

# **Plan of Action for Religious Leaders from Africa to Prevent Incitement to Violence that could lead to Atrocity Crimes**

## **Introduction**

While the protection of populations and the prevention of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity (atrocity crimes) is primarily the responsibility of States, it is a multilayered endeavor to which different societal actors can make an important contribution. Among them, religious leaders have a fundamental role to play, given their spiritual leadership and influence over their communities and the broader society. When they speak out, their voices are heard and their messages have the power to multiply.

This Plan of Action is the result of two days of consultations among religious leaders from different faiths from the Africa region, as well as faith-based organisations, subject experts, the United Nations and other inter-governmental organisations, to develop a strategy for religious leaders from Africa to prevent and counter incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.

The meeting revealed that incitement to hatred, hostility and violence is prevalent in Africa, as it is in all regions; incitement has preceded and accompanied violence and atrocity crimes in countries affected by conflict and violent extremism, as well as in countries considered to be relatively peaceful. The targets of incitement have included communities defined by their religious and ethnic identity or political affiliation, as well as women.

Through this Plan of Action, religious leaders and actors committed, among other actions, to respect and promote human rights; respond to and counter incitement speech; increase interfaith collaboration; and partner with traditional and new media, as well as with state authorities and education institutions, to prevent and respond to incitement to violence and build communities that support each other, across faiths, and are resilient to incitement to violence.

## **Recommendations for religious leaders**

### **Protecting and promoting universal human rights**

- Even if religious leaders and actors adhere to what they consider to be absolute truths, they should base them on ethical and human rights principles;
- Religious leaders and actors should promote the fundamental value of accepting others as they are, whatever their beliefs, without insisting that others should change their beliefs;
- Religious leaders and actors should discard ideas of being superior to other human beings;
- Religious leaders and actors should be role models within their communities; preach the value of fraternity in humanity and contribute to educating the

- population on peace, social cohesion and the acceptance of “the Other”. This role is particularly important when peace and social cohesion are threatened;
- Protection of human rights, preventing discrimination based on religious or other fundamental beliefs, and the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, could help stem the misuse of religion to drive violence and war and could help promote peace and reconciliation in places marked by religiously motivated violence;
  - Religious leaders and actors should be the mothers and fathers not only of their own congregations, but of all those within their communities;
  - Religious leaders and actors should avoid being politically manipulated, however they should engage with political actors for the common good of their communities (in relation to access to healthcare and education, for example);
  - Religious leaders and actors should engage in activities that have a strong symbolic relevance to promote peaceful coexistence and inter-religious harmony<sup>1</sup>;
  - Religious leaders and actors should promote and disseminate best practices of peaceful coexistence and lessons learned<sup>2</sup>, bearing in mind, however, that there are no “fix all” solutions and that every context is different;
  - Religious leaders and actors should establish and strengthen Councils of Peace and Solidarity<sup>3</sup> at the national or sub-regional level;
  - Religious leaders and actors should move beyond tolerance and preach universal messages of peace and respect that are aligned with international human rights standards;
  - Religious leaders and actors should develop an inter-faith code of conduct for preaching, based on ethical and human rights principles that should become a blueprint for all religious leaders.

### **Preventing and countering incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence**

- Religious leaders and actors should prevent and contribute to the eradication of incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence;
- Religious leaders and actors should be trained to recognize the difference between offensive speech, hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence;

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<sup>1</sup> e.g.: if a Church that has been damaged or destroyed is re-built, Muslims can contribute or assist and vice versa. Of note is the example from the Central African Republic, where a mosque in Lakouanga was destroyed during the conflict and then rebuilt by Christians in April 2015. Muslims subsequently assisted with rebuilding a church that had been destroyed.

<sup>2</sup> e.g.: Experience of Cote d’Ivoire.

<sup>3</sup> e.g.: The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) operates at the National and State levels in Nigeria. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also tries to do some peace-building work between member countries and observer countries, some of which are not Muslim majority countries eg. Gabon and Thailand (respectively). Also, the Ethiopian Peace & Development Center sets up Councils of Elders for different conflict situations, as the Ethiopian-Eritrean Peace Council (1998-2000) that was created to deal with the Ethiopian-Eritrean War (1998-2000.) It also set up a Council of National Peace Elders to help free the imprisoned political leaders and members of the Parliament (2005-2007). Moreover, in 2007, the Council helped free 30 leading political prisoners, doctors, lawyers, business people, professors, and elected members of the Parliament overcoming “a deadlock that no amount of outside [international US AND EU] pressure seemed able to loosen” and opening “a new chapter in Ethiopian politic”. <http://www.csmonitor.com/>.

- Religious leaders and actors should diagnose problems correctly and be able to distinguish between tensions/violence that have political, ethnic or religious roots, or a combination of them;
- Religious leaders and actors should not allow tensions to escalate, and should therefore respond to incitement as soon as it occurs;
- Influential and committed religious leaders and actors should be appointed to disseminate counter and alternative messages in situations where tensions are high;
- Religious communities should support religious leaders and actors when they speak out in relation to preventing incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, whichever faith they represent;
- Religious leaders and actors should find appropriate and acceptable means to abide and respect agreements. These agreements could be in the form of a simple document signed by the Muslim and Christian leaders of a particular community, that states that each member of the leadership (on behalf of their respective groups) promises to work for peaceful coexistence and will not in any way support hatred or violence against the Other.

#### **Interfaith dialogue and inter-religious activities**

- Religious leaders from different faiths and beliefs should jointly seek common moral and theological ground, rooted in their respective religious traditions and teachings, which confirms the principles and values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Religious leaders and actors should create and/or reinforce interfaith alliances and networks<sup>4</sup> and, when necessary, release joint press statements and carry out joint missions<sup>5</sup>. They should use these networks to build and strengthen relationships within the community;
- Religious leaders and actors should, with the support of the media, publicize joint, collaborative/solidarity efforts of inter-religious communities to the wider public;
- Religious leaders and actors should establish an African network of religious leaders, beginning with the participants of this meeting (Addis Ababa 2016 core);
- Where relevant, religious leaders and actors should establish national interreligious observatories to detect causes and origins of hate speech and incitement to violence as well as to identify and analyse endemic, structural, cultural, and cult-related sources of violence. The observatories should have regional and local offices. Activities of the national observatories could include:
  - Establishment of hot lines for early warning for violence and its incitement;

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the example of the interreligious coalition established to fight HIV/AIDS.

<sup>5</sup> Example of interreligious “caravans” in Cote d’Ivoire that religious leaders and actors belonging to different religions used to travel across the country to spread messages of peace and mutual respect.

- Identification and implementation of different prevention tools to be used to address violence and its incitement, including sensitization and mediation;
- Liaison with political, media and security officials on actions aimed at preventing/countering violence and its incitement;
- Periodical monitoring and evaluation of the work of the national observatories.

## **Education**

Based on the belief that education, including education for religious leaders and actors, as well as youth, increases mutual respect, tolerance and understanding and diminishes the risk that individuals could be manipulated for political purposes:

### Recommendations for enhancing the education of religious leaders and actors:

- Religious leaders and actors should be trained to diagnose issues related to violence and its incitement, including training on: understanding the risk factors for violence and its incitement; their consequences and impact; as well as possible measures and strategies to prevent and/or counter violence;
- Religious leaders and actors should be trained on intercultural and interreligious communication so as to be enabled to better understand religious, ethnic and tribal differences as well as their consequences. They should also be trained on global citizenship<sup>6</sup> and on the use of traditional and new media;
- Profiles (or minimum qualifications) for religious leaders should be developed and education curricula for the training of religious leaders should be improved. These curricula should be based on intra-faith theology that is inclusive and promotes respect for international human rights<sup>7</sup> and “the Other”;
- Training for religious leaders that promotes interfaith partnership should be developed and related tools and resources should be disseminated and made easily available, including online;
- Resource persons, including trainers of trainers, specialized in interfaith dialogue and partnerships, should be trained and interreligious networks of resource persons should be developed;
- To ensure an on-the-ground, immediate response to the eruption of violence, local clergy and other religious leaders (including women and youth who play leadership roles in their religious communities) should be trained in conflict resolution and management, so that they are better able to help contain violence;
- Conflict resolution and management, as well as peaceful resolution of conflicts should be included in the curricula of religious universities to equip future religious leaders with the knowledge and capacity to understand how violence manifests, the historical role of religion in fueling or mitigating violence, and how religious leaders and actors can contribute to preventing and countering violence.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://en.unesco.org/gced>.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Muslim scholars need to be trained on legal principles (*Usul al-Fiqh*) and objectives (*Maqasid*) of Islamic jurisprudence to better understand how *fatwas* are constructed to meet the changing needs of a community, and why respect for differing opinions is essential to constructive problem-solving.

### Recommendations for enhancing youth education:

- The education of children should be rights based. In this context, education curricula, from early childhood to university-level education, should include civic and peace education, information on different religions, as well as the history of genocide and other atrocity crimes and how to prevent their future recurrence. Moreover, critical thinking should be embedded in youth education;
- Stereotypes and negative values should be removed from teaching materials in schools.

### General:

- Existing education resources for religious leaders and actors, as well as for youth, should be mapped in order to avoid duplication of efforts;
- Religious leaders from different faiths and beliefs should jointly identify and share core texts from their respective scriptures as well as influential theological writings and pedagogical materials that could be used to support the promotion of mutual respect and understanding;
- Knowledge of the “other” should be promoted within religious institutions to increase understanding, tolerance and respect of other religions and beliefs and to ensure that religious identity does not become a source of division and of religious tensions and violence.

### **Media**

- Religious leaders and actors should encourage research on the role of the media in spreading incitement to violence;
- Intra and interreligious media literacy should be developed;
- Media content that could be shared with the media should be developed;
- Religious leaders and actors should collaborate with traditional and new media to spread counter and alternative messages in the main African languages;
- Religious leaders and actors should develop relations with the media so that their alternative and counter messages are picked up quickly and widely disseminated;
- In particular, they should enhance their collaboration with interfaith radio stations and radio stations that broadcast messages promoting inclusiveness and social cohesion;
- Media and interfaith networks should establish collaboration on social activities as well as on issues of public importance.

### **Confronting ideology that promotes violent extremism**

- Religious leaders and actors should publicly reject radical ideologies that promote violent extremism;
- Religious leaders and actors should engage with hardline politicians, including those who hold extremist views;
- Religious leaders and actors should identify extremist arguments and develop a compendium of counter/alternative messages, based on religious scriptures and principles;
- Religious leaders and actors should listen to and address grievances of the youth, even when what they say is shocking or controversial;

- Religious leaders and actors should develop and use alternative and creative methods of talking to young people, in addition to preaching;
- Religious leaders and actors should contribute to building the resilience of youth to violent extremism and narratives. In this context, they should engage constructively with youth communities and contribute to their “intellectual immunization” from ideologies that promote violent extremism;
- When possible, they should personally engage, and engage early on, with radicalized youth or youth at risk of radicalisation and counter their arguments using religious principles and scriptures;
- Religious leaders and actors should enhance dialogue with students and students’ councils to improve intergenerational understanding;
- Religious leaders and actors should involve youth in community, sport, cultural and interfaith work;
- Religious leaders and actors should identify and train influential youth who can contribute to spreading messages of tolerance and respect among their peers;
- Religious leaders and actors should undertake advocacy with state institutions and the private sector on the importance of providing youth with economic opportunities and vocational training.

#### **Preventing and countering incitement to gender-based violence**

- Religious leaders and actors should condemn and advocate against gender-based violence and its use as a weapon of war;
- Religious leaders and actors should promote a “healing of memories” approach to gender-based violence, whereby they welcome back survivors into their communities and encourage the re-acceptance and reintegration of survivors instead of isolating and stigmatizing them;
- Religious leaders and actors, especially women, should be trained in faith-based counseling to support survivors of gender-based violence.

#### **Engagement with State authorities**

- Religious leaders and actors should work to ensure that States demonstrate respect for all religions and do not discriminate against any religion, or the practitioners of any religion;
- Religious leaders and actors should lobby national authorities to establish national days, for example national days of reconciliation, social cohesion, tolerance, mutual respect or peaceful co-existence. On these days, religious leaders should organise community and youth gatherings;
- Religious leaders and actors could lobby national authorities to establish a “day of apology”, based on the Australian model, whereby forgiveness is promoted and perpetrators of past crimes and violations apologize;
- Religious leaders and actors should lobby national authorities to implement measures to prevent or counter incitement to violence.

#### **Recommendations for States**

- States should demonstrate respect for all religions and not discriminate against any religion, or the practitioners of any religion;

- States should ratify, domesticate and disseminate information on international treaties relevant to preventing violence and its incitement; they, together with religious leaders and actors, should raise awareness about these treaties and their relevance;
- States should ensure implementation of these treaties at the national level;
- States should provide political and financial support for religious leaders to implement this Plan of Action at national and local level;
- National and local authorities should publicly support, and provide protection for religious leaders who speak out against incitement;
- States should support education curricula that include knowledge of world religions, and of their respective ethical frameworks;
- State should encourage and support religious diplomatic engagement as a tool to prevent, manage and solve conflicts;
- Consolidate and strengthen ongoing multilateral interreligious programs. Programs conducted under the auspices of the United Nations, African Union and other international Organizations, such as the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the Alliance for Civilizations, among others, provide a pathway to strengthen international norms of religious pluralism and high-order religious tolerance.

#### **Implementation of the Plan of Action**

- This Plan of Action should be implemented at continental, regional, national and local level; its implementation should be monitored and evaluated.

*Nothing about us without us*