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LEARNING BRIEF

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN BUILDING PEACEFUL SOCIETIES AND COMBATING XENOPHOBIA

This is one brief in a series of three¹ concerning faith-based action for children on the move.² The purpose is to help faith actors,³ development practitioners, policymakers, and donors learn about faith communities' global contribution to prevent and respond to violence against children on the move. The learnings in these briefs come from a systematic review of academic and grey literature⁴ and a call for case study submissions. Two hundred and twenty-two documents and 33 case studies were reviewed.⁵ The findings from this review can be used to shape policy and practice regarding faith communities' support to children on the move. The learning briefs will also support the evidence base for the Faith Action for Children on the Move Forum,⁶ held in Rome, 16–19 October 2018. It is acknowledged that there are many further examples than those included in this literature review; the hope is that more practice examples will emerge during the forum.

Faith actors influence attitudes and behaviours

This learning brief aims to bring to light some of the dynamics around religion, attitudes and behaviours towards children and displacement as well as efforts from faith actors to counter harmful rhetoric and actions.

Faith actors have both long-term presence and expertise working in local communities. They also have value-driven underpinnings, connections and wide global networks. Given these advantages and characteristics, faith actors have ways to work with children on the move that are not available to other organisations. Their trust and authority also allow for opportunities to

change attitudes and behaviours to positively affect the lives of children on the move.

It is also important to recognise that religions and their followers have sometimes perpetuated attitudes and behaviours that are harmful to children.⁷ Thus, faith actors must work within their own communities to change these behaviours. Furthermore, interrelated religious and ethnic discrimination can be at the root causes of displacement, as with Yazidi and Christian displacement from Northern Iraq following the expansion of ISIS in 2014⁸ or the 2017 persecution and mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar.⁹

Faith groups raise awareness and advocate

By speaking out for children on the move and raising awareness of their needs and migration journeys, faith actors can shift attitudes and behaviours towards children so that their protection is continued.

Religious leaders speaking out

Faith actors are highly active in advocacy and awareness-raising work across the world, with religious leaders worldwide speaking out for the rights of children on the move.¹⁰ A range of faith actors recently denounced the family separation policy in the United States,¹¹ and Pope Francis has also publicly advocated in support of children on the move. For example, in 2017 for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis focused on children on the move in his message, 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.'¹²

Awareness-raising campaigns for the general public by faith groups

There are several faith-based awareness-raising campaigns to welcome refugees. These include #faithoverfear,¹³ from Religions for Peace with a number of partners, and #sharethejourney,¹⁴ from Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. UNHCR's #WithRefugees campaign has also featured stories highlighting support from faith actors for children and young people.¹⁵

Awareness-raising to protect children on the move within faith networks

Faith actors recognise that much needs to change within faith networks themselves to improve practices for 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.¹⁶ Following the 10th General Assembly of the WCC in 2013, a series of consultations took place around the world to inform commitments.¹⁷

Faith-based actors advocate to policymakers on child protection issues

Various faith-based international organisations and networks advocate for protection for children on the move. The International Catholic Migration Commission is one such organisation, working at local, national and interregional levels to serve and protect displaced

Practice example: Organising a worldwide faith-based network to end violence against children¹⁸

The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) is an interreligious network of organisations and individuals worldwide dedicated to guaranteeing the rights and welfare of children everywhere. The members of the GNRC come from all the major religions of the world and from many other spiritual traditions. This network is one of the four main initiatives of Arigatou International.

Activities

- The GNRC's 5th Forum, titled Ending Violence against Children: Faith Communities in Action, was held in Panama City in May 2017. The forum was attended by 526 religious leaders, leaders of faith-based organisations, members of faith communities and officials from international and non-governmental organisations.
- The result of the forum was 'The Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children', which 'affirms the fundamental dignity of every boy and girl' and calls for ten commitments to end violence against children.¹⁹

people. It has a global network of bishops, religious orders and Catholic organisations that respond to the needs of people on the move across 50 countries.²⁰

Faith actors hold events to advocate for children on the move in New York²¹ and Geneva,²² as well as with national governments and ambassadors around the

world. The UN published several documents highlighting the importance of cooperation between faith and other actors. Several agencies published partnership guidance for work with faith actors.²³ UNICEF published guidelines titled 'Partnering with Religious Communities for Children',²⁴ and UNHCR developed 'Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders'.²⁵

Practice Example: Educating schoolchildren in Italy about the realities of irregular migration²⁶

Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo (VIS) runs the *Stop Tratta /lo non discrimino* programme to raise awareness about the risks connected with irregular migration and to counter false news stories about migrants. It supports unaccompanied minors and young people in Italy and reaches out to children in Italian schools. It works in Italy (destination country) and in partnership with Salesians of Don Bosco in Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia (origin countries).

Activities

- The *lo non discrimino* awareness-raising toolkit includes an app through which students can interact and explore information about migration, the voyage, countries of origin and more. More than 300 schools in Italy have been reached. Messages are tailored to the context.
- Activities in the countries of origin are targeted at young people at risk through the Salesians' establishments in their vocational training centres, schools and other centres.
- The entire programme is designed, developed, and implemented based on Don Bosco's pedagogy and preventive method, in which education in the broadest sense (formal, informal, vocational, lifelong and so forth) is at the centre of all the programmes.

Future work

- The awareness-raising toolkit is being translated into English to be used in other countries where children and young people are arriving or are at risk.

Practice example: Advocating for the protection of children on the move in Australia

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) has several projects to support children on the move in Australia and abroad. As well as partnering with ACT Alliance, the NCCA has an initiative called the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ARCT) and has supported church advocacy by the WCC through the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Violence against Children.

Activities

- The group runs the Safe Church programme which, through safeguarding training and a training agreement, aims to ensure that Australian churches are emotionally, physically and spiritually as safe as possible for children and vulnerable adults.²⁷
- A programme in ARCT in partnership with Save the Children, Refugee Council, Amnesty International and Welcome to Australia is recommending guiding principles for the new community support programme, which will allow members of Australian church communities to sponsor visas for vulnerable refugee families.²⁸

Combating xenophobia

Xenophobia towards refugees is increasing, with discrimination based on both religious and national and ethnic identity. Faith actors promote sensitisation and work to advocate against xenophobic mindsets while also trying to protect refugees directly from xenophobic experiences and attacks.

Discrimination towards religious minorities

Xenophobia is on the rise globally.²⁹ Discriminatory practices against religious minorities in refugee movements have been reported around the world. In Germany there are accounts of attacks on Christians in refugee shelters,³⁰ reports of Muslim refugees finding it difficult to attend mosques in cities,³¹ and the existence of several political parties espousing strongly anti-Islamic views, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which has grown in popularity,³² and Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA).

In the UK the complexity of identity for asylum seekers means that there are differences in their 'voluntary or imposed identification as "Muslims" and...their exclusion from established Muslim communities in the UK'³³ similar to the experiences of Muslims refugees in Germany. A study on intergenerational religious belief and practice in Europe suggested that when discrimination is perceived and acknowledged, there is a positive effect on immigrants' religious belief and practice, with a greater effect in the second generation.³⁴

Faith actors protecting refugees from 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 some 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'.³⁵ Research found that CMM's leadership was central to this ability to strike out against prevailing authorities to protect refugees.³⁶ Further reports showed that many churches were involved in response to the xenophobic attacks.³⁷

Recent research following xenophobic attacks in 2015 in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa also show how local churches are central places of protection and services for Congolese refugees.³⁸ In the Central African Republic (CAR) religious leaders and their communities have protected people of different faiths against attacks that

are also based, in part, on religious difference. There are several stories from the past four years of Catholic churches protecting Muslims fleeing sectarian violence.³⁹ Elsewhere, US religious leaders spoke out against immigration bans targeting Muslim-majority countries,⁴⁰ and a growing number of faith-based organisations support the Global Campaign to End Child Immigration Detention,⁴¹ among other initiatives.

Faith actors in the Global Compact on Refugees

Faith Actors promote reconciliation and conflict prevention in the Global Compact on Refugees. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) has a specific section on children and youth calling for capacity development of child protection systems and the empowerment of young people.⁴² The GCR also recognises the role 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'.⁴³ Finally, the GCR's programme of actions aims to 'ensure the best interests of the child; and combat discrimination of any kind while promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence'.⁴⁴

UN bodies enlist religious groups to prevent xenophobia. Bringing together the threads of child protection, faith actors and combating discrimination,



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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'.⁴⁵ In May 2018, a group of faith-based and research organisations released the 'Joint Recommendations on the Role of Local Faith Communities in Refugee Response'.⁴⁶

Faith actors provide education to combat xenophobia

The Jesuit Network for Migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean (RJM LAC) developed an activity handbook, with two volumes for children in primary⁴⁷ and secondary education,⁴⁸ to transform their perceptions of meeting people from other backgrounds, views of hospitality, acceptance and respect for others, and to build an appreciation of diversity. *The Journey towards Hospitality* handbooks were published in 2015 and emerged from the RJM LAC's Campaign for Hospitality.

In Johannesburg, South Africa, Mercy College, a Catholic-run school, operates the Refugee Bridging Programme.⁴⁹ The programme runs from 3:00 to 6:00 pm daily, bringing approximately 150 disadvantaged, marginalised refugee children, 5 to 14 years old, onto its campus. The programme aims to support these children's transition into the South African school system while also offering protective supports to promote their resilience.

In Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya in collaboration with UNHCR runs the Peace Education Program for children in the Dadaab refugee camp in Northern Kenya.⁵⁰ In another example, prompted by the Salvation Army's experience with responding to xenophobia in South Africa, the Salvation Army published a positional statement setting out the reasons why xenophobia should be rejected by followers of Jesus. This was used to educate congregations and communities.⁵¹

Practice example: Avoiding xenophobia by creating cultures of peace for displaced children⁵²

World Vision in the CAR implemented Damara Children as Peacebuilders, focusing on children on the move who were affected by the conflict in the Damara sous-prefecture. Child beneficiaries particularly included children formerly associated with armed groups and their families. World Vision CAR partnered with several actors, including local government, CARITAS and local faith leaders (men and women). This project improved the protective environment for children with the support of 30 religious leaders (24 men and 6 women) selected from various churches and mosques.

Activities

- Trained religious leaders in child protection, child rights and social cohesion.
- Established and maintained child peace clubs. Carried out work to improve children's and caregivers' knowledge on social cohesion, tolerance and child protection.
- Provided children with the opportunity to access formal education with support from local government agencies.
- Provided children and community members with access to informal education, vocational training and development of income-generating activities through saving groups.
- Established child protection committees.

Impact

- In total, 4,944 children have accessed 10 peace clubs, with 308 former children associated with armed forces and armed groups and 70 members involved across 10 child protection community committees.
- The trained religious leaders replicated the training they had received on child protection, child rights, and social cohesion in their own churches and mosques.

Practice example: Providing creative and playful methods for children to overcome their differences in school environments⁵³

The Learning to Play Together programme in Greece aims to promote ethical values and intercultural learning through physical education classes. It is based on ‘Learning to Live Together: An Intercultural and Interfaith Program for Ethics Education’ developed by Arigatou International.⁵⁴ It has been implemented with fifth-grade students from the Elementary School of Intercultural Education in Athens since 2011. The programme provides alternatives to the use of competitive games and sports in physical education and helps to promote mutual understanding and respect among children and youth living in multicultural societies to help tackle the xenophobia and racism present in the country from anti-immigrant feelings.⁵⁵

Activities

- Students (migrants and refugees) were from 10 different countries⁵⁶ and did not have a common spoken and written language or similar socioeconomic background.
- Methods used included cooperation-based and problem-solving-based learning, discussion-based learning and experience-based learning. The children played multicultural and cooperative games together.

Lessons

- It was found that play can be a common language for children even if they do not share a spoken language, that the programme can be creatively adapted even in resource-poor environments, and that there needs to be special consideration for children who have experienced the extremes of violence and war so that they feel ‘safe, protected, reassured, and included.’⁵⁷

Key learnings

1. An awareness of the embeddedness of religion in social, cultural, political and economic dynamics will help all actors to understand the nuances of faith partnerships. For example, though faith actors may work to combat xenophobia that affects children on the move, they may simultaneously perpetuate other social norms that negatively affect children.
2. Because children on the move are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, faith actors are compelled by their beliefs to speak out for the protection of children and advocate for better practices, especially among people of the same faith.
3. In educational environments, children can experience xenophobia-related bullying. Because faith actors are highly involved in education systems worldwide, high standards of protection and combating xenophobia must be attained and maintained. This includes helping children integrate into mainstream schools and educating for hospitality and tolerance in schools.

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The studies and reports mentioned in this learning brief can be found at childrenonthemove.jliflc.com.

ENDNOTES

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