure

The course consists of three modules, which can be adapted flexibly. For example, educational institutions can decide which of the thematic sessions in module 1 they would like to cover in addition to the first introductory session. Similarly, the inclusion of module 3, which focuses on the practical application of the course in the form of small research projects that are completed by students outside of the classroom, is optional. The course as a whole is designed to be taught as weekly sessions or in the form of a block/residential course lasting 2-3 days. Adaptation is possible and encouraged.

Module 1 – Topics in Religions and Development	Module 2 – Doing Research	Module 3 – Practical Application
Session 1: Introduction to Religions and Development	Session 1: Introduction to Research	Session 1: Planning Projects I
Session 2: Climate Change and Religions	Session 2: Research Design	Session 2: Planning Projects II
Session 3: Religions, Health and Development	Session 3: Data Collection	Session 3: Discussing Ongoing Research I
Session 4: Gender, Development, and Religions	Session 4: Data Management and Analysis	Session 4: Discussing Ongoing Research II
Session 5: Peacebuilding, Development and Religions	Session 5: Research Dissemination	Session 5: Reflection and Feedback
Session 6: Decolonisation, Development and Religions		

Pedagogical approach



Underlying pedagogical principles

The course is based on the pedagogical principles of participation, ownership, solidarity, creativity, and flexibility. Participation prioritises the input and involvement of every student in the classroom. Ownership helps students feel they understand and are actively engaged in the learning process. Solidarity underlines the role of education in working for social justice in society and encourages students and instructors to collaborate with respect and a commitment to deeply listen to each other in the classroom. Creativity highlights that people learn differently and that creative expression and openness to creativity in the classroom can help students learn in fruitful ways. Flexibility helps instructors respond to the different learning styles of students and be adaptable to their context to facilitate learning.



No “experts” required

To teach this course, we do not expect either instructors or students to have prior knowledge or experience in these topics. Instead, we take a pedagogical approach that prioritises participatory learning, which means that the group will help and support each other to learn together. Our pedagogical approach actively challenges notions of the instructor being “the expert” whereas students are passive learners. The learning spaces we create are aimed to give all present (instructors as well as participants) the opportunity to bring in their specific expertise and experience. This requires humility on the side of the instructor who should stress this approach to the students and encourage them to find expertise within themselves. This is not an “anything goes” approach that denies different levels of training or experience. For example, if the instructor has a PhD and years of research experience, acknowledging the students’ expertise in the classroom does not mean to imply that they have the same amount of research skills. Instead, our approach encourages students to value existing skills they may have, such as an analytical mindset, contextual knowledge, and so on. Authenticity on the side of the instructor plays an important role in this. Instructors should be open about their own strengths and areas that they do not have any existing expertise/experience in, so as to encourage students to also be open about any gaps in understanding during their own learning journey.



Instructors as facilitators of learning

This participatory learning is supported by the session outlines for each module, which include the reading materials needed to develop an initial level of familiarity with academic and policy/practice-focused discussions in the subject area. Instructors are expected to be facilitators of the students' learning, helping them to work through the reading, and then make sense of what is included in the texts through a series of exercises. This approach focuses on student-led learning, with the students identifying their own learning from the reading materials provided, rather than being taught what to learn from a lecture, which is a more top-down approach.



Creating space for exploration and self-expression

Instructors are encouraged to prepare themselves to help facilitate their students' exploration of the material. This requires instructors to listen carefully to what students have to say, give considerable space and time for students to express themselves, and help students (who may not be familiar with such a pedagogical approach and be reluctant to talk) to open up and voice their opinions. Many students are used to more top-down approaches of teaching and learning and expect to hear "the right answer" from the instructor. Instructors should challenge these expectations, by instead asking students what their opinion is, if they have relevant knowledge they could apply, if anyone else in the classroom can help, or where they could find out more about a question they do not have an answer for. It is encouraged to ask open questions (why? how? what if...?) that give students an opening to expand on their answers.



St Andrew's Theological Seminary, the Philippines, 2024



St Paul's University, Kenya, 2024

Key learnings

The following learnings are based on feedback from the students, instructors and advisory group members involved in co-creating the course, which was collected throughout the project's duration. The recommendations for creators and instructors below build on the guidance outlined in the section on the course's pedagogical approach above, a more detailed version of which can be found in the instructor's manual (available open access on the JLI website).



Recommendations for funders

- **Prioritise the need for training support:** There is a great need for support for developing and disseminating religions and development research, evidence-based faith engagement, and teaching/training on evidence literacy and research capacity aimed at religious actors and students.
- **International exchange:** Support international projects that allow for cross-border exchange, including notably south-south dialogue between educational institutions.
- **Long-term approaches:** Provide multi-year funding allowing for the expansion and continuation of training and sustainability of initiatives.
- **Research to practise collaboration:** Invest in collaborative initiatives involving researchers and practitioners, to ensure the practice/impact focus of work and dissemination of research into practice
- **Interfaith projects:** Fund both projects with an intrafaith and interfaith element that include educational institutions of various faith backgrounds and/or working in various faith contexts



St Andrew's Theological Seminary, the Philippines, 2024

Recommendations for creators of teaching/training on evidence-based faith engagement and religions and development research



- **Contextual collaboration:** Engage in collaborative initiatives enabling the input of researchers and practitioners familiar with the context in which the teaching/training will take place during the development of teaching/training content
- **Diversity of activities with emphasis on participation:** Include a range of different participatory, interactive, creative and student-led types of activities
- **Quality over quantity:** Prioritise quality over quantity when designing/adapting course content and do not be tempted to cover as many topics as possible if this risks not giving students sufficient time to engage deeply with the material
- **E-platforms:** Explore possibilities for setting up e-platforms aimed at providing student access to readings and resources as well as supporting student exchange across localities and faith communities
- **Adaptation:** Create adaptable content, prioritising flexible and contextualised learning



St Paul's University, Kenya, 2024



Recommendations for instructors of teaching/training on evidence-based faith engagement and religions and development research

- **Participation:** Honour the participatory, holistic nature of the course by including interactive and creative activities (as outlined in the instructors' manual), keeping lectures engaging and allowing for as much student engagement and interaction time as possible
- **Contextualisation:** Prioritise the contextualisation of teaching (by ensuring readings and activities focus on locally relevant issues) and explore the possibility of delivering courses in languages that are spoken in the communities the institution works with, to allow for wider reach and higher accessibility
- **Student preparation time:** Share readings and resources several weeks in advance of the course, giving students time to do the readings and prepare the lessons appropriately
- **Classroom materials:** Ensure classroom materials (such as pens, markers, flipcharts) are available, test all technology prior to the session, and prepare emergency options in case of technological failures
- **Sensitive topics:** Remain attentive to sensitive topics and ensure all students have an opportunity to share their perspectives if they wish to do so, while pointing out dynamics around power, positionalities, inequalities, and marginalisation, where necessary



Cathedral Institute for Education and Formation, Sri Lanka, 2024



St Paul's University, Kenya, 2024

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