

GENEVA
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WEEK

Roundtable Discussion Report

Contributing to Peaceful and Inclusive Societies

Working Together to End Violence in Early Childhood

Palais des Nations, 9 November 2018

Brief Report of the roundtable discussion: Contributing to Peaceful and Inclusive Societies – Working Together to End Violence in Early Childhood, that took place on 9 November 2018 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva Switzerland, in the framework of the Geneva Peace week 2019.

The event was co-organized by Arigatou International – Geneva, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, Islamic Relief Worldwide, UNICEF, and World Vision International; members of the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood.

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INTRODUCTION



The discussion explored the multiple relations between early childhood development (ECD) and peacebuilding, looking at concrete holistic approaches to foster the cognitive, socio-emotional and spiritual development of children, including challenging social and cultural norms that condone violence in the upbringing of the child.

After presenting the latest scientific evidence in terms of how critical the early years are for the development of the child, the discussion looked specifically at those factors, like the exposure of children to violence, neglect, and abuse, that have a profound negative impact on the child development – with effects lasting well into adulthood. The evidence presented covered both the consequences in terms of negative health outcomes and the consequences in terms of socio-emotional development.

The reflections focused on the importance of challenging harmful practices by families and

caregivers, that are often condoned or justified by social and cultural norms and that have adverse effects on the development of the child's identity formation, including a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and resilience.

The panelists shared good practices in nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood and specifically at the interconnections between social and cultural norms and the role of religious actors in terms of influencing parents and caregivers in the upbringing of the child.

Religious communities play a critical role when it comes to challenging cultural and social norms that condone violence. They can be catalyst and allies to equip and influence families and caregivers to nurture peaceful and non-violent upbringing, contributing to flourishing and thriving childhoods as well as to reduce violence in families and communities, and foster peaceful and inclusive societies.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The moderator Ms. Eleonora Mura, Program Officer at Arigatou International – Geneva, opened the discussion giving a brief introduction to the topic and highlighting some of the latest evidence in terms of

the development of the brain architecture, showing the importance of fostering a culture of peace from the early years of life and presenting concrete experiences from working with parents, caregivers and faith leaders.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PANEL

Mr. Aaron Greenberg

Regional Child Protection Advisor to UNICEF
Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia

Q1: How critical are the early years for the development of the child? What are the factors that negatively influence the character formation of the child? And what are the factors that contribute to nurturing flourishing and thriving children?

Mr. Greenberg shared the latest evidence and the advances of science in terms of ECD and the consequences of violence, presenting some of the findings of the 2016 Lancet Series “Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale”: approximately 250 million (43%) children in low and middle-income countries are at risk of not meeting their developmental potential because of extreme poverty and stunting. He also highlighted the findings of the 2017 UNICEF report “A Familiar Face” in terms of the number of children worldwide affected by violent discipline: close to 300 million (three in four) children aged two

to four worldwide experience violent discipline by their caregivers on a regular basis; and 250 million children (around six in ten) are punished by physical means.

While the extreme cases of violence, abuse and neglect are addressed by statutory provisions, these usually constitute only 1-3% of all forms of violence. Therefore, in order to address violence against children in its broader range, we need to move from child protection to prevention and consider violence in all its manifestations working with families and caregivers around long-term prevention strategies through health and



education systems. This includes looking at the linkages between the brain formation and the sense of attachment and belonging, forging positive relationships from the early years that contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, cognitive and intellectual development, and learning and health outcomes. For this reason, governments interested in combatting extremism, including tackling the root causes of gang violence, recruitment into violent groups, etc., are increasingly encouraged to invest in ECD programs as there is robust evidence to show the linkages between adverse childhood experiences and negative seeking behaviors in adolescence and adulthood.

He also quoted the study [The Bucharest Early Intervention Project](#) to show the effect of neglect in the development of the brain architecture, shedding light on the interface between parenting, nurturing care and brain development and how the interaction between parents, caregivers and children is fundamental for children to reach their full potential.

He continued introducing the [Adverse Childhood Experience International Questionnaire \(ACE-IQ\)](#) developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to measure adverse childhood experiences in all countries, and the association between them and risk behaviors in later life.

He concluded by stressing the importance of investment in early childhood programs to build social cohesion and peaceful societies, including fostering formal policy mechanisms to provide nurturing care and stimulation during the early years to address peace in the longer run.

ECD constitutes the foundation of peace, solidarity, and social cohesion, and more

awareness needs to be raised among practitioners and policymakers about the importance of the early years.

Ms. Sabine Rakotomalala

Senior Adviser to Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children

Q2: It is crucial to challenge cultural and social norms that condone violence against children. Could you provide us with evidence-based strategies that have shown success in reducing violence against children? Particularly in terms of transforming harmful norms and practices and in working with parents and caregivers.

In her reply Ms. Rakotomalala, after highlighting again the universality of violence against children as a phenomenon that affects three out four children aged two to four worldwide, regardless of where they come from and their socio-economic background, continued recalling the consequences of violence in terms of health, citing a broad range of health problems going from anxiety to depression, to teen pregnancies, suicide and other negative coping behaviours (see [World Health Organization](#)).

Ending violence against children is at the center of the Sustainable Development Goals. Target 16.2 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against, and torture of, children”. Evidence from around the world shows that violence against children can be prevented. This evidence has been collected and seven strategies for ending violence against children have been highlighted in an evidence-based technical package to support

countries in their efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children aged 0 to 17 years: INSPIRE. (INSPIRE stands for **I**mplementation and enforcement of laws; **N**orms and values; **S**afe environments; **P**arent and caregiver support; **I**ncome and economic strengthening; **R**esponse and support; **E**ducation and life skills).

Ms. Rakotomalala also recalled the vision, mission, and objectives of the [Global Partnership to End Violence against Children](#), launched in 2016 to help achieve the ambitious undertaking of ending violence against children in every country, every community, and every family.

Ms. Rakotomalala concluded by presenting the evidence gathered after three concrete interventions to challenge restrictive and harmful norms. She cited the program *Coaching Boys into Man* that reported 38% fewer incidents of physical or sexual intimate partner violence perpetration 24 months after the intervention; the project *SASA!* (Kiswahili for “Now!”) in Uganda that resulted in women experiencing 52% less physical intimate partner violence, and in the decrease of the overall social acceptance of violence; and the results of *Cure Violence*, a program associated with fewer shootings, killings, and retaliatory killings in communities where it has been implemented

fully, with 20–70% reductions in violence. [For more details see INSPIRE pages 35-40](#)).

She closed her remarks highlighting the important role that faith leaders play in supporting their communities to embrace change and to reject cultural and social norms that condone violence.

Mr. Christo Greyling

Senior Director: Faith – Advocacy and External Engagement, Faith and Development, World Vision International

Q3: Religion plays an important role in shaping values and norms. Faith leaders have significant influence within their communities and can, therefore, inspire the upbringing of children both in positive and negative ways. How can religious actors be mobilized to nurturing spirituality and positive values in the family and challenge cultural and social norms that condone violence, contributing to building peaceful and harmonious societies? How can we equip faith leaders with the necessary information about harmful practices in early childhood so that they can bring change to their communities?

Mr. Greyling starting sharing his personal experience as a religious leader working to foster understanding and forgiveness within his congregation in Namibia, supporting his community to face challenging issues such as the stigma around HIV/AIDS and the consequences and practices of violence against children. Mr. Greyling reflected on the important role that faith leaders play in terms of accompanying their communities to embrace change, appreciate diversity and to challenge cultural and social





norms that condone violence. As the world is experiencing an increase in religiosity with 84% of the world population identifying belonging to a religious group (Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life), faith leaders play a key role: they are the gatekeepers in their communities and they can drive change to transform their communities. In Africa, for example, 70% to 84% of people declares to trust more their faith leaders than their elected state officials (BBC World Service Survey).

However, to engage with faith leaders, we as practitioners, need to listen to them and their experiences, connecting the evidence from science with the context of their communities and with the scriptures and theological reflections of each particular faith. This process starts with creating moments of self-reflection and self-awareness for faith leaders to allow self-discovery and dialogue that culminate in personal change and ultimately community transformation. These moments allow faith leaders to be aware of their practices in a critical manner and often end up with challenging those practices that are most harmful, like for example in the case of child sacrifice in Uganda by traditional healers, faith leaders challenged these practices and stopped them. The same happened in the case of child marriages in several locations.

While concluding his intervention, Mr. Greyling shared three lessons he has learned while working with faith leaders. Religious communities are based on value systems, rather than on human rights-based systems: as practitioners, we need to allow space for the scriptural principles and values to emerge and be connected with the context and the issues we are facing. Departing from these values and principles is the base for faith leaders as spiritual nurturers to stand up for justice and ultimately contribute to upholding human rights but from a values-based approach.

A second key lesson concerns the way of working with faith communities avoiding their instrumentalization. Finally, Mr. Greyling mentioned the importance of creating spaces for discovering the issues: rather than approaching faith communities with a long list of harmful practices that need to be abolished, allow faith leaders to discover what the issues are and how they can be faced.

Ms. Neelam Fida

Global Child Protection and Inclusion Advisor, Islamic Relief Worldwide

Q4: Your organization has an extensive experience working with families and caregivers, and with faith leaders for the holistic development of the child, promoting the well-being of children, including contributing to challenging violence against children and creating nurturing environments for the child. Could you share some of these concrete experiences with us, and how these programs have contributed to fostering inclusive and peaceful communities?



Ms. Neelam Fida continued reflecting on the good practices and lessons learned while working with faith communities. As a child protection practitioner, she shared how important is to understand norms that justify violence and are harmful, understanding the context and creating safe and sensitive spaces to challenge these norms while engaging with faith communities.

She shared her experience of engaging faith leaders using the *Channels of Hope* methodology developed by World Vision International and adapted by Islamic Relief Worldwide to work with Muslim faith communities. This methodology allows to engage faith leaders and understand how they can support and create protective environments for children, including by engaging with government structures to change policies affecting their communities. *Channels of Hope* helped faith leaders to engage more with the communities outside their mosques and also to work with different denominations in an inter-faith manner to transform their communities. She continued describing the implementation of the methodology in the Philippines, Kenya, and Lebanon.

Channels of Hope has been welcomed as a methodology by faith leaders to be more involved in driving transformation and have a meaningful engagement in their communities. However, as practitioners we have to be innovative in looking at what is important to them, for example, we can promote human rights education through schools, looking at roles and responsibilities in child protection, helping children to understand their rights so they know what to do to protect themselves and their families. At the same time, faith leaders would work with parents and caregivers to foster a culture of human rights within the community. In this way, both children and parents are equipped, they know their roles, responsibilities and human rights.

Ms. Fida concluded zooming on a project about sponsorship in Bangladesh to alleviate extreme poverty, piloting an alternative approach to ensure that families can be free of poverty within four years, through an integrated approach of multi-stream capacity building and financial support. The program provides each family with an interest-free loan, training, and equipment in order to allow families to make a living. Faith leaders' engagement was crucial to allow women to access the market and sell their products without being harassed.



DISCUSSION

The discussion looked at phenomena of online violence and how this is increasingly affecting children, highlighting how important it is to collect evidence in order to develop integrated approaches to address online violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

Globally, children face cyber-threats that are often poorly understood and underestimated by policymakers and parents alike. Online sexual exploitation and abuse of children is one of the most urgent of these rapidly emerging risks. The Global Partnership to End Violence against Children is working to combat [online sexual exploitation and abuse](#) of children around the world supported by £40 million over five years from the United Kingdom and US \$5 million from Human Dignity Foundation, and in partnership with the WePROTECT Global Alliance to End Child Sexual Exploitation Online.

Another initiative discussed included the Child Dignity initiative to shape and drive a global movement to protect our children in an increasingly digital world and the [Interfaith Alliance Forum](#), the world's religious leaders unite, along with distinguished academic experts, business leaders, law enforcement representatives, politicians, and governments, to protect every child's right to dignity and safety online.

Ms. Fida also shared the work of [NSPCC on child protection and social media](#) as a concrete practice in the field to foster the education of parents and caretakers to reduce the risk of harms for children while online.

The discussion also focused on the impact and sustainability of the interventions presented, looking in particular at the progress that has been made in terms of tracking the impact of the different interventions, looking at monitoring and evaluation practices and longitudinal studies to understand what interventions work best in terms of violence prevention.

The discussion also looked at where governments should make their investments in terms of child protection, including how one capacitates social services for child protection.



CONCLUSIONS AND CLOSING



The moderator shared some final conclusions on the linkages between ECD and peacebuilding and how important it is to include ECD programs in overall prevention strategies for peace and social cohesion.

The moderator also recalled the importance of working in partnership and joining forces; she recalled the launching of the Consortium on Nurturing Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence. This international consortium aims to foster collaborations, to share good practices and to develop evidence-based and innovative approaches in religious communities that contribute to ending violence in early childhood, challenging social and cultural norms that condone it and supporting families to nurture values and spirituality in children.

The moderator closed the event thanking the panelists for their informative and inspiring sharing and for presenting their personal stories of engagement to end violence against children. Warm thanks also went to the participants for the engaging discussions.





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**“If we are to create peace
in our world, we must begin
with our children.”**

—Mahatma Gandhi

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