



FOUNDATION FOR
**INTERCULTURAL &
INTERRELIGIOUS**
DIALOGUE INITIATIVES

CELEBRATING THE INTERNATIONAL DAY COMMEMORATING THE VICTIMS OF ACTS OF VIOLENCE BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

AUGUST 22, 2021



THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**PROMOTING A CULTURE OF INTERFAITH
AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

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OUR COMMITMENT TO THE DAY

There are growing concerns by citizens around the globe on the question of “how can interfaith and intercultural dialogue be promoted?” Many state and non-state actors are digging deep into divided communities around the subject of interfaith and cultural interactions and the barriers to dialogue such as stereotyping and intolerance. It is clear that the strength of intercultural dialogue is dependent on the ability to listen with empathy. The current situation of youth division along cultural and religious lines demands that concerned bodies should include and engage cultural and religious actors in measures aimed at mitigating violence and creating sustainable peace resolution mechanisms in our communities. Support should be given to local initiatives for intercultural and interfaith dialogue at all levels. It is important to ensure the full involvement of new partners, especially community women and young people.



FIIDI joined like-minded organizations around the globe to celebrate the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief at the Makomp Community Hall in Lunsar (Sierra Leone) on Sunday, 22 August 2021. Thus, this report gives a day overview of our gathering of religious and community leaders as well as young people at the Makomp Community Hall. It is meant to summarize the outcomes of our discussion, to give some insight into the background thoughts of the topics that we touched upon and the results we believe we have achieved with this workshop.

We see this year's celebration of the Day as an opportunity to engage community members to promote a culture of Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue. Thus, the main topics lay focus on the dimension of our faith and local contexts like peacebuilding and intercultural dialogue according to Islam and Christianity as well as discussions on the situation of young people and interfaith violence in Africa.



We believe that the participants of the workshop have now a deeper knowledge of the concepts around interfaith and intercultural dialogue as well as an increased self-awareness on why interfaith and intercultural dialogue is a crucial dimension of community understanding, and thus of conflict resolution. Misunderstanding and ignorance of religion and culture heighten tensions.

The speakers did their best to make their presentations reflect on conflicts resulting from cultural and religious diversity; and enhancing empathy, respect, and tolerance towards people who don't look like us or do things like us. The event encouraged the participants who are mostly youth to learn about other religions and cultures; and finding similarities and links between different religions and cultures. Also, participants were given the opportunity to share their feelings and reflections about the event and the way forward. Special emphasis was placed on discussing interfaith and intercultural issues raised by the workshop activities.

WHY IS THE DAY IMPORTANT TO US?

The aim of the community outreach workshop was to celebrate the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief and involving Islamic and Christian leaders in the work to engage communities in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue in Sierra Leone. The workshop brought together 70 participants from Makomp, Mabesseneh, Malompo, and Royama villages as well as Lunsar Town.

Dialogue is the bridge between interfaith and cultural diversity and peace; therefore partnership building is a crucial element to this reality. We see an urgent need for continued reflection on ways to establish genuine interfaith and intercultural dialogue in our communities. This includes the development of appropriate skills, support for local (community-owned) initiatives and networks of all kinds, and the involvement of many new actors.

The constitutional provisions of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone has a number of human rights provisions that include freedom of religion or belief. Section 24, subsection I, of the Constitution states that: “Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience and for the purpose of this section the said freedom includes freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and both in public and in private to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

Fortunately, Sierra Leone is another icon of religious tolerance where Muslims and Christians collaborate and interact with each other peacefully. Even during the 11 year civil war (1991-2002) people were never targeted because of their religion. Although religious violence is very rare in Sierra Leone, there are growing divisions along ethnic as well as political lines. Consequently, FIIDI aims to work with partners including communities in order to terminate any breeding ground for religious and cultural intolerance.

The Foundation for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) is now registered as a community-based organization (CBO) in the Port Loko District of Sierra Leone and remains committed at all levels, to promote intercultural and interreligious understanding and to empower communities in peacebuilding activities that contribute to living together in dignity and dialogue.

This year, FIIDI received financial and technical support from its founder to celebrate the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief in Sierra Leone. This support has amplified our awareness-based approach to address and prevent interfaith and cultural challenges affecting the communities we serve.



WHAT DID WE DO FOR THE DAY?

In introducing the programme, Hassan Moses Sesay, Secretary-General of FIIDI in Sierra Leone, informed participants that the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief is being celebrated for the third year by like-minded organizations around the world. He further gave his regards and appreciation to the key facilitators namely; Pastor Foday Koroma and Sheik Alpha Imam Kamara, the Central Executive Council of FIIDI, and the special volunteers who made the occasion a reality. Prior to him introducing the Chairman of the programme, he talked about organizational matters and housekeeping rules which guided the activities of the day and influenced the success of the event.

In his statement for the international day, Joseph Zeto Bangura, Chairman of FIIDI in Sierra Leone conveyed a special greeting on behalf of the Foundation for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) to the people of his beloved nation, Sierra Leone. He said that FIIDI remains committed at all levels, to promote intercultural and interreligious understanding and to empower communities in peacebuilding activities that contribute to living together in dignity and dialogue. He further stated that the key objective to observe this day relates to promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue and giving communities, especially young people the opportunity to take ownership of our initiatives.

He also said that FIIDI underscores the important role played by community youth in either fueling or mitigating violence at the community level. He went on to give a brief background on the current situation of religious and cultural violence around the globe and also made references to the constitutional provisions of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone regarding human rights and religious tolerance. He further stated that the workshop will provide opportunities to develop sustainable solutions that can be a stepping stone to interfaith and intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding in the communities of Sierra Leone.



In drawing the attention of all the participants to take ownership of the workshop, we started the day by facilitating the participants' reflection on their underlying ideas and concepts of peacebuilding, interfaith, culture, and dialogue. The reason for this was to have a learners-centered approach for a productive exchange of experiences, ideas, and concepts on the subject matter which helped the participants to identify common interests and issues.

The dialogue between the participants and facilitators was followed by a presentation by Sheik Alpha Imam Kamara of the Basahara Mosque in Lunsar on the topic “Peacebuilding and Intercultural Dialogue according to Islam”. The participants discussed terms like interfaith, interreligious, intercultural, peacebuilding and dialogue. Each participant represents a community of a large number of people. Some communities are very big and some are small. They differ from each other not only in the frequency in which the members of the different communities meet each other, but also in the shared values, habits, and religions. Sheik Alpha Imam Kamara stated that Islam promotes peace and dialogue - quoting some relevant verses from the Holy Quran to support his position. He urged the participants to be more tolerant and avoid violent conduct. He said it is a principle of Islam that people from different tribes and nations should be tolerant because they all exist for one purpose which is to love one another. Sheik Alpha Imam Kamara admonished the participants to be proactive in order to sustain peaceful co-existence. He also discouraged participants from hate speech or attacking people based on religion or culture.

Presenting on Peacebuilding and Intercultural Dialogue according to Christianity, Pastor Foday Koroma of the Baptist Church in Lunsar provided relevant scriptures where the Holy Bible talked about the importance of peacebuilding. Religion can be of extreme importance to some, while it is not important to others, nevertheless, it has an integral part of the identity of people. The same can be true with any other group one might belong to, like family, organization, gender, etc. The identification with one of those groups has a strong impact on the identity as a whole. Thus, Pastor Foday applauded the organizers of the workshop for their foresight in coming up with such an initiative. He said peace is fundamental and should be safeguarded. He noted that there cannot be peace for anyone whose relatives and friends are at war. Pastor Foday said as Christians who believe in Jesus Christ, they must promote peace both at home and abroad.

In her Way Forward and Closing Remarks, Aminata Deen Sesay, Advisor of FIIDI expressed her appreciation to the facilitators for their valuable contribution to the Community Outreach workshop. She also voiced her deepest gratitude to all who attended the Community Outreach workshop and helped to make it such a successful event. She re-iterated FIIDI's mandate and passionately talked about the importance of regular engagements with religious and community leaders as well youth on how intolerance and discrimination could affect them. Before ending her remarks, she gave a summary of some of the key messages as well as ideas emanating from the workshop.

DISCUSSIONS

All the participants shared their feelings and reflections about the workshop and activities. Discussions and questions were mostly centered on interfaith issues raised by the workshop activities. For example, many of the participants compared accounts of Adam and Eve in the Bible and the Quran thus saw the need to co-exist, and that went on with other stories we know from different religious scriptures. When asked, 80% of the participants learn something new about their own convictions and beliefs. The workshop was fun and very strong emotionally, the participants and the atmosphere were wonderful, and lots of useful information was given. The organizers were appreciated, and the participants made recommendations and left very motivated.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The workshop has greatly contributed to raising community especially youth awareness of the role that they can play in promoting community interfaith and intercultural dialogue in Sierra Leone. At the same time, participants have benefited from encounters with their counterparts from other communities in terms of knowledge of and respect for diversity. Participants have also been able to discover how to regard this recognition of diversity as a valuable asset rather than a threat. As organizers, we can say that the workshop was an extremely helpful and important opportunity for us to discuss a theme that is of great importance to us with the necessary time and the educational support that was needed. The aim is to sustain what we have started as well as develop new programmes that will further strengthen our work of promoting youth participation in peacebuilding relating to interfaith and intercultural dialogue in Sierra Leone.

As recommended by the participants, we will continue to mobilize both financial and human resources to support initiatives that promote peaceful co-existence in the communities we serve. FIIDI will develop programmes and activities that enhance cultural interaction, especially in contexts of inter-community conflict. In the coming decade, we will continue to build local and international partnerships for the exchange of ideas and reach more communities with a focus on religious leaders and young people including women. One key recommendation by all the participants to sustain the outcomes of the workshop is launching a “Community Circles for Peace Project: Promoting peace in the community, by the community, and for the community through drama (play). We aim to transform this recommendation from words to a progressive community engagement in the nearest future.

ABOUT THE DAY

On the 28th of May 2019, the United Nations General Assembly, by resolution A/RES/73/xx officially designated August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The resolution, approved by consensus, hopes to help combat hate crimes and acts of violence related to religion or belief, and further strengthen inter-religious dialogue. Unfortunately, a vast majority of the states who have voted this day into existence are witnessing an alarming spike in hate speech and incitement to violence against individuals or communities, based on their identity (religion or belief). The resolution was approved in the months following attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the targeting of Christians in Sri Lanka during Easter Sunday. These horrible tragedies serve as a reminder to leaders and citizens across the world that they must get involved as ambassadors for tolerance, acceptance, and dialogue. 2021 marks the third year August 22 is celebrated around the globe after it was officially designated by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. This Day is also a celebration of the efforts of many organizations and individuals who continue to contribute in different ways to mitigate (and one day end) religious violence in our communities around the world.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

There are continuing acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities around the world. The number and intensity of such incidents, which are often of a criminal nature and may have international characteristics, are increasing. According to Pew Research Center, in 2018 more than a quarter of the world's countries experienced a high incidence of hostilities motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religion, terrorism, and harassment of women for violating religious codes. In the same vein, a 2018 Minority Rights Group report indicates that mass killings and other atrocities are increasing in war-torn and stable countries alike. Bloody encounters were recorded in over 50 countries across the globe. The reported deadly incidents involving minorities were concentrated in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Although it is common knowledge that Islamist insurgencies predominate in ideas-based religious conflicts, Christian rebel groups in Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda have also been active since the turn of the millennium. Countries with mixed religious populations are prone to interreligious conflicts, which has materialized in cases such as the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire. As an organization, we look forward to working with state and non-state actors to find attainable solutions to end such acts of violence in the communities we serve.

ABOUT FIIDI

Arising out of a commitment to end religious and ethnic violence, the Foundation for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) is a registered non-profit, non-religious, non-partisan and non-political community-based organization in the Port Loko District of Sierra Leone. FIIDI has taken an awareness (education) based approach to address and prevent religious and ethnic violence affecting the communities we serve. We believe that education, including education for tribal, ethnic, and religious leaders and actors, as well as youth, increases mutual respect; tolerance, and understanding while diminishing the risk that individuals could be manipulated for political purposes. We don't give aid; we strive for dialogue and tolerance, empowering communities to stand up for peace.

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” Nelson Mandela (1918 – 2013). FIIDI's mandate and promotional activities stem from this quote. Our goal is to give meaning and actuality to Mandela's words.



Our Vision

To foster a strong community-centered platform grounded in a culture of peaceful coexistence among people from different backgrounds as a pillar for peace, stability, democracy, and sustainable development.

Our Mission

To promote intercultural and interreligious understanding and to empower communities in peacebuilding activities that contributes to living together in dignity and dialogue.



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