

Michelle Garred, Rebecca Herrington, and Elizabeth Hume

Linking Evaluators and Inter-Religious Peacebuilders

The Making of an Evaluation Guide

“At a time when religious differences are often used to fan the flames of violence, the role of faith-based initiatives in building peace can be pivotal...However, inter-religious action—as a key approach to sustainable peace—still has not recognized its full potential as a force for sustainable peace.”

—Melanie Greenberg, President and CEO of the Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2011–2018¹

With funding from the GHR Foundation, the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) and its partners CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) and Search for Common Ground (SFCG), in collaboration with a Global Advisory Council, led the Effective Inter-Religious Action in Peacebuilding Program (EIAP) project between 2015 and 2017.² The project’s substantive learnings to date are captured in its primary publication: *Faith Matters: A Guide for the Designing, Monitoring & Evaluation of Inter-Religious Action for Peace*³ (hereafter referred to as the *Faith Matters* Guide). This chapter complements the *Faith Matters* Guide by exploring the underlying human learning processes that made the substantive learning possible. In bringing together representatives of two very different stakeholder audiences, evaluators and inter-religious actors, this project set in motion a mutually transformative exchange. Both groups are essential for progress, and yet previous communication and collaboration had been minimal. Therefore this chapter analyses what inter-religious peacebuilders and evaluators learned from each other during EIAP, unpacking the victories, tensions and challenges they encountered, to help illuminate the next phase of effort. The chapter also identifies real-world ways forward in developing evaluation approaches that both evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders can embrace.⁴

1 See Alliance for Peacebuilding (2021).

2 This chapter was written in mid-2017 near the end of EIAP’s initial three-year phase. It reflects developments up to that time, unless otherwise noted.

3 Woodrow *et al.* 2017. The guide is available at: <https://www.dmeformpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SEPT-26-JF-EIAP-GUIDE-FINAL-UPDATED.pdf>. The guide addresses design, monitoring and evaluation, but the primary focus throughout most of its development process was on evaluation.

4 The authors appreciate constructive feedback from: David Steele, Nick Oatley, Peter Woodrow, Sumaye Hamza, Khaled Ehsan, Benjamin Medam and Dilshan Annaraj.

1 Background: The Effective Interreligious Action in Peacebuilding Project

EIAP was driven by the belief that inter-religious action can play an important role in both religious and secular peacebuilding. The supporting objectives included developing a framework for learning, establishing a nascent community of practice, developing guidance on how to evaluate inter-religious action (the focus of this chapter), and advocating for policies that support inter-religious action in peacebuilding. EIAP began by exploring the ‘state of play’ in the field, including reviews of relevant literature (Schmidt *et al.* 2016) and current evaluative practice (Vader 2015). The overarching findings indicated that, despite high levels of activity and commitment in the inter-religious peacebuilding field, examples of good evaluation practice and customized tools for carrying it out were exceedingly scarce. Those findings shaped the priorities for EIAP action.

1.1 EIAP Activities

Early in the project, the Global Advisory Council (GAC) was created, consisting of religious leaders and practitioners of multiple faiths, to advise and provide intellectual continuity for EIAP activities. The three lead partner organizations recognized this faith-based community of practice as critical, particularly since the lead partners themselves are all secular organizations. The community of practice was supported by SFCG’s launch of an online interface (DM&E for Peace 2015) to provide an opportunity for practitioners, evaluators, academics, and donors to share resources and lessons learned.

Beginning in 2016, CDA produced an initial draft of the *Faith Matters* guide, incorporating a range of tools, processes and methods for application in widely differing contextual and organizational circumstances. The field-testing of the guide by seven organizations became a central component of EIAP. Three testing organizations were selected through a competitive mini-grant process: Sindh Community Foundation (in Pakistan), the Rossing Centre for Education and Dialogue (in Jerusalem), and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda. Additionally, four larger organizations agreed to test the Faith Matters guide using their own resources: SFCG (in Kyrgyzstan), Mercy Corps (in Myanmar), World Vision (in Kenya and Lebanon), and a multi-regional programme at Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Throughout the project, AfP engaged donors and policymakers in the United States and Europe to share principles for effective evaluation of inter-religious

action, including how policies and donor practices can promote or inhibit inter-religious action in peacebuilding.

1.2 Challenges Encountered

The sheer diversity of EIAP stakeholders is vast: practitioners and advisors, religious and secular, grassroots organizations and global networks, seasoned veterans and new voices. Nonetheless, when viewed in overarching terms, EIAP has two primary audiences – the largely secular evaluation community and the inter-religious peacebuilding community. The relationship between these two main stakeholder groups is pivotal, because both groups are necessary to strengthen evaluation practice in the inter-religious peacebuilding field. However, past communication between the two groups has been minimal and hampered by misunderstanding. Neither audience is a monolith; there is variation and overlap, and there are individuals who don't fully identify with either group. Nonetheless, EIAP's overall trajectory represents an outreach from the evaluation community toward the inter-religious peacebuilding community. The rich interchange of learning between those two audiences manifested itself consistently throughout EIAP. Looking beyond EIAP, this is a relationship that will help shape the future of the peacebuilding field.

One of EIAP's most ambitious objectives was to develop a utilization-focused evidence base concerning effective inter-religious peacebuilding. The challenge was to both compile the evidence base and help inter-religious actors apply those learnings in the three-year timeframe of the project. In practice, it was not possible to move so quickly from identifying evaluation best practices to implementing them. A longer process is required to overcome the gaps between the evaluation and inter-religious peacebuilding communities. A limited number of inter-religious programmes are designed in ways conducive to traditional evaluation, and evaluations are scarce (Vader 2015). Thus, the EIAP lead partners opted to invest more time in developing best practices, recognizing that implementation will follow. Indeed, even during EIAP's first phase, several of the GAC and *Faith Matters* Guide field-testing organizations began to incorporate EIAP learnings into their programmes. For example, Peace Catalyst International, represented on the GAC by Dr Rick Love, made development of a monitoring and evaluation system a key goal within its current strategic plan.⁵

⁵ Strategic Plan 2017–2020, Peace Catalyst International.

The demanding process of carrying out project activities revealed that inter-religious peacebuilding is more broad, diffuse and complex than the secular lead partners had anticipated. It proved difficult to locate inter-religious peacebuilding among the network of prominent international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) with whom the lead partners typically work. Despite the increasing recognition of religion's importance, INGOs funded by the US government are wary of the legal 'separation of church and state,'⁶ so they may avoid explicit inter-religious action. Additionally, many secular INGOs still do not have experience working with religious actors. When the lead partners began to reach beyond their usual network to engage inter-religious peacebuilding specialists, their comments on the draft documents pointed out complex issues that required additional time and expertise to address. Among those issues were the nuanced diversity within each faith tradition, the importance of intra-faith relations, and the theme of violent extremism.

The development and testing of the *Faith Matters* Guide itself, became a centrepiece of the EIAP experience, involved additional conceptual and practical dilemmas. There were numerous rounds of discussion among EIAP lead partners on the key question of who is the primary audience for the guide: evaluators or inter-religious peacebuilders? The eventual pivotal decision was to write for both audiences. Given the barriers that still exist between these two communities, progress requires addressing them both together. There were also debates regarding the purposes and appropriate approaches for evaluation, since evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders tend to view those issues differently. The question of how to make evaluation 'faith-sensitive,' and to acknowledge the influence of belief in the spiritual realm, also proved to be more far-reaching than the EIAP lead partners expected, crystallizing much of the mutual learning described in this chapter. The narrative returns to those key themes in depth later in the chapter, after first exploring the mindsets, experiences and skills that both evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders bring to the collaborative process.

⁶ This is commonly called the 'establishment clause' of the First Amendment to the US Constitution. See US Constitution (2010).

2 How Evaluators Approach Inter-Religious Action in Peacebuilding

Measuring, monitoring, and evaluating have not been common activities in inter-religious action for peacebuilding. Those who have tried to engage in these efforts have struggled with the complex nature of peacebuilding work, the difficulty of understanding the influence of belief in the divine, and the challenge of protracted conflict contexts. The donor-driven shift over the past decade towards accountability-focused evaluation has also made inter-religious actors less inclined to invite those who are perceived as not understanding their work to pass judgement on it. However, even before evaluation was professionalized, there have always been those attempting to explain how change happens, trying to articulate the influence and impact of their work. Evaluation, as a systematic and technical approach for capturing and utilizing such learnings, has a lot to contribute to the growth of inter-religious action in peacebuilding.

Evaluators are one of the two key audiences of the EIAP project, the other being inter-religious actors. For the purpose of this chapter ‘evaluators’ refers not only to full-time evaluators, but also to a broader spectrum of people engaged in assessment or review work, including evaluative thinkers within NGOs, donor agencies, and other implementing actors who have monitoring and evaluation capabilities. This includes internal evaluators and considers evaluation to be an attainable practice, requiring some technical skills that should be considered an intertwined component to conducting work that claims social good. This section of the chapter provides a grounding in how evaluators have been approaching the inter-religious space and considers key competencies for M&E staff or consultants.

2.1 Why Evaluate?

There are traditionally two complementary motives for evaluation. One is evaluation’s ability to ensure *accountability*, shining light on whether the claimed impact from a particular effort has been achieved, and whether it was on time and on budget. The other component to evaluation is *learning*, surfacing the how and why of change, and helping to understand what works and does not. Both of these components provide significant and distinct value added to inter-religious action in peacebuilding.

Activities that claim to achieve a social good are strengthened by reviewing the interconnections between the work they are doing and the outcomes they

aim to achieve. Evaluators believe that activities which claim to achieve a social good are obliged to conduct evaluation as a way to remain accountable to the people who are supposed to benefit from that social good. This is also a core belief of the EIAP convening organizations, and a key motivating factor in the pursuit of a stronger understanding of how evaluation is perceived and works in the inter-religious peacebuilding community. Knowledge is power and knowing what does or does not cause a desired social change enables those invested in that change to adapt their efforts to be more effective. Evaluation can also facilitate the development of a systematic way to share the value of inter-religious work, so that inter-religious efforts in peacebuilding will be perceived as valid and trustworthy by other actors on the global stage.

There is an ongoing tension among donors, implementing actors, and the evaluation community regarding the ‘correct’ balance between the accountability and learning motivations of evaluation practice. Most evaluators, especially those that work in sectors that require a more qualitative lens like inter-religious action and peacebuilding, acknowledge the importance of the accountability component, but are more heavily focused on learning. As this field emerges, the accountability component is seen by evaluators as contributing to the broader, global conversation about the effectiveness and value of inter-religious work. The learning component is seen by this audience as paramount to understanding the complexity of inter-religious action, and how change happens amidst the innumerable variables, improving practice in an iterative fashion, and moving towards identification of best practices for the sector.

When pursuing evaluation for learning purposes, it is important to recognize that many evaluators want to see evaluation findings used for improving the activities and pathways through which positive change happens, even if facilitating utilization of findings is outside their mandate. Some evaluators have a personal interest in improving the practice of inter-religious action for peacebuilding, given their own experiences or identity; evaluative practice is their specific contribution. These evaluative learning efforts stand to make a significant contribution to the peacebuilding field, since this programming has been traditionally less well-documented, and learnings have yet to be broadly disseminated.

2.2 Religious or Secular Evaluators?

One important consideration frequently discussed among EIAP stakeholders is the capabilities and experience needed for those conducting evaluation of inter-religious processes. Whether the evaluator is a team member responsible for monitoring and evaluation work or an external evaluator coming in for a dis-

crete evaluation, there are competencies to look for that facilitate a nuanced and respectful approach to evaluating inter-religious activities. Given the complexities of inter-religious action, it may be necessary to comprise a diverse team, in order to capture the perspectives, experiences, and expertise that one evaluator working alone could not provide. Involving local religious actors or stakeholders on the evaluation team, or at the very least, in consultation regarding the evaluation design is a particularly helpful strategy to ensure a well-rounded, representative, and sensitive evaluation effort. There is sometimes an assumption that evaluators for inter-religious action need to have a personal faith themselves, either directly related to the activities or not. Grounding in a personal faith is perceived by some audiences as crucial to the understanding of the complexity, nuance, and divine influence in inter-religious action. In EIAP's view, while personal faith is an advantage for certain types of programming and certainly changes the personal lens of the evaluator, it should not be a blanket requirement. There are both pros and cons of evaluators who have their own faith-based experiences and/or beliefs, which should be taken into consideration when determining the best skillset match for what type of efforts are to be evaluated.

Evaluators who possess a personal faith can bring additional knowledge and an understanding of the importance of faith into their interpretation of data and generation of findings. Such evaluators are also more likely to be open to the influence of belief in the divine in achieving individual transformation and broader social change. A personal faith is often a significant motivating factor for evaluators engaged in inter-religious peacebuilding work, fuelling their desire to see 'proof' of impact that they know would be accepted by a more secular community. Evaluators and donors often see such proof as a necessary part of the journey to legitimizing and expanding inter-religious peacebuilding activities on a larger scale. On the other hand, the complexities of personal faith can sometimes limit faith-inspired evaluators in their evaluation of inter-religious action. The cultural context of an evaluator's beliefs, how their faith intersects with other faiths, and their own level of knowledge and openness toward other faiths can significantly bias their evaluative efforts. This can lead to unfair interpretation of findings, biased sampling and interactions with implementers, and even harm, if the evaluator asks questions or takes actions that reignite inter-religious tensions.

Likewise, there are pros and cons in involving secular evaluators in inter-religious action in peacebuilding, even though secular evaluators are less likely to see and admit the implications of their personal beliefs on their evaluation practice. Some secular evaluators perceive their secular beliefs as being 'neutral' and the only way to ensure an unbiased evaluation. However, due to personal expe-

riences and cultural influences, secular evaluators are just as likely to be biased against religion, or against a particular religion, as religious evaluators. Secular evaluators also might not recognize the importance of personal faith experience in understanding inter-religious efforts, or the influence of belief in the divine. Depending on the context, some inter-religious efforts will call for a secular evaluator who is experienced and willing to delve into the nuances of faith-based efforts. Other evaluative efforts will call for a faith-based evaluator who can relate to the personal experiences of individual and inter-personal transformation. Either way, an honest conversation about the impact of the evaluator's beliefs is beneficial to selection of the evaluation team and conducting responsible evaluation.

The emerging consensus among EIAP stakeholders is that, whether or not the evaluator(s) has a personal faith related to that of the activities being evaluated, it is essential for the evaluator(s) in question to properly prepare for and orient towards both the context and the faiths involved, taking stock of their personal perspectives, experiences, and lenses, and readily acknowledging how that may or may not impact their work. The evaluator(s) should have 'religious literacy' which enables them to understand the core concepts that inform faith-based peacebuilding, as well as each faith community they will interact with. Finally, it is very important that the evaluator or evaluation team all recognize that each individual – including evaluators – brings their own beliefs, value systems, and biases into the work. These attributes will help to facilitate communication and implementation of evaluative activities in ways that make sense to the religious actors involved.⁷

2.3 Leveraging Evaluation to Look Beyond Individual Transformation

The evaluative mindset offers another complementary perspective that is advantageous for inter-religious peacebuilders. Some inter-religious work has a tendency to overemphasize individual transformation of attitudes and behaviours. Sometimes this is the end goal, and other times the activities are meant to build collectively towards larger social transformation. In the case where the aim is larger social transformation (Chigas and Woodrow 2009) there is a need to capture the process of change and transfer efforts from individual transformation to socio-political impact. Evaluation activities can home in on the process of

⁷ For more information, see Section 5.5 of the *Faith Matters* Guide.

this transfer, looking at whether, how, and why it is happening. Learnings from these evaluation activities can help to strengthen and adapt inter-religious activities to make stronger connections towards social transformation and prove the interlinkages regarding how the work is affecting that change.

On the other hand, it is important to note that some larger INGOs have also fallen into the trap of measuring only higher-level changes, ignoring the impact and contextual implications of individual transformation. In the *Faith Matters* guide testing process, both Mercy Corps and World Vision International discovered that they had initially looked for change at the community level, to the exclusion of transformation taking place among individuals. They found shifting the unit of analysis to be beneficial in drawing out learnings regarding individual transformation, as a building block of higher-level change. Especially in contexts of identity-based conflict, it is crucial to leverage evaluation to look at multiple levels of change and their interconnections. Failing to track the shorter-term foundations of individual transformation that are necessary for longer-term socio-political change is just as problematic as assuming that individual transformation is indicative of higher-level change in the absence of supportive evidence.

2.4 How Do Donors Fit In?

Evaluation is increasingly required by most governmental and even private foundation donors. Donors are interested in a return on investment, ensuring their money is making the desired impact and effectively contributing towards the identified, desirable social change. There are often political, economic and other social motivations involved as well, sometimes on a geopolitical scale, depending on the donor. Because of this desire to prove effective use of funds, donors tend to sway the tension between accountability and learning more towards a focus on accountability as the primary use of evaluation. However, recently, there are some donors who are recapturing and promoting a better balance and focus on the learning component as well.

Although not all inter-religious programming is funded by typical international development funding mechanisms, a portion of it is, and is therefore beholden to new requirements for monitoring and evaluating. As inter-religious action in peacebuilding is increasingly recognized on a global scale, there are more funding opportunities available for this type of work through international development mechanisms that come with monitoring and evaluation requirements. Capturing successes from inter-religious work through evaluation can enable organizations and actors doing inter-religious work to apply for this type of fund-

ing, leveraging larger funding pools to expand their work when they can speak to quantitative results. Informed inter-religious actors can also help shape the requests and expectations coming from donors by requesting more learning-driven approaches and demonstrating documented programme improvements from such efforts.

It can sometimes appear that some donors do not understand the complexity of inter-religious action in peacebuilding, when they are overly driven by accountability concerns, when their rhetoric is intentionally secular, or when they fail to acknowledge the impact of shifting conflict dynamics on implementing activities in inter-religious contexts. However, donors can serve as an impetus to capture learnings, results, and build on what is already being done. There is movement in international development towards influencing donors to work with programmes, providing additional support, resources, and tools, previously unavailable to the organization. Approaching donors as partners, rather than gatekeepers, will benefit inter-religious action in the immediate and long term.

3 How Inter-Religious Peacebuilders Approach Evaluation

As an EIAP audience, the term ‘inter-religious peacebuilders’ refers to the faith-based people and groups that implement inter-religious action for peace. Importantly, they may or may not call their work ‘peacebuilding’ – a term which tends to be associated with the secular peacebuilding sector. They may consider peace to be only one among their multiple objectives. Nonetheless, the focus on peace is intentional and often intense, just as it is for secular peacebuilders. The differences lie in their motivations and mindsets, and in the types of organizations and networks that are engaged in the process.

3.1 Who Are ‘Inter-Religious Peacebuilders?’

Seen through EIAP’s lens, the inter-religious peacebuilding audience is broad and diverse, with their degree of connection to secular peacebuilders ranging from strong to non-existent. At the least connected end of the spectrum, there are a multitude of peace-promoting communities of worship and faith-based organizations (FBOs) that may not be aware of the existence of the secular peacebuilding community. Such organizations may have engaged in decades of ongoing inter-religious action supported only by religious institutional budgets, or

sometimes by no formal budget at all, because they hold a conviction that promoting peace is necessary in their context and is part of their role as believers. Their peace training may come through religious teachers and literature as part of their own faith formation. Their size may range from small grassroots communities of worship to international religious networks. Many inter-religious peacebuilders have no awareness of the evaluation practices of the secular peacebuilding field, though they certainly have an interest in doing their work effectively and a desire to see positive change.

At the most connected end of the spectrum, there are faith-based organizations that figure prominently within secular-leaning fields of endeavour, as CRS does in the humanitarian and development sectors. CRS is known not only for excellence in integrating inter-religious peacebuilding into their work, but also for excellence in monitoring and evaluation approaches. Occupying the middle of the spectrum are numerous hybrids and crossovers. For example, there are FBOs that work with external donors, such as religious or secular foundations, and conform to their evaluation requirements. There are faith-motivated individuals working seamlessly inside secular, evaluation-oriented organizations (including the EIAP lead partner organizations). Faith-based motivations and worldviews typically remain highly significant for faith-based actors engaged with secular peacebuilding, though they may be less vocal, or express themselves differently, than peacebuilders working exclusively in the religious sector.

3.2 Global Advisory Council

Within EIAP, if the ‘evaluators’ audience is represented by the three secular lead partner organizations, then the ‘inter-religious peacebuilders’ audience is represented by the Global Advisory Council (GAC). The GAC was composed of eleven prominent inter-religious peacebuilding practitioners, representing Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Buddhist traditions⁸ across ten countries of origin. In some EIAP processes, the Council was joined by other recognized experts in inter-religious peacebuilding.

The GAC’s formation and voice required some time to develop. The first face-to-face GAC meeting, in Washington DC in 2015, focused on the current state of play in inter-religious peacebuilding programming and evaluation. However, at the second meeting in Istanbul in 2016, the faith-based influence of the GAC began to make itself heard, fuelled by a preliminary draft outline of the guide.

⁸ EIAP staff also tried without success to recruit a Hindu member for the Council.

At a humorous level, GAC members noted that the name originally envisioned for the guide – the Guide for the Assessment of Inter-Religious Action (GAIA) – represented the Greek goddess of the earth and would evoke many types of unintended connotations within the audience of inter-religious peacebuilders.⁹ On a more substantive level, GAC members also observed in Istanbul that the preliminary draft outline of the guide, and the meeting agenda itself, were framed primarily around secular evaluation concepts, such as the OECD-DAC (2012) criteria for peacebuilding evaluation. Some important questions came to the fore: This content is all interesting, but what specifically does it have to do with *inter-religious* peacebuilding? What is unique about evaluating *faith-based* action? How can evaluation content be made relevant and accessible to the vast numbers of faith-based actors who work at grassroots levels? At this point, it became clear to everyone involved that the need for evaluators to learn from inter-religious peacebuilders was deeper and more extensive than the secular EIAP lead partners had originally envisioned.

David Steele, a (Protestant) Christian pastor, professor and conflict resolution expert, gave an insightful presentation in Istanbul on faith-based reconciliation processes, in which he began to identify key distinctions between faith-based and secular action. Shortly thereafter, he teamed up with EIAP advisor Ricardo Wilson-Grau to write a paper¹⁰ on the implications of these faith-based distinctions for evaluation practice. Ricardo¹¹ was a highly respected evaluator advocating the importance of religious sensitivity and literacy in evaluation. He was, interestingly, also a non-theist. Ricardo was assertive, and he got the attention of the evaluation community in a way a faith-based peacebuilder alone probably could not have.

3.3 Faith-Based Distinctions

The work of David and Ricardo (Section 2, 137–168) highlighted the following distinctions in emphasis between faith-based and secular peacebuilding:¹²

1. *Value system.* Faith-rooted values including peace, justice and compassion are often what motivates inter-religious action for peace. Such values have

⁹ The name of the guide was changed to *EIAP: Guide to Program Evaluation* during the pilot testing phase, and finally to *Faith Matters* prior to publication.

¹⁰ Steele and Wilson-Grau 2016.

¹¹ Ricardo Wilson-Grau passed away on 31 December 2018.

¹² Adapted from Steele and Wilson-Grau (2016). See also *Faith Matters* Guide, Section 2.1.

corollaries in secular practice, yet they may differ significantly in the nuance of their meaning and the way they are applied.

2. *Motivation.* Spiritual direction, guidance and calling, via scripture, meditation or a mentor, can be a major factor in determining what a religious person does. There may also be a strong conviction that spiritual beings or forces can act on their own, implying a different view of causation from that typically seen among secular actors.
3. *Understanding of Success/Failure.*¹³ From a religious perspective, success can be understood from the transcendent perspective of faithfulness to a spiritual calling. For secular peacebuilders, success is more likely to be defined in ways that emphasize performance against materially measurable goals.
4. *Accountability.* Accountability for faith-based actors is often about long-term faithfulness to a divine calling, or a faith community. For secular peacebuilders, accountability may revolve more around the aims of a particular project, meaning a time-bound set of predefined objectives supported by a particular donor.
5. *Faith-based transformation.* Faith-based peace practitioners often emphasize individual spiritually inspired changes in attitudes, which can lead in turn to changes in expressions of belief and behaviour. Secular peacebuilders tend to place less emphasis on attitudinal and more on behavioural changes, especially those that have a clear and direct impact at the socio-political level.

Of course, most of these distinctions are matters of degree or emphasis, not binary differences between faith-based and secular peacebuilders. Even so, the overall implication is that faith-based and secular actors may have vastly different ways of understanding the peacebuilding work that they do, and different frames of reference when considering evaluation or evaluative ways of thinking. For this reason, Steele and Wilson-Grau highlight the importance of certain evaluative practices: participatory methodologies to give religious actors a voice to present their own perspectives, qualitative methodologies to deepen understanding of the intangible aspects and processes of faith-based peacebuilding, and awareness of complex causation, as described in Section 4 below.

It is worth noting that the different experiences and competencies of religious actors and evaluators have frequently led each group to politely question the capacity of the other. The EIAP project design documents, crafted by evalua-

¹³ For an additional, extended exploration of faith-based distinctions centering around the motivation for action and the understanding of success/failure, see Reina Neufeldt (Section 1, 53–76). Neufeldt posits that the impact-focused consequentialism of secularly-derived evaluation criteria may be fundamentally at odds with the values of faith-rooted peacebuilding.

tors, assert not only a need for better evidence of the effectiveness of inter-religious peacebuilding, but also a need to improve the effectiveness of inter-religious peacebuilding work itself.¹⁴ On the other hand, one of the inter-religious peacebuilders involved in EIAP recently expressed disappointment in a similar (but unrelated) project as follows:

...an amazing (if somewhat random) selection of religious leaders...An important...sign that Western governments are finally waking up to the importance of religious peace building – but I feel the conference itself could have been so much more constructive if the organizers, let alone the participants, knew a bit more about effective interreligious peacebuilding. So important and frustrating at the same time.¹⁵

Indeed, both evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders recognize that coming together is important, if occasionally frustrating. The next section describes what happened when these two very different audiences began to work together consistently over three years' time through EIAP.

4 Tensions and Transformations

The Faith Matters Guide was outlined, drafted, pilot tested, and revised for publication between June 2016 and September 2017. Throughout these processes a fascinating learning journey unfolded, as evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders combined their strengths and learned from each other. The learning was characterized by several areas of tension and transformation, which are relevant far beyond EIAP, because other collaborative efforts that bring together inter-religious peacebuilders and evaluators are likely to encounter similar dynamics.

4.1 Who Are We Writing For?

The distinction between EIAP's audiences as explored in this chapter is not an idle observation – rather it was a question actively explored during the EIAP process. From the moment EIAP staff began drafting the outline of the *Faith Matters* Guide, there were many conversations and re-writes prompted by the ques-

¹⁴ “...inter-religious action initiatives will improve in both quality and impact.” EIAP project proposal, p. 9.

¹⁵ Email communication to Michelle Garred, 22 May 2017.

tion of identifying the primary intended readers. What pre-existing knowledge and skill set would we assume that readers would bring? Were we writing this guide for experienced inter-religious peacebuilders who need to learn how to approach evaluation? Were we writing this guide for experienced evaluators who need to learn to adapt to inter-religious peacebuilding?

At one point, it was tentatively decided that it was impossible to write for both audiences, so the first guide would be geared toward evaluators, and another publication designed for inter-religious peacebuilders would come later, if possible, in a future phase of the project. However, that decision was quickly challenged as potentially extractive,¹⁶ and later discarded. The EIAP staff team then decided that it was necessary to write the *Faith Matters* Guide for both audiences,¹⁷ knowing full well it would be difficult – and indeed it was. The guide pilot testers affirmed this decision as early as their pre-testing workshop held in Kathmandu in November 2016. They observed that mutual transformation between inter-religious peacebuilders and evaluators, as described below, is made possible by bringing both audiences *together* to exchange their perspectives and experiences.

4.2 What Is the Purpose of Evaluation?

As described above, there is currently a great deal of emphasis in secular peacebuilding circles on evaluation for the purpose of accountability toward donors. In contrast, some inter-religious peacebuilders do not currently work with large external donors bearing evaluation requirements and may have little interest in doing so in the future. Further, inter-religious peacebuilders tend to view meaning and accountability in spiritual rather than material terms. Seen from their perspective, evaluation for purposes of donor accountability may hold limited relevance. Evaluators who present evaluation primarily as a means of donor accountability, or as a source of evidence to justify future investment, may be seen as representing someone else's interests and therefore not fully trustworthy. Inter-religious peacebuilders may accommodate such evaluators when called

¹⁶ 'Extractive' here refers to the ethically questionable practice of one partner requesting another partner's knowledge, and then using it to their own advantage, typically in a way that exacerbates power differences.

¹⁷ The *Faith Matters* Guide later recognized a third category of readers: organizational staff charged with developing M&E plans or commissioning evaluations. They are important readers, but they do not represent overarching EIAP constituencies in the same way that 'evaluators' and 'inter-religious peacebuilders do,' so they are not emphasized in this chapter.

upon to do so, even as their posture remains guarded and they decline to fully ‘own’ the evaluation process or its findings.

On the other hand, EIAP’s experience indicates that when learning is foregrounded, and learning and accountability are viewed as complementary, uptake naturally increases. Inter-religious actors want to make a difference, so most are keen to learn about the effectiveness of their efforts. When learning was emphasized, *Faith Matters* guide pilot testers in the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda reported seeing evaluation through fresh eyes. Julie Nalubwama expressed that she felt more interested and increasingly confident to engage evaluation on her own terms – by asserting what her organization needs to learn from an evaluation process, and how. Joshua Kitakule articulated a newfound appreciation for the value of collecting meaningful data, as evidence to inform the improvement of practice.¹⁸ Further, a multi-faceted understanding of accountability, which can include accountability toward host communities, programme participants, staff, partners and ultimately to the divine, is highly compatible with a faith-rooted commitment to learning for purposes of ongoing improvement.

4.3 Which Evaluation Approaches are Appropriate?

When the first draft of the *Faith Matters* Guide was shared with pilot testers and other stakeholders in November 2016, it was warmly received, but it also caused a bit of a stir among traditional evaluative thinkers due to its lack of emphasis on ‘indicators,’ which some criticized as impractical. The initial omission of indicators was intentional, reflecting a belief among the early author team that certain evaluation approaches (goal-free and indicator-light) were more appropriate than others (results-based evaluation) for inter-religious action. Results-based approaches, which are generally considered traditional in the Monitoring and Evaluation field, emphasize advance planning, using measurable indicators (such as changes in behaviour or the success rate of conflict resolution mechanisms) to assess the degree to which programme results align with pre-determined goals, objectives and outcomes. Results-based approaches are prominent in the development assistance sectors, which increasingly integrate with and influence secular peacebuilding. On the other hand, goal-free and complexity-based approaches assume a complex operating context in which cause-and-effect relationships are not linear or predictable. A goal-free evaluation seeks to

18 Workshop plenary, EIAP guide testers’ consultation, 14–16 November 2016, Kathmandu.

assess what outcomes have emerged and how the programme has contributed, without reference to pre-determined goals or targets.¹⁹

There is still a debate in the field, and there was a significant debate among the three EIAP lead partners, about these approaches. What follows is an illustrative sample of real-life conversation between a results-based (RB) evaluator and a goal-free (GF) evaluator, while providing input to the *Faith Matters* Guide.²⁰

- *R-B Evaluator*: In order to assess change in the work of peacebuilding, we need a common yardstick. Without that, our conclusions become very subjective, and we don't know whether a programme is effective.
- *G-F Evaluator*: I agree on the need for a yardstick – but the yardstick does not need to be predefined. Most peacebuilding work takes place in complex contexts – and where that work is faith-based, the importance of intangible factors such as spiritual practices, and the active belief in divine agency, can add additional layers of complexity. It is impossible to specify the causal chains in advance, in a way that informs the development of meaningful goals, indicators, baselines and targets.
- *R-B Evaluator*: When results-based approaches are used properly, they are not rigid! In a complex setting, one has to discern between what can and cannot be measured as progress. In a quality programme, the people involved will adapt their goals to fit the changing context, often monitoring indicators for a signal of the need to adapt, rather than getting stuck in a pre-determined way of working.
- *G-F Evaluator*: In my experience adaptation is not enough, so the pre-defined results frameworks often need to be discarded. Also, many faith-based peacebuilders do not plan time-bound projects in the same way that secular peacebuilders do – their planning is emergent, but it's still important and worthwhile to assess their effectiveness. That's why I prefer to assess what a program has actually achieved, without reference to pre-defined goals.

¹⁹ For more information on goal-free evaluation, see Youker and Ingraham (2014).

²⁰ EIAP internal email communications, May and June 2017. The colleague arguing for results-based approaches comes from a strong religious tradition, while the goal-free colleague would be considered secular – an illustration of the individual diversity within each of these identifiably distinct communities.

4.4 Methodological Balance and Inclusion

After extended reflection on the question of appropriate methodologies, the EIAP team decided that the appropriate approach for the *Faith Matters* guide was balance and inclusion. Whatever one's individual opinions, the reality is that both results-based and emergent design approaches are currently used in inter-religious peacebuilding, and that is unlikely to change in the near future. A broad-based guidance on evaluation should therefore be relevant to both approaches. The guide was significantly revised to speak to both approaches, including the addition of a section (Sect. 3.6) on indicators and the pros and cons of their use, including sample indicators tested by CRS and other organizations.²¹ Even so, the level of balance and inclusion was subject to healthy debate right up to the time of publication.

While these debates are not easy, the benefits of balance and inclusion can be seen in the methodological growth reported by the pilot testing organizations. For example, Mercy Corps in Myanmar was developing the M&E strategy for their *Some Hmat* community-based inter-communal peacebuilding project. They had originally planned to focus on mostly theory-based approaches and quantitative indicators. However, they increasingly considered the relevance of goal-free impact evaluation approaches (i.e. Most Significant Change) and decided to expand that plan to include more qualitative data gathered through participatory processes, so that project stakeholders (community leaders, government officials and inter-faith religious leaders) could voice their own interpretations of project experiences and results.

For Mercy Corps, the process of incorporating these changes involved adding semi-structured interviews to elicit stories, and training staff in how to facilitate this new form of data collection and highlight individual behavioural changes. It also involved convening programme participants to discuss the purpose of participatory M&E, and to collectively identify the best way to tell the story of the project's impact. This greatly increased religious leaders' understanding, ownership, and active participation in the evaluation process, and reduced suspicions about the investigation of topics as sensitive as peace and religion. The Mercy Corps team still planned to analyse the findings according to their traditional results framework, but they expected those findings to be more robust and meaningful.

²¹ In addition to the shift in positioning on indicators, this revision of the guide also included a significantly strengthened and expanded focus on practical tools, in response to stakeholder feedback.

4.5 How Do We Approach ‘Violent Extremism?’

In recent years, programmes aimed at countering or preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) have become increasingly prominent in response to an increase in civilian attacks attributed to extremist motivations, particularly those that claim to be religiously inspired. As C/PVE programmes have become more closely linked to peacebuilding, they have also become more contentious. Addressing violent extremism in peacebuilding is not new, however the rebirth of C/PVE work in large part through a Western and counterterrorism, and even securitized, lens has been a cause for widespread debate, in particular among peacebuilders, questioning its compatibility with peacebuilding given the new philosophical underpinnings.²² There has also been a sense among peacebuilding practitioners that it is not known ‘what works’ in C/PVE programming (Ris and Ernstorfer 2016). Nonetheless, there is now evidence for the effectiveness of community-based approaches rather than the targeting of at-risk individuals, and for the importance of meaningful youth engagement in the community (Alliance for Peacebuilding 2018).

Among faith-based peacebuilders there is a widespread (though by no means universal) chafing at the assumptions regarding the roles of religion that are embedded in many C/PVE programs:²³ first, that religion is more a driver of conflict than it is of peace; and second, that the most problematic religion is specifically Islam. Not only Muslim peacebuilders object to this implicit assumption. Many peacebuilders of other faiths also see the focus on Islam as a biased interpretation of a reality in which all religions can be understood and practiced in either peaceful or violent ways—as amply demonstrated throughout history.

For all these reasons, C/PVE was one of the most consistently difficult themes throughout the EIAP experience. There were natural disagreements about how much attention C/PVE should be given on a particular meeting agenda. For example, C/PVE was significantly less prominent in the EIAP meeting in Vienna 2017 than it had been in the meeting the previous year in Istanbul, to the relief of many GAC members. Further, EIAP’s preliminary literature review was significantly delayed by the fact that many of the religious themes were more nuanced than the lead partners originally envisioned – not least the theme of C/PVE. However, a mutually acceptable middle ground was found for the literature review, and then carried forward into the *Faith Matters* Guide. C/PVE was simply positioned as one among many common approaches to peacebuilding,

²² See for example Peace Direct (2017).

²³ See for example Jayaweera (2018).

giving it no more attention than the others, and acknowledging briefly the sharply differing perspectives described above. The guide also mentions the practical priority of participant protection and conflict-sensitive practice (Sect. 3.4), because the risks of C/PVE programming to participants and communities can be particularly high.

4.6 What is the Role of ‘Faith Sensitivity?’

The evaluation-oriented EIAP lead partners often used the term ‘faith sensitivity’ to express their ongoing effort to explain and adapt secular evaluation practices in ways that are appropriate for use in faith-based settings. This term served the necessary function of signalling a need to question the usual ways of doing things, and to consider doing something different to be more relevant to one’s colleagues. At the same time, the notion of faith sensitivity was also contested, because the mention of faith sensitivity can appear shallow or tokenistic in the absence of genuine mutual understanding.

In practice, the influence of faith sensitivity gradually expanded. For example, in the early days of EIAP, it was thought that the way to make the OECD-DAC (2012) peacebuilding evaluation criteria faith-sensitive would be to add a criterion on ‘consistency with values.’ That criterion was indeed usefully added, but it was also recognized over time that every other criterion in the OECD-DAC framework could be unpacked in ways that reveal the perspectives of faith-based actors and the unique dynamics of inter-religious action. Similarly, the faith sensitivity content of the *Faith Matters* Guide, which comprised a discrete handful of pages in the pilot test version, had expanded to become more significant by the time the guide was published in September 2017. This transformation of thinking is still underway.

5 Emergent Challenges and Opportunities

The *Faith Matters* Guide, launched in September 2017, was richly strengthened by the ongoing interchange between evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders, in both conceptual development and field testing. The AfP, SFCG and CDA are hopeful that this new resource will add value to the field. At the same time, everyone involved is keenly aware the learning process is far from over. This section highlights some of the challenges and opportunities that will continue to characterize our learning, as evaluators and inter-religious peacebuilders work together in collaborative initiatives.

5.1 Clarifying ‘What’s Unique’

Much of the mutual learning process that evolved between EIAP’s secular and religious stakeholders revolved around the question of what makes inter-religious action distinct from other forms of peacebuilding. The difference was greater than originally anticipated. Key distinctions common to faith-based mindsets have been identified (as described above). It is also increasingly clear that the role of religious hierarchies and networks can distinctively shape who gets involved in peacebuilding (or not), through which points of access and influence, and how the patterns of the peacebuilding process unfold. However, there is not yet a comprehensive answer to the question of how these distinctions influence the practicalities of evaluation.

For example, when assessing indications of improvement in inter-group relations, evaluators involved in EIAP have understandably wondered whether inter-religious relationships differ significantly from other relationships formed across the lines of an identity-based conflict. Indeed, inter-religious progress often looks very much like inter-ethnic or inter-cultural progress, at least on the surface. Further, these different aspects of identity often overlap demographically to involve the same people—for instance in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist and Tamils are predominantly Hindu.

However, many of EIAP’s faith-based stakeholders see the inter-religious aspects of the process as distinct, because of the spiritual processes involved. In conservative religious contexts, the boundaries between (and within) faith groups may be experienced as existential, such that interaction with ‘the other’ threatens a person’s status in ways that are not only social but also spiritual. This involves:

...deep-seated fears of punishments, rewards, day of judgments, and all other beliefs that touch the core psyche of the person’s existence...For a Muslim or Christian person who has been raised to avoid interacting with anyone outside of his or her faith group, meeting the other can be a terrifying experience that will shake his or her core being (Garred and Abu-Nimer 2018, 11).

The improvement of those relationships involves a spiritual process of reframing one’s most deeply held beliefs, usually through the discovery of new theological interpretations within one’s existing faith tradition.²⁴ This requires a lengthy transformation process – yet an evaluation that misses the spiritual aspects of this process could be considered incomplete. Evaluators need deepened guid-

²⁴ See for example Patel 2018.

ance in order to better discern the uniquely spiritual aspects of an inter-religious process – which means that inter-religious peacebuilders need to take the initiative to help identify, articulate and explain those spiritual aspects.

5.2 Tuning in to Marginalized Voices

Another unique nuance of inter-religious peacebuilding evaluation is the need to come to grips with the ways in which certain voices can be missed. Unfortunately, the marginalization of groups including women, children, youth, sexual and gender minorities, and persons with disabilities is a widespread problem that affects many expressions of peacebuilding. However, it can manifest in unique ways in religious settings, because marginalization of particular groups may be sanctioned (or even mandated) by certain interpretations of religious teachings and reinforced by a hierarchy of religious leaders who function as de facto ‘gatekeepers.’

In evaluation, the concern should not be simply to assess the extent to which faith groups have practiced inclusion – a challenging task in and of itself, given the diversity and sensitivity of the socio-religious norms involved – but also to make the evaluation itself inclusive. *Faith Matters* Guide tester, Joshua Kitakule of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, described how, in his experience, the contribution of women to inter-religious peacebuilding projects is easily overlooked in an evaluation process, because gatekeepers consider it relatively insignificant. This deprives the practitioner community of the opportunity to learn based on what those women have accomplished, including potentially ground-breaking innovations that differ from the male-dominated ‘mainstream.’ Evaluations that exclude women can legitimize exclusion from future programming in a self-reinforcing negative cycle.²⁵ To break this cycle, evaluators need the religious literacy and communication skills to not only identify where exclusion is a problem, but to successfully negotiate inclusion of women (or other marginalized groups) in ways that inspire rather than offend the religious gatekeeper’.

²⁵ Workshop sharing of examples, EIAP Global Advisory Council consultation, 8–10 May 2016, Vienna.

5.3 When There Is No ‘Project’

One of the oft-raised issues in considering application of M&E to inter-religious efforts is that many of these activities are run by religious organizations with little external funding and outside the time-bound ‘project cycles’ typically used in international development work. A great many of these organizations are small and local. In the EIAP context, the issues surrounding non-existent ‘project cycles’ were raised by the inter-religious peacebuilders within Global Advisory Council and the guide-testing cohort, because they were concerned that traditional monitoring and evaluation approaches might not apply. However, monitoring and evaluation need not be confined to a project cycle as one may think. Since one of the key purposes of M&E is learning, there are many mechanisms and tools through which to establish systematic learning, feedback loops, and capture results that do not require the formalized structure of a project cycle to be effective.

A good starting point is adaptive management.²⁶ Adaptive management is a systematic process of reflection, results capture, adjustment of activities in response to learnings and shifting contexts, and smaller evaluative efforts that are intertwined with the day-to-day implementation of activities. Thus, adaptive management is a process with a suite of tools that can enable inter-religious action to apply forward-thinking learning without conforming to a project cycle. The easiest way to think about adaptive management is to build in systematic steps and look for tools that help organizations to (Ladner 2015):

1. Review what has happened, identify what changes have affected outcomes, and document any existent but individual learnings;
2. Assess this information to determine what priority opportunities and risks need to be addressed to strengthen the work being done;
3. Adapt, as necessary, strategies, operations, and activities based on that assessment; and,
4. Document how and why the revisions were made, as well as any consequences of adaptation. Then repeat!

It is worth noting that adaptive management can be practiced nearly cost-free. Where budgets are limited, the Reflection Exercise shared in Annex C of the *Faith Matters* Guide is another possible tool with off-the-shelf usefulness for inter-religious peacebuilders who may not have a ‘project.’

²⁶ For an explanation of adaptive management see USAID Learning Lab (2018).

If there is significant funding available for learning exercises, but still no defined project, another tool worth considering is developmental evaluation (DE).²⁷ DE is a non-traditional evaluation approach that provides evaluative thinking and timely feedback to inform ongoing adjustments, as needs, findings, and insights emerge in complex, dynamic situations. DEs are also designed to help facilitate moving from looking at the question ‘what are we learning from our work?’ to ‘how do we leverage what’s working and overcome any challenges?’, taking stakeholders from learning to adaptation through collaborative processes. DEs require the regular engagement of a dedicated evaluator who accompanies a project for a defined period of time. They are not a fit for every type of work, but are particularly useful when dealing with unknowns, such as untested theories of change, rapidly changing contexts, complex structures and/or relationships, and innovations. DEs are increasingly being utilized in a wider variety of contexts, with new guidance on implementation and lessons learned emerging quickly.²⁸

5.4 Where and How to Build Capacity

This chapter does not assume that inter-religious peacebuilders will quickly develop an international network of highly skilled evaluators within their own ranks. EIAP does see a role for appropriate external resource people that can lead evaluations as well as highlight entry points for enhancing internal evaluation capacity within the participating organization(s). There is need to build capacity on both fronts, achieving two very different objectives.

With regard to external evaluators, one well-trained evaluator can evaluate many inter-religious efforts in peacebuilding. If these evaluators are truly well-qualified, religiously literate and equipped to train, they can also build the capacity of inter-religious actors along the way. In a resource-constrained environment, it may be necessary to put the burden on evaluators to orient themselves to this sector and build the necessary skills to address the nuances and distinctive nature of inter-religious action in peacebuilding. This will enhance the capacity of the sector writ large to apply more formalized evaluation efforts, especially those that speak to results and are perceived as rigorous enough to influence the global conversation regarding religion, peacebuilding, and development. Further, increasing the demand for evaluation experts who understand

²⁷ For more information, see Gamble (2008).

²⁸ Quinn Patton *et al.* 2016.

the subtleties and complexity of inter-religious work will increase the availability of such experts.

On the other hand, evaluation goes beyond formalized, end-of-programme assessments, to the more iterative, learning-centric approaches and tools used by practitioners. As such, building the internal capacity of inter-religious actors in evaluation is also an important consideration. Individual staff who are trained to think evaluatively and have a strong toolbox available can help integrate systematic learning into activities and contribute to stronger programming and sharing of learnings. This strategy requires more resources, as there are more staff to equip, so in particularly resource-constrained environments it may be beneficial to equip leaders through a training-of-trainers approach so that they can build capacity and institute new norms about evaluative thinking across their own organization. Future EIAP work would consider both types of capacity building needs, through raising awareness and building capacity among external evaluators (e.g., working through the regional evaluation associations), and by working with inter-religious organizations to develop their capacities for effectiveness and evaluative thinking.

5.5 Looking Ahead

As noted at the outset, EIAP was launched and led in 2015–2017 by three secular evaluation-oriented organizations: AfP, SFCG and CDA. Strong inter-religious influence came through the GAC and the faith-based organizations among the guide testers. The result was a very dynamic interplay of learning. The changing relationship between evaluator and inter-religious peacebuilder was not unlike the change process of successful inter-faith dialogue, in which one small, uncertain step followed by another leads over time to significant growth in mutual respect and understanding.

Since the time of writing, EIAP has entered a dynamic second phase. AfP in collaboration with SFCG now aims to improve the evidence base of effective inter-religious action by enhancing the internal capacities of inter-religious actors for design, monitoring and evaluation. EIAP is further using evaluation processes to generate evidence of macro-level social and/or political level change, to increase the visibility of inter-religious action in peacebuilding. Such visibility will increase the likelihood that inter-religious actors, including those working at local grassroots levels, can gain a seat at the global table to influence the future of peacebuilding.

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