

From Dialogue to Engagement: Experiences of Civil Society Organizations in Religious Literacy Programs for Multicultural Education Curriculum in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to learn about civil society organizations' experiences in cross-cultural religious literacy programs and what should be done to maintain harmonious, non-conflictual relations between people of different religions and beliefs

Design/methods/approach – This study was conducted to explore in-depth information about the experiences of civil society organizations (CSOs) in cross-cultural religious literacy programs. One of the CSOs in Indonesia mentioned in this research is the Leimena Institute, which shares its experience in various literacy activities, including cross-cultural literacy. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experience of civil society organizations in cross-cultural religious literacy programs, not to mention to find out what should be done to maintain harmonious-non-conflictual relations between people of religion and belief. The data for this qualitative research was taken from related documents.

Findings – There are international interfaith documents that speak of the importance of building togetherness in organizing life for the better. The dialog process is one of the efforts that can be carried out to allow the spread of the spirit of cross-cultural religious literacy, to bring up a multicultural-multireligious education curriculum.

Research implications/limitations – This research has theoretical and ideological implications for producing educational innovation. The efforts made by the Islamic community and the international community have a positive impact on efforts to build a broad educational network. As a result, the predictions of future education that is multicultural and multireligious will be able to be faced calmly and fully prepared

Originality/value – This research illustrates how dialogues will build good engagement and produce significant changes in the world of education towards a multicultural-multireligious future education

 OPEN ACCESS

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 20-09-2024

Revised: 25-10-2024

Accepted: 30-12-2024

KEYWORDS

Dialogue;
Engagement;
Curriculum; Religious
Literacy; Civil Society
Organizations;
Multicultural
Education

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Introduction

Indonesia, in this case, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, has long held interfaith dialogues. At least in the late 1970s, the term “dialogue” between religious communities was introduced. Its latest derivative is the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB). But still, prejudice or *su'u al-dan*, misunderstandings, and less friendly and unfriendly attitudes from adherents of one religion towards adherents of another religion are still deeply embedded in people and religious communities. Negative stereotyping attitudes towards followers of other religions and beliefs are still deeply rooted in the minds and cultures of religious people everywhere (El-Ansary & David K. Linnan, 2010; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Goma'a, 2010)

It was not surprising that UNESCO, in 2021 when issuing a *report from the international commission on the futures of education*, reminded the world of education by stating that “The world appears to be increasingly divided and polarized ... Designing and imagining the realization of a shared future of prosperous humanity is increasingly necessary. More particularly, planning patterns of education that genuinely invite all parties to maintain and foster cooperation and solidarity among human beings”. (The world appears increasingly divided and polarized ... Rethinking a common future requires a pedagogy that fosters cooperation and solidarity) (Unesco, 2021).

Methods

This research was conducted to explore in-depth information about the experiences of civil society organizations (CSOs) in cross-cultural religious literacy programs. One of the CSOs in Indonesia mentioned in this research is Leimena Institut, which shares its experience in various literacy activities, including cross-cultural literacy. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experience of civil society organizations in cross-cultural religious literacy programs, not to mention to find out what should be done to maintain harmonious-non-conflictual relations between people of religion and belief. The data for this qualitative research was taken from related documents.

Result and Discussion

1. International Documents: Muslim World and the UN

Meanwhile, documents, agreements (*ijma'*) of contemporary Muslim scholars worldwide, and statements of agreement issued by the United Nations (UN) on how to properly establish harmonious-non-conflictual relations between people of religion and belief in general and between adherents of Islam and Christianity (Catholic and Protestant) in particular continue to emerge. At least in the last 20 (twenty) years, there have been 8 (eight) important international documents related to the issue of how peaceful and harmonious relations between religious communities in various parts of the world have been built, revived, discussed, scheduled, and practiced in real terms of everyday life.

Some examples of international declarations are, among others, 1. *The Amman Message* (2004); 2. *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2007); 3. *Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities* (2016);

4. *Abu Dhabi Declaration or "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together"* (2019); 5. *The Makkah Charter* (2019); 6. *Bukhara Declaration* (2022); 7. *UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 of 2011*, reinforced by UN General Assembly Resolution 78/214 of 2023; and 8. *UN General Assembly Resolution 73/128*, 2018

Below is a translation of some excerpts from the agreement at the international level that was widely publicized on a global scale. First, *The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* (2009); *The Amman Message*, 2004, page vi: Based on fatwas delivered by the leading scholars worldwide (including Sheikh Al-Azhar; Ayatollah Sistani, and Sheikh Qaradawi), in July 2005); and H.M. King Abdullah II organized an international Islamic conference attended by 200 of global leading scholars from 50 countries. In Amman, the scholars unanimously issued decisions on three fundamental issues that became known as the "*Three Points of the Amman Message*."

- (1) They specifically recognize the validity of all 8 Sunni, Shia, and Ibadhi schools (schools of law) of Islam, traditional Islamic theology (Ash'arism), Islamic mysticism (Sufism), the correct Salafi thought, and arrive at a precise definition of who a Muslim is.
- (2) Based on the definition, they prohibit the *takfir* (declaration of apostasy) among fellow Muslims.
- (3) Based on the opinions of the madhhabs, they establish subjective and objective prerequisites for issuing fatwas, thus revealing inappropriate and unauthorized fatwas in the name of Islam (Thought, 2009).

Some important excerpts from *A Common Word Between Us And You*, pages 163-164, more particularly the response from the Archbishop of Canterbury (the principal leader of the Church of England), Dr. Rowan Williams, July 14, 2008, stated "A shared or joint word for the common good to Muslim leaders and scholars who have signed a mutual word between us and you and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere."

Amidst the diversity of encounter and participation patterns, some common priorities need to be set to keep Christian-Muslim relations focused and effective on several core themes. Again, three steps seem feasible here:

First, there is an urgent need to understand each other's different traditions existing among us for educational purposes. We are all influenced by prejudices and misconceptions inherited from the past and often updated with the experience of the present through the influence of media stereotypes. Teaching and learning about the reality and diversity of Islam when Muslims practice their faith should be an equally important priority for Christians as an understanding of true Christianity for Muslims. Concretely, these educational programs may initially be focused on institutions that prepare clerics and imams to carry out interfaith public roles and on institutions that provide religious education to the younger generation.

Second, the opportunity to meet people of different faiths, both at home and abroad, needs to be multiplied and developed in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. This should be done at different levels and circumstances. These opportunities can be useful when they are focused on educational projects, efforts towards the achievement

of the Millennium Development Goals, and cooperation for the reconciliation of historical conflict and hostilities.

Lastly, having sustainably long-lasting meetings requires a commitment to each other and mutual trust from all participants. Such a commitment, which grows into affection, respect, collegiality, and friendship, will be an expression of love for others. Also, it will be done with love for God and in response to God's will.

We believe that the same word between us and you paves the way for these steps to be approached with new vigor. The limitations of making further statements or sending further letters before a joint meeting are obvious, regardless of how good and friendly the intentions may be (El-Ansary, 2019; El-Ansary & David K. Linnan, 2010; Markus, 2016; The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2009).

Third, the *Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities* (2016) stated that ... Based on the above matters, we hereby ... Urge Muslim educational institutions and authorities to undertake a bold review of educational curricula that honestly and effectively address any material that incites aggression and extremism, leads to war and chaos, and results in the destruction of our shared society (M. Declaration, 2016; Marrakesh, 2016).

Fourth, the Abu Dhabi Declaration or "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" asserted that ... We also affirm the importance of religious consciousness awakening and the need to revive this consciousness in the hearts of the new generation through healthy education and moral observance. Straight religious values and teachings. By doing this, we can confront individualistic, selfish, conflicting tendencies and also overcome radicalism and blind extremism in all its forms and expressions. ... This document, under previous International Documents that have emphasized the importance of the role of religion in world peace-building, upholds the following:

- (1) An unyielding faith that authentic religious teachings call us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to uphold the values of mutual understanding, brotherhood among people, and harmonious coexistence; to reestablish wisdom, justice, and love; and to revive religious consciousness among the younger generation so that future generations may be protected from materialistic thinking and dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference based on the rule of law and not on the force of law; ...
- (2) Dialogues, understanding, and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others, and peaceful coexistence will make a significant contribution to alleviating many of the economic, social, political, and environmental problems that weigh heavily on most of humanity;
- (3) Dialogues among the faithful means to gather in a broad space of shared spiritual, humanitarian, and social values, and from this, propagating the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions (A. D. Declaration, 2019; Markus, 2016).

Fifth, the Makkah Declaration, The Makkah Charter (2019), particularly item 19, asserted that "We recognize and affirm that educational institutions are responsible for

shaping the social protection of the Muslim community. Such institutions require effective curricula, teaching tools, and a responsibility to promote centrism and moderation, especially among the youth” (League, 2019).

The sixth is the Bukhara Declaration, May 19, 2022. In the Dialogue of Declarations, Bukhara Uzbekistan, May 2022, it stated, among other things, the following: To achieve these goals practically through the citizens of the world – we, the participants of the forum, agree to:

- (1) Encourage open and constructive discussions on social, cultural, and religious processes and the expansion of multi-religious and intercultural dialog in national, regional, and international contexts;
- (2) Underline the need for all religions to commit to strengthening multi-faith dialogues (and partnerships), especially among religious leaders, allowing multi-faith programs to benefit the whole of society based on a deeper understanding of universal human values, and as a function of deeply held beliefs;
- (3) Acknowledge the importance of education and training - always with the practical aim of equipping citizens with the competencies and skills to interact with each other based on common projects serving the whole society – in fostering religious tolerance and human rights, promoting mutual understanding and respect among civilizations, cultures, religions and beliefs, and the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief;
- (4) Enhance educational activities and establish new mechanisms – including new curricula – to foster multi-religious and intercultural dialogue resulting in respectful engagement and practical programs, building unity and solidarity, and raising public awareness of the importance of religious freedom and peaceful coexistence within and among members of different religious and national communities;

As for the United Nations resolutions, there are 3 (three) that are relevant to mention here. (1) *UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 of 2011*, reinforced by (2) *UN General Assembly Resolution 78/214 of 2023*, on “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief” as follows.

- (1) *UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 of 2011*
 - (a) Promote the creation of collaborative networks to build mutual understanding, encourage dialog, and inspire constructive action towards common policy goals and achieve tangible results, such as serving projects in education, health, conflict prevention, employment, integration, and media education; ...
 - (b) Recognize the need to combat defamation and negative religious stereotypes of individuals, as well as incitement to religious hatred, by strategizing and harmonizing actions at the local, national, regional, and international levels through, inter alia, education and awareness-raising; (Nation, 2011).

(2) *UN General Assembly Resolution 73/128 of 2018 on “Enlightenment and religious tolerance”*

Consider the value of education, including global citizenship education and religious tolerance in promoting mutual understanding and respect between civilizations, cultures, religions, and beliefs, to help prevent acts inconsistent with the Charter and relevant UN instruments, ...

(3) Urge member states to increase their efforts to protect and promote freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief by the following :

- (a) To promote, through education and other means, mutual understanding, tolerance, non-discrimination, and respect in all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief by encouraging, in society at large, greater knowledge of the diversity of religions and beliefs and the history, traditions, languages, and cultures of the various religious minorities present in their jurisdictions;
- (b) To support various types of intercultural engagement and peacebuilding at the national and international levels (Nation, 2018)

(4) *UN General Assembly Resolution 78/214 of 2023*

Underscoring also the importance of raising awareness of cultural and religious differences or beliefs and of education in promoting tolerance, which includes societal acceptance of and respect for religious and cultural diversity, including concerning religious expression, and underlining further the fact that education, in particular in schools, should make a meaningful contribution to the promotion of tolerance and the elimination of discrimination based on religion or belief (Nation, 2023)

Underlining further that educational measures, youth forums, strategic plans, and public information and media campaigns, including online platforms, can make a meaningful contribution to increasing tolerance and the elimination of negative stereotypes, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against a person, based on religion or belief.

From all the international documents mentioned above, both from the Muslim environment and the international world, especially the United Nations (UN), it can be read that both have the same meeting point and emphasis in terms of prioritizing the importance of education. In addition to education, young people around the globe also receive special attention. The courage to review the practices of education and religious education worldwide, more particularly in the digital and post-truth era. Only with quality, constructive-transformative education, especially in schools and madrassas, education of teachers and lecturers, education of prospective pastors, priests, *bhikku*, preachers, *kyai* (clergy and imams) is expected to help foster understanding and awareness of mutual good and positive understanding of the beliefs and faith of different people or groups, respect for civilization, culture, religion and beliefs of other people or groups, and prioritize brotherhood between human beings (human fraternity) and live in peace and harmony between human beings.

Reducing to zero the attitude of demeaning, blaming, hating, hostile to adherents of other different religions, transforming and misleading other people or groups with different understandings, interpretations, religious thoughts, beliefs, and mazhab; dismissing intolerant attitudes, prejudice (su'u al-dzan), negative stereotyping, misunderstandings, stigmatization, discrimination, violence, and injustice; fostering mutual trust and mutual understanding, mutual respect, support and full involvement in appreciating and respecting multicultural and intercultural life (intercultural engagement); rejecting extremism, radicalism, preaching hatred of other different groups; and increasing spaces for encounter and participation between various adherents of different religions and beliefs. Everything leads to the need for cooperation between diverse adherents of religion and belief, race, tribe, ethnicity, and gender to solve world and humanitarian problems, such as environmental damage, global warming, climate change, underdevelopment, poverty, and backwardness.

Despite numerous international documents and statements issued from various authoritative circles, it still seems as if the world of education is dormant at a standstill, does not move on, or does not care about them at all due to the burden of the old history carried by each community in each country, local, regional, and national is renewed and reproduced in the present. It is not easy indeed, but the civilization of humankind needs to be directed and guided towards a more advanced, soothing, joyful welfare, away from hatred, disputes, and hostility.

2. The experience of Leimena Institute, a CSO in Indonesia

Amid world developments on interfaith relations as reflected in the documents and statements of international agreements above and also the expectations of UNESCO on how education should be designed for the future, the Leimena Institute, Jakarta, as one of the civil society organizations (CSOs) took the initiative to do something different as an effort to answer and follow up on the world's concerns reflected in the above document statements.

Leimena Institute, as one of the civil society organizations (CSO) in Indonesia, has introduced a new approach to how to establish relationships between adherents of world religions that are not dominated by prejudice and negative stereotyping through the introduction of LKLB and the upgrading course that follows it for religious teachers both in madrasah and in schools (Leimena Institute, n.d.). It is, namely, through a cross-cultural religious literacy (LKLB) approach applied in madrasah/school teacher training programs (kindergarten to high school). The first class was launched in October 2021. Spanning 2.5 years until May 2024, the LKLB Introduction program (1 week online) has reached 9,969 educators, mostly teachers, along with other educators, such as dai/daiyah and Islamic religious instructors. The total number of graduates reached 8,055 educators from 37 provinces.

Cross-cultural religious literacy emphasizes 3 (three) competencies: personal competency, comparative competency, and collaborative competency.

(1) Personal Competency

Teachers of religious education participating in the LKLB introduction program and the accompanying upgrading course are expected to have and improve “personal competence,” namely being able to understand their own religious teachings, moral framework, epistemology, and spirituality, including their own (sacred) books, interpretations, literature, traditions, and culture, more particularly what their religious texts teach and say about relationships with adherents of other religions. It is about understanding one's own religion comprehensively, deeply, wholly, or not selectively. It means a critical understanding of the traditions that develop in the broader community toward a harmonious, prosperous life without conflict.

(2) Comparative Competency

Religious people do not live alone in society. They are always in contact with followers of other different religions, either directly or indirectly, especially in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. Having “comparative competence” means recognizing and understanding the moral framework, beliefs, faith, and spirituality of other cultures, customs, and followers of other religions or beliefs. This other religious literacy covers a wide range of topics that are usually discussed in comparative religion studies courses. It does not depart from the comparison paradigm that favors one religion over another, but rather the spirit of juxtaposition, where the intersections of similarities are more highlighted than the differences. LKLB emphasizes the importance of developing an understanding of the religions and beliefs lived by people of other faiths, respecting and appreciating them. They are aware of differences yet make inclusiveness the focus of attention. All that are different become an integral part of a group in a pluralistic society.

(3) Collaborative Competency

After moving through a new awareness of the importance of mutual respect and appreciation between different religious believers in a pluralistic community (comparative competence) based on inclusive interpretations of their own religious teachings (personal competence), collaborative competence prioritizes a culture of working together (cooperation; collaboration) as the final result (resultante) of the encounter between the two. As social beings who always associate and relate to people of different religions, races, tribes, customs, languages, education, and professions, religious people are required to be able to cross the boundaries of primordialism. Out of mere dialog or conversation towards cooperation, promoting the ethos of cooperation means being able to work together to implement an idea, aspiration, and project or program together. Collaborative competence occurs when religious people are able to move forward from only verbal dialog and passive tolerance toward engagement.

Different individuals and institutions take a step forward from active let alone passive tolerance towards coexistence in diversity to self- and community awareness of the existence of different people or social groups, cultures, and religions, where all are

believed to be a single entity of humanity that is inseparable by anything. As citizens of the world who want to live prosperously and happily despite different ways and paths due to differences in language, geography, climate, and other factors. Wholehearted mutual involvement (engagement) is the essence of a healthy plurality and bipartisanship. Prioritizing partnerships in working on projects that can be done together to overcome poverty, ignorance, and backwardness in all respects and finding solutions to the challenges of climate change, natural disasters, and environmental damage that cannot be resolved without cooperation with all parties. In facing global problems, social, cultural, spiritual, scientific, and organizational capital becomes valuable capital and a true partner in facing global humanitarian challenges together. Periodically, joint learning and joint cooperation can be evaluated, negotiated, and communicated (El-Ansary & David K. Linnan, 2010; Goma'a, 2010; Hoover, 2021; Leimena, 2023).

One thing that differentiates the "dialogue" approach commonly used in the inter-faith forums is the word "engagement." Engagement has become a principal keyword in the LKLB program, where the teachers get the opportunities to directly interact (engage) with speakers of different religions while elaborating on their religions. Christian teachers learn about Islam from Muslim source speakers who understand well and truly practice Islam religion. Vice versa, Muslim teachers learn about Christianity from well-informed Christian sources or tutors. Moreover, they cooperatively learn about Judaism from Jewish sources, Buddhism from Buddhist sources, and the like.

Engagement with other religious adherents is also carried out through the follow-up program for the "alumni" (teachers who already passed the 1-week online program of LKLB Introduction). They can directly engage with other adherents of different religions in advanced online programs. Even more, they can physically interact directly in workshop programs, including visiting other religious places of worship. In several workshops, the participants are mixed between Muslim and Christian teachers, allowing them to learn from each other.

Engagement is also crucial in implementing the LKLB program since Leimena Institute (IL) prioritizes partnerships with other institutions of different religious backgrounds. Up to date (June 2024), IL has been working with 32 domestic partners (religious and educational institutions), not to mention the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Law and Human Rights. The LKLB Program has been conducted and developed as a form of engagement in collaborative competency.

So far, the experience of the LKLB Program has shown that positive engagement with other adherents of different religions and faiths, even diverse cultures and traditions, in the form of cooperation or partnership building, collaboration, by keeping on acknowledging and respecting the existing differences, plays a pivotal role in overcoming the issues of prejudice, misunderstandings, and negative stereotypes, not to mention building mutual trust that becomes a social asset toward bigger and further collaborations.

Conclusion

No point of return. There is no reason not to follow up on the notes, recommendations, and appeals of international statement documents from both Muslims and UNESCO of the United Nations as described above. The appeal of the Muslim world and international leaders to review, re-examine methods and approaches of educational curriculum, upgrade teacher competence, and update the content of educational literature and religious education cannot be ignored without bringing unexpected risks. In fact, UNESCO firmly states that future education is education that is loaded with multicultural-multireligious. Multi-cultural, intercultural, in the context of the LKLB is interfaith and interdisciplinary. All social elites, religious elites, and political elites need to be open and open themselves in facing and responding to the challenges of future education. What has worked in the past may not necessarily work for the present, especially in the future as the challenges faced are extremely different. Digital culture, social media, influencers, or post-truths, that are intensively spreading hoaxes and slander between religious people in various ways, are real challenges faced by the current generation, more particularly the future generation.

When educational institutions, in general, and religious education institutions, in particular, are still reluctant to move forward to follow up on the various appeals and recommendations above, the Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy practiced and pioneered by the Leimena Institute has been able to break through the freeze and stagnation and is enthusiastically welcomed by madrasah teachers and teachers of various religions. The first classes of Buddhist teachers will be held in September. Until the end of 2024, there will already be Buddhist, Confucian, and Hindu teachers. They long for fresh enrichment and inputs in terms of relationships between believers of various religions. This experience will continue to be developed and can be considered a model of multicultural, multireligious, and multifaith education in the future, especially in a pluralistic country like Indonesia and other countries that need it. I remember Fareed Zakaria in his article when he praised the Singapore government for its ability to practice multi- and inter-cultural education driven by the spirit of Liberal Arts and Science Education altogether (Zakaria, 2015).

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