Examining the Role of Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives Towards Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Community of Sant’Egidio

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue is the meeting of persons of different faiths to have a conversation, so at its most basic it essentially is talking. However, it is the nature of this talking that is crucial, as it involves all parties sympathizing with one another to understand their position (Smock, 2002, p. 6). Paul F. Knitter describes it as “the interaction of mutual presence speaking and listening and witnessing the commitments, the values, and the rituals of others” (Knitter, 1996, p. 14).

Using qualitative methodologies and undertaking fieldwork in both Italy (where the Community of Sant’Egidio is based) and Israel, I analysed the challenges and possibilities surrounding the place of Faith Based Actors (FBAs) within peacebuilding and development, asking whether there is an appropriate space for the collaboration of different faiths within the peace process, and if so what this may look like. In doing so I have explored the use of current interfaith dialogue initiatives as a tool for what Galtung terms ‘positive’ peace, analysing the connections between peacebuilding and development and religions place within these paradigms, and how they parallel positive and negative peace theories.

This research has shown that religion has a large role to play in peacebuilding, as FBAs are considered more trustworthy, they understand the perspective of religious communities, and can use the peace ethic inherent in their faith as a contribution to peace and development efforts. Interfaith dialogues were especially important in conflict as they were a form of community participation in peace activism, and showed solidarity and a commitment to learning about ‘other’ religions. People, organizations and FBAs are aware and realistic that interfaith dialogue alone does not have the power to end immediate conflict, but it does hold power to change the atmosphere in which many of the prejudices that cause conflict arise. I argue therefore, that interfaith dialogues can be seen as a ‘positive’ peace initiative, as it is a tool that can be used towards fixing rooted problems of conflict and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding through the changing of societal attitudes.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FBA  Faith Based Actor
NGO  Non-Government Organization
UN  United Nations
MDGs  Millennium Development Goals
WB  World Bank
DANIDA  Danish International Development Agency
NORAD  Norwegian Agency for Development
SIDA  Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
IMPP  International Meetings for Prayer and Peace
DDVE  Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics
DFID  Department for International Development
IEA  Interfaith Encounter Association
ICCI  Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel
RFP  Religions for Peace
GFN  Global Freedom Network