

9 December 2024

# Outcome report

## Maintaining engagement in fragile contexts through partnership with local faith-based organisations



## Introduction

This roundtable, hosted in Brussels on 9 December 2024, brought together experts and stakeholders to explore best practices and challenges in implementing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus, particularly in fragile contexts. The event was hosted by COMECE (Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union), ACT Alliance EU, Caritas Europa, Islamic Relief, and EU-CORD. Chris Lukkien, CEO of ZOA, moderated the event.

The event focused on the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs), which are critical actors in fragile states due to their longstanding presence and strong community ties. The roundtable highlighted the potential for collaboration between the European Union (EU), FBOs, and civil society organisations (CSOs) in implementing the Nexus in fragile and politically estranged states.

This report is a summary of the presentations and discussions held during the roundtable: two sets of opening remarks on the current political scenario and contribution of FBOs; presentations from local/national organisations in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Venezuela and Pakistan; discussion by the roundtable participants and closing remarks by EEAS and NGO representatives.

## Key takeaways

1. Local/national Faith-based organisations (FBOs) play a vital role in fragile contexts where state institutions are weak. They are often trusted by local communities due to their deep-rooted presence working in an integrated way to sustain social cohesion, promote human rights & participation and respond to livelihoods needs and emerging crises. This makes them essential partners in implementing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus.
2. Local/national FBOs struggle with the unpredictable and short-term nature of funding available to local actors. This limits their ability to address long-term development goals alongside immediate humanitarian needs. In turn, this affects their capacity to sustain programmes, positive development outcomes and address the root causes of conflict.
3. FBOs have been successful in leveraging local structures and vertical state relations to promote peace, such as establishing inclusive peace committees, managing conflicts, and supporting dialogue between religious and secular actors, often filling gaps left by the state. Their faith-based identity can foster trust, which is essential for social cohesion and gaining access during humanitarian crises, especially in conflict-affected areas like Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Pakistan.

## Recommendations

1. A better understanding of the role of faith in humanitarian response, development and peacebuilding can be enhanced by promoting religious literacy among international policymakers and practitioners. Religious literacy enables a do no harm approach which is well targeted: it enables a more comprehensive conflict sensitivity analysis, as well as more accurate analysis of the overlapping socio-economic, political and religious/ethnic drivers of crises and development challenges.
2. Donors, including the EU, need to prioritise and create the relevant instruments for an integrated approach. One way this can be achieved is by improving the distinct funding instruments that already exist by making them more long-term, flexible, and creating the possibility to easily transition between them. These funding instruments should enable local organisations to support development and peacebuilding efforts in fragile states.
3. Greater collaboration and coordination with local FBOs by governments, multilateral agencies and international organisations is needed to ensure sustainable impact and the inclusion of local voices in decision-making processes. Successful implementation HDP Nexus programming is not just about

coordinating different pillars but fundamentally requires embedding interventions within existing social structures at multiple levels: local actors and FBOs have crucial experience to build on.

## Opening remarks

Marek Misak from COMECE set the stage by discussing how the new political cycle offers an opportunity to improve work on implementing a Nexus approach with the integrated approach to fragility appearing multiple times in the new mission letters of the Commissioners. He highlighted the importance of engaging FBOs and religious organisations due to the important role they play in peacebuilding and meeting local needs, particularly in fragile contexts where trust in state institutions is weak or absent. FBOs have deep community roots and are often trusted more than governments in fragile states.

The EU is already seeking to improve partnerships with FBOs to enhance its impact on sustainable development and peacebuilding efforts. There have been several initiatives, including the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, that speak to how to implement this collaboration more effectively. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Guidelines on Engaging with Faith-Based Organisations and Religious Leaders can serve as a model for the EU to develop more structured cooperation.

Ruth Faber, CEO of EU-CORD, set the scene with opening remarks, noting that fragile states face numerous difficulties, including weak governance, lack of services, and political isolation. FBOs operate in contexts where funding is increasingly unpredictable and short-term, making it hard to sustain long-term programming. There is a need for a nuanced approach to engage with local structures while maintaining accountability for humanitarian principles and neutrality. "Religious literacy is not just a diplomatic necessity but a programmatic one," she noted, speaking to the growing awareness of the necessary role of FBOs in building bridges within and between communities, and in governance to create breakthroughs in health, education, and livelihoods.

Ruth clearly stated the goal of the roundtable to be to help faith-based organisations and networks tailor their advocacy approaches on Nexus and fragility, looking ahead to the MFF to create strong solutions-oriented messages, and to create an enabling environment to reach the full potential of the case studies presented by the speakers. Ruth closed her remarks by asking participants to consider the cost of inaction and the need to adopt a comprehensive and strategic approach to fragility.

## Best practice presentations

The first session featured presentations from two FBO representatives working in fragile contexts: Yilikal Shiferaw Messelu of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOC-DICAC) and Simon Gniminou of OCADES Caritas Burkina. These presentations provided insights into the practical challenges and successes of implementing the Nexus approach.

Ethiopia: Yilikal Shiferaw Messelu (EOC-DICAC)

Yilikal highlighted the long-term role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's development arm in providing humanitarian assistance and promoting social cohesion in areas of protracted conflict. Key components of their work include:

- Leveraging faith and cultural values and long-term relations with communities to enhance trust, community acceptance and humanitarian access during heightened conflicts
- Religious literacy ensures a fuller conflict sensitivity analysis and contextual understanding which helps to ensure do no harm approaches which take into account historical grievances.
- Implementing integrated projects that address water sanitation, hygiene, climate resilience, and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention.

Key outcomes:

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- The organisation roots its approach in achieving sustainable development by also ensuring response to humanitarian shocks and long-term peacebuilding efforts.
- The faith basis of the organisation, and its structure rooted in the grassroots, enables the EOC-DICAC to support social cohesion. They do so by addressing the ethnic and religious roots of conflicts and engaging with both religious and secular leaders, authorities and community builders. Securing sustained funding and resources is very difficult and creates capacity gaps. Flexibility and neutrality in their approach allowed for the successful provision of services without discrimination despite those gaps.

### Burkina Faso: Simon Gniminou (Caritas Burkina)

Simon discussed the social cohesion and peace framework developed by Caritas Burkina in response to the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis. Caritas Burkina Faso has been a development actor in the country for many years, but since 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced a deteriorating security situation, resulting in mass displacement and conflict over land, resources, and politics. Additionally, Burkina Faso is subject to cyclical and/or shock droughts and floods (acute drought almost every 10 years, major floods every 5 years), hence the need to combine development and humanitarian aid.

#### Key strategies:

- Development of a social cohesion and peace mechanism, which includes mapping conflict zones, diagnosing risks, and creating peace plans with local communities.
- Through long-term work with both communities and with governance structures, Caritas Burkina Faso has ensured representation of communities in national social cohesion and conflict sensitivity planning and among NGOs.
- Caritas Burkina focused on long-term solutions, such as setting up dialogue and peace committees to manage conflict and foster peaceful coexistence.

More information about Caritas Burkina Faso's work can be found [here](#) and their manual (in French) can be found [here](#).

#### Challenges:

- International cooperation and funding remain fragmented, with resources often diverted from development to humanitarian response.
- The lack of sustainable, multi-year funding for Nexus-related projects limits the ability to address the root causes of conflict.
- Limited funding reaches local organisations, further limiting the ability of local FBOs to mobilise resources to implement humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding work

## Best practice presentations II

The second session showcased two additional best practice examples from Venezuela and Pakistan, emphasising the importance of FBOs in remote and conflict-affected areas.

### Venezuela: Norayma Angel (Vicariate Apostolic of Puerto Ayacucho)

Norayma described how the Catholic Church's long-term presence in remote regions of Venezuela enabled them to play a critical role in providing humanitarian aid and protecting the rights of indigenous communities. Contrary to some assumptions about the Church, they do not deny the spirituality to the indigenous people but rather recognise and embrace the values upheld by indigenous communities and their commitment to living in harmony with one another and with nature. This is an important example of the potential of relationships between different faith traditions and how mutual respect and collaboration can lead to strong relationships that facilitate peacebuilding and social cohesion.

#### Key Initiatives:

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- The Vicariate's Human Rights Office has collaborated with Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe to deliver emergency relief and livelihood support to communities affected by the ongoing crisis.
- Their integrative approach combines emergency assistance with long-term recovering and sustaining livelihoods and support to human rights defence – particularly the participation and empowerment of women and marginalised indigenous populations.

### Challenges:

- The organisation's neutrality and independence often made them targets in politically charged contexts. Working in partnership with international NGOs supported the agency to navigate working across humanitarian, human rights and development work.
- Navigating the balance between human rights advocacy and humanitarian action requires careful assessment of security risks, local dynamics and of state approaches and relations.

### Pakistan: Wisal Muhammad (Islamic Relief Pakistan)

Wisal from Islamic Relief Pakistan shared his experiences working across South Asia in conflict-affected regions with deeply entrenched social divisions. In Pakistan, their Nexus approach centres on building trust between communities and local government authorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The situation in Pakistan is complex, with over a decade of unrest, displacement and a breakdown of social structures, inter-tribal relationships and social cohesion. Newly merged districts voted to join the state governance system of Pakistan in 2018, ending autonomous rule. Due to the limited history of government-citizen relations, there remain very low levels of trust in the government by citizens of the region.

### Key strategies:

- Establishing community-led development and dispute resolution structures to foster social cohesion and address water disputes; ensuring youth and women engagement in these structures.
- Supporting youth-led initiatives to resolve inter-tribal conflicts, and strengthen inter-generational relationships.
- Building on Islamic Relief Pakistan's long-standing relations with both communities and levels of the state to broker trust and support both vertical and horizontal relations.

### Challenges:

- Community sensitisation and outreach efforts require significant investment
- Trust is hard to build but easily lost

### Success factors:

- Islamic Relief's faith-based identity and local staff's cultural sensitivity were crucial in gaining community trust and acceptance.
- Their long-standing presence in the region allowed them to build credibility and facilitate dialogue between tribal groups and government authorities.

### Roundtable discussion:

The second roundtable discussion centred on identifying strategies to overcome political and structural barriers to supporting local FBOs in fragile contexts.

### Key discussion points:

- There is broad awareness of the importance of the Nexus, but humanitarian funding often takes precedence over development and peacebuilding efforts.
- Participants expressed concerns about the barriers to operationalizing Nexus funding, with some citing difficulties in accessing long-term, flexible resources.

- Collaboration among FBOs and sharing of best practices is essential for replicating successful models across regions, but structural challenges, including political and institutional barriers, persist.
- Lack of flexible and sustainable funding for Nexus-related projects, which limits the ability to address both immediate needs and long-term development goals.
- Institutional barriers within the EU and other international organisations that hinder collaboration with local FBOs – this work seems to occur in spite of, not supported, by institutional structures.
- The need for greater recognition of FBOs' role in peacebuilding and development, particularly in areas where state institutions are weak or absent.

## Recommendations

- Increase donor awareness of the need for integrated Nexus funding, particularly for development and peacebuilding initiatives.
- Strengthen partnerships between FBOs, governments, and international organisations to align efforts and ensure sustainable impact.
- Promote diaspora engagement and engagement with new donors as a potential source of funding and support for local development initiatives in fragile states.
- Foster stronger partnerships between FBOs and international organisations to ensure that local voices are included in decision-making processes.
- Encourage the EU to develop specific guidelines for engaging FBOs in Nexus-related work, building on existing UNDP frameworks.
- Promote religious literacy among policymakers and practitioners to enhance understanding of the role of faith in development and peacebuilding.
- CSOs should play a key role in shaping the new fragility strategy and they should take advantage of the consultation process to do so.

## Closing remarks and the way forward

In the closing session, Adriana de Fijter (Kerk in Actie) and Asad Beg (EEAS) reflected on the key takeaways from the roundtable and outlined the next steps for advancing the Nexus approach in fragile states.

Adriana de Fijter:

- FBOs are integral to the social fabric of society, particularly in regions where religious faith plays a central role in community life.
- Building trust is essential for successful Nexus interventions, and FBOs' long-term presence in local communities positions them as key players in this effort.
- There is a need to adapt funding mechanisms to align with the realities of fragile states and to strengthen the capacity of FBOs to implement Nexus projects.

Asad Beg:

- Emphasised the importance of credibility, integrity, and impartiality in the work of FBOs.
- Recognised the importance of the role of FBOs in brokering trust across communities and with levels of the state, supporting social cohesion and working through co-creation with local communities.
- Highlighted the cost of inaction, noting that failing to address root causes of conflict will result in higher costs in the future.
- Encouraged FBOs to engage with EU policymakers and ensure that their voices are included in the development of future Nexus strategies. He underlined the commitment of the European Commission to engaging with the experience and voice of youth.

## Conclusion

The roundtable highlighted the critical role of FBOs in fragile and conflict-affected states. Their deep-rooted presence and trust within local communities make them essential partners in implementing the HDP Nexus. However, significant challenges remain, including the need for more flexible, long-term funding to local actors and greater collaboration between FBOs, governments, and international organisations. The EU, Member States, and other donors often acknowledge the important role played by FBOs but struggle to strategically engage with them and adequately support their work.

Moving forward, the EU and its partners must prioritise building stronger partnerships with FBOs and addressing the structural barriers that hinder effective implementation of the Nexus in fragile states. By doing so, they can create more sustainable and inclusive solutions that address the root causes of conflict and promote peace, development, and human dignity. The new EU fragility approach can play an important role in furthering this work, but it remains to be seen if it will deliver in these areas.

### Contact details

#### Abriel Schiefflers

Humanitarian Advocacy Officer

Tel: +32 (0) 2 204 03 81

Mob: +31 (0) 6 25 30 88 22

[aschiefflers@caritas.eu](mailto:aschiefflers@caritas.eu)

#### Luisa Fondello

Senior International

Cooperation Officer

Mob: +46 (0) 73-947 39 16

[LFondello@caritas.eu](mailto:LFondello@caritas.eu)

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