

BUILDING AN EU INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION & SOCIAL INCLUSION



THE LOKAHI FOUNDATION

Our work is to progress a more diverse, harmonious society.

We create and deliver effective, practical projects which tackle needs and tensions in our communities. Our action springs from original academic research and thinking on the challenges of faith and culture.

From government agencies through to community groups, our engagement is built on core values of integrity, independence and intellectual rigour.

Lokahi (loh-kah-hee) is a Hawaiian word which embodies our vision. It means harmony, unity and balance which arises from diversity and even opposition.

lokahi.org.uk

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Mahalo

We received tremendous support from many people on this journey. We extend our warm 'mahalo' and 'aloha' to our new and old friends from many countries. We hope you will remain part of the Lokahi family for many years to come.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Religion plays a vitally important role in nearly every society around the world, contributing in a wide variety of ways—both positively and negatively—to many of the key issues in contemporary global affairs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the key recommendations in our report ‘Islam, Diversity and Context’ was the creation of opportunities for international exchange. Through the creation of such a platform on religion and social inclusion, the European Union (EU) has the potential to define a new paradigm for engagement with religion. The ‘religion and society’ approach proposed here recognises religion as an important social force throughout the world while emphasising the importance of engaging religion and religious actors alongside other relevant and non-religious stakeholders (social, political, economic, etc.) necessary for addressing the issue at hand. Such a model will also permit the EU to avoid any appearance of endorsing specifically religious approaches (or specific interpretations of religion) as a preferred solution to global problems.

We propose that the EU should define the core scope and purpose of the proposed platform as follows:

The international exchange platform on religion and social inclusion is a mechanism for enabling people-to-people contact, dialogue, collaboration, and mobility between civil society leaders and organisations in Europe and their counterparts in other parts of the world working on the relationship between religion, respect for diversity, and social inclusion. It will support a wide range of activities carried out by people of diverse beliefs and worldviews, as well as those working from non-religious perspectives, to explore how resources from religion can be mobilised to promote coexistence between people in diverse societies.

We recommend that the EU create an International Exchange Platform on Religion and Social Inclusion in the form of a series of short-term exchanges and international collaborations between religious actors and other civil society groups seeking practical solutions to key global problems of mutual concern. Exchange activities—to be implemented by a third-party organisation selected by the EU—should provide an immersive experience consisting of dialogue, experiential learning and exchange of best practices, training/skills enhancement, and peer-facilitated project design.

Based on research and pilot exchange activities carried out by Lokahi, this report identifies options for areas of thematic focus for the exchanges; specific activity types to be incorporated into the exchanges; guidance with respect to the profiles and recruitment of participants; criteria for choosing locations to host exchanges; considerations with respect to the selection of implementing partners; issues of platform governance; mechanisms for ensuring enduring impact and sustainability of exchange activities; and areas of potential risk.

PART I

DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH



DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the contemporary world, and belying longstanding assumptions about a global trend towards secularisation, religion remains a potent force in many societies. The Pew Research Center's monumental 2012 study of *The Global Religious Landscape* revealed that 84% of the world's population professes some form of religious affiliation.¹ While understandings and expressions of religious faith—of what it means to 'be religious'—vary enormously, it is strikingly clear that religion is a factor analysts, practitioners, and policymakers in world affairs cannot afford to ignore.

Looking around the globe today, religion seems to have some connection to many of the most pressing issues in the headlines: militant extremism and sectarianism in the Middle East; the rise of far-right populism in North America and Europe; the Rohingya crisis; and debates over the meaning and scope of freedom of religion and belief—just to name a few. These same examples highlight another common feature of religion as it figures in the considerations of policymakers and government officials—that is, the idea that more often than not, religion means trouble. Indeed, with the commonly perceived association of religion with violence, hatred, and exclusionary politics in many settings today, it is easy to lose sight of the many examples of religion helping to make the world a better place. Consider the vital role played by religious leaders in brokering peace agreements in Guatemala and Colombia; cross-sectarian outreach by Shi'i clerics in Iraq seeking to repair that country's broken social fabric; Pope Francis' impassioned plea to protect the natural environment in *Laudato si'*; faith groups in Malawi rallying to the defense of civil society in the face of growing authoritarianism; or the fact that, for decades now, the refugee resettlement activities of the US government, and more recently in Germany, and Italy, have depended on crucial partnerships with faith-based NGOs of diverse denominations.

Religion, as these two clusters of examples illustrate, is neither inherently positive nor negative. It inspires acts of boundless kindness and justice in some contexts even as it seems to justify bigotry and bloodletting in others. There is, in short, no easy way to characterise the nature of religion as a force in society other than perhaps to recognise that it is pervasive, persistent, and powerful.

As the European Union contemplates the creation of a new international exchange platform focused on religion and society, this report and the research report 'Islam, Diversity and Context' which informs it aim to support decision-making in Brussels by providing guidance and recommendations for how such a platform might be developed. In addition to offering ideas about the nature and form of the exchange mechanism itself, the study will advance research-based findings regarding the most suitable themes and topics to be explored in any platform as well as possible participant and audience types. The recommendations put forward here are based on extensive research by Lokahi Foundation scholars and staff, including focus groups and interviews across Europe (including all its sub-regions) as well as international site visits to institutions, universities, and civil society organisations in numerous countries around the world characterised by high levels of social, cultural, and religious diversity.



Bullet-scarred mural in 'Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, Saida (Sidon), Lebanon

DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH

It also incorporates insights and findings from two pilot implementations of an international exchange programme focused on religion and social inclusion which took place in the UK and Lebanon in December 2018 and January 2019, respectively.

The purpose of this final platform report is to provide detailed recommendations and guidance to the European Union as it considers the creation of an international exchange platform in the near future. These recommendations are based on a combination of desk research and discussions with key personnel involved in other international exchange programmes (past and present) that have incorporated a focus on religion; the focus group, interviews, site visits conducted by Lokahi to date; results and observations from the two pilot exchanges in the UK and Lebanon; and the collective experience of the members of the core Lokahi research team (Gwen Griffith-Dickson, Dilwar Hussain, and Peter Mandaville), all of whom have played key roles in designing, managing, and/or participating in local, national, and international exchange programmes focused on religion.

The final platform report is structured as follows.

It begins with a discussion of religion and society with a primary focus on the intersection of religion and coexistence (*'vivre ensemble'*) in societies characterised by high levels of sociocultural diversity.

The report then explains how international exchange programmes can help to advance foreign policy objectives. It looks more specifically at the underlying rationale and purposes behind the creation of an international exchange platform focused on the role of religion in society, followed by a brief discussion of previous efforts to create similar mechanisms on the part of other international actors.

The report then turns to the proof of concept as tested through the pilots run by the Lokahi Foundation, and thereafter the question of how to move forward with the creation of such an international exchange mechanism.

It offers a recommendation as to the optimal format (including some variants, alternatives, and their associated strengths and weaknesses);

ideas about relevant topics and themes to engage through platform activities;

effective exchange activities, suggested participant profiles;

and guidance on other practical dimensions of building the platform such as implementation partnerships, recruitment mechanisms, platform governance (both internal to the EU and externally);

and, finally, issues of sustainable impact.

DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH

2. RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: VIVRE ENSEMBLE

A focus on religion and society can seem impossibly broad and almost certainly too abstract to serve as the basis for concrete public diplomacy initiatives such as an international exchange platform. It would therefore be useful to delimit our conceptualisation of this theme and any concrete activities that might arise from it.

In what follows, the emphasis on religion and society is not intended to denote an interest in every single aspect or sense in which religion is implicated in social issues. Rather, the question we wish to explore here—with a view to reflecting it in the proposed platform—is about how religion relates to possibilities for coexistence/ *vivre ensemble* in societies characterised by high levels of social diversity. More specifically, we want to look at how religion structures the dynamics surrounding social inclusion and exclusion and how it contributes to both the production and mitigation of societal tensions.

Such a focus seems apt in the face of many instances today where religion appears to be at the heart of social conflicts around the world, whether we are talking about blasphemy laws, the limits of citizenship and belonging, or what kinds of refugees are allowed to cross borders. Another Pew study, this time from 2014, seems to identify a clear pattern of increasing social hostility connected to religion in recent years.²

They find that between 2007-2012, there was a marked increase in the number of countries experiencing violence or threat of violence in connection with the enforcement of religious norms; sectarian or communal violence; harassment of women over dress; abuse of religious minorities; and religion-related terrorist violence. The challenge thus seems to be one of identifying how faith can help diverse societies to hold together and move forward collectively rather than as a force driving different groups apart.

At some level we are therefore talking about the relationship between religion and the rather slippery concept of ‘social cohesion,’ or the ability of different groups in society to work collectively towards broadly shared goals based on trust and reciprocity rather than experiencing the presence of the other as a source of existential danger or as something that compromises one’s sense of religious or cultural authenticity.

We qualify it as a ‘slippery’ concept because the level of cohesion in a given society is not something amenable to easy quantification, nor is there any broadly accepted understanding of the mechanisms that generate such cohesion.

Apparent cohesion based on minorities being thoroughly assimilated and not culturally different is not always a sign of a healthy and harmonious history; it can also be the result of minorities feeling the need to accommodate culturally in order to avoid persecution. In our usage here, therefore, we mainly wish to point to the relationship between social cohesion and another fundamental concept in modern political sociology, that of *social capital*—most closely associated with scholars such as Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu.³



The ‘Nameless Library’, Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial in Vienna, Austria.

PART I:

DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH

One initial possible framing of the issue at the heart of this endeavor is therefore the question of the role of religion in fostering positive social capital, or, more specifically, *bridging* social capital: relations of trust and reciprocity that connect socially heterogeneous groups.

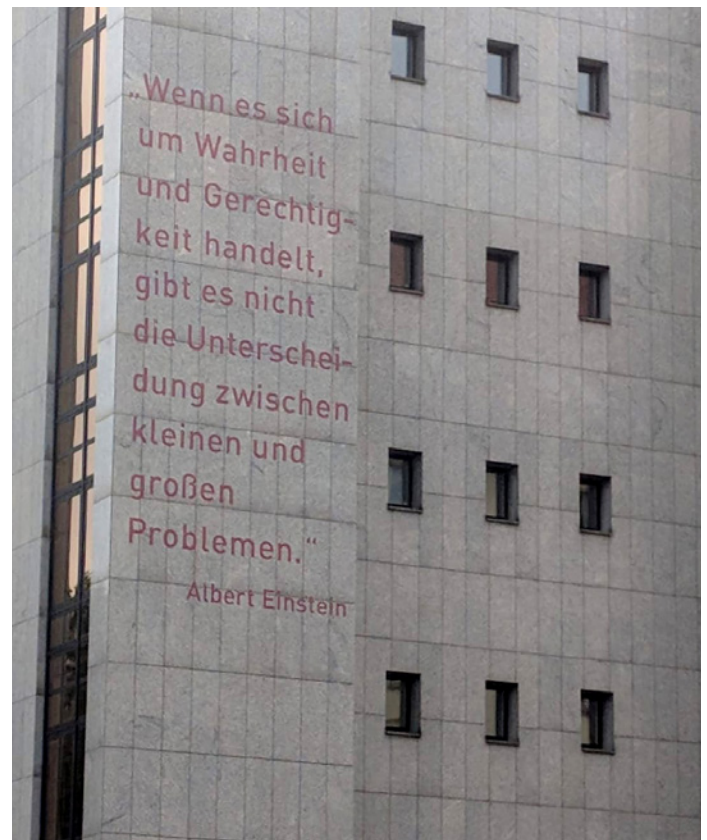
A model example of the kind of dynamic we have in mind is found in the work of the sociologist Ashutosh Varshney. In his highly-regarded 2003 study *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, he set out to explain why some religiously mixed villages in India managed to avoid the high levels of inter-religious tension that beset other communities.

What he found was that those villages experiencing lower levels of intercommunal tensions were characterised by historically higher levels of civic engagement across religious boundaries. In these villages, over the years, Muslims and Hindus had come to recognise and celebrate each other's holidays and festivals, to share in the upkeep and preservation of each other's religious sites, and—perhaps most importantly—to extend this respect and mutual recognition into other spheres of daily life.

Varshney argued that when national and regional events in the 1980s and 90s led to increased intercommunal violence in many mixed towns throughout India, the inter-religious social capital that had built up in his focus villages allowed them to largely avoid such tensions.

However, in many cases in Europe today, a simple model of relatively unified groups having to interact with significantly different groups already is too simplistic. Young European identity is intersectional; bonds are formed (or contested) according to multiple aspects of identity, such as gender and LGBT identities, political alliances in an increasingly polarised Europe, and ethnic differences.

In particular, a striking pattern emerged from our research when, for example, we listened to the younger generation of Muslims in Europe; religious millennials do not have the same stable bonds and attachments to their own religious leaders as once supposed, and tend to seek other sources of inspiration and aspiration.



Building in Berlin. 'In matters of truth and justice, there is no difference between little problems and big problems.'

DEFINING THE RELIGION & SOCIETY APPROACH

It may appear that this case points to the importance of interfaith engagement as a tool for generating bridging social capital, and, indeed, there is sometimes a vital role to be played by such activity. But interfaith provides neither the full story nor, for our present purposes, the full solution when it comes to identifying an operative framework for the proposed exchange platform. We emphasise and favor a focus on ‘religion and society’ over ‘interfaith engagement’ or ‘religious engagement’ for several reasons:

⇒ Religion and society enables a broader analysis of the issue at hand. It helps us to focus more clearly on situations where the root issue may have more to do with broader social factors even where religion appears to be the operative driver – e.g. religious tensions in South Asia that are more about how the caste system (i.e. social class) has intersected historically with processes of conversion; or sectarian strife in the Middle East that is better understood as a function of geopolitical rivalries or the local demographics of political and economic inequality. Put another way, the religion and society approach helps us to ‘right size’ our understanding of religion’s role in particular issues;

⇒ The broader religion and society approach makes it easier to add a religious engagement or religious outreach component to work focused on issues that might not be explicitly religious (e.g. public health, combating corruption, addressing environmental degradation, job growth). In other words, it becomes possible to consider and pursue faith outreach and engagement in relation to a wider range of social issues and challenges than if one were to focus only on topics understood to fall within the domain of religion as it is conventionally understood—both in terms of the relevant subject matter and also the boundaries that define e.g. the domain of religion and the domain of public life (per varying European models such as French *laïcité* or British secularism);

⇒ Unlike interfaith engagement, which privileges the position of belief and generally expects participants to declare a faith identity as a condition of entry, ‘religion and society’ more easily accommodates secular, humanist, or non-religious subject positions;

⇒ A focus on religion and society (as distinct from ‘interfaith engagement’ or ‘religious engagement’) helps to reduce the chances of activities being perceived as endorsing or promoting particular religions, religious leaders, or ways of believing. Framing an engagement as interfaith often implies working through established channels of religious leadership in ways that may exclude women and younger people.

In the discussion so far we have tried to establish some parameters and a clearer focus on the core question of a potential exchange platform on religion and society: namely, how to create greater social cohesion through enhancing bridging social capital via religion. We have also sought to explain why a ‘religion and society’ framework would be inclusive of a wider range of topics, issues, and participants than other possible framings (such as ‘interfaith engagement’).

PART II

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?



WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?

Part I of this report focused on establishing the importance of religion as a factor in contemporary world affairs; on developing a distinctive framework for potential EU activities focus on religion and society and explaining the added value of such an approach.

In Part II we will look more closely at why and how the EU might pursue its goals with respect to the role of religion in society via the creation of an international exchange platform. After a brief discussion of public diplomacy and civil society exchange programmes as a tool for advancing foreign policy goals, this section will define the mission and some of the key objectives such a platform might accomplish.

PART II:

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?

3. EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES FOR ADVANCING FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

Exchange programmes have long-featured in the public diplomacy repertoire of major actors in the international system. While often primarily associated with the realm of public affairs and the projection of 'soft power,' international exchange programmes have evolved in recent years to focus on more than just creating a positive image abroad. They have become part of the broader toolkit for advancing core areas of foreign policy concern—around, for example, human rights, press freedom, economic development, and stability—by helping to increase the capacity and effectiveness of civil society actors working on those issues around the world.

Governments invest a significant amount of money in such exchange mechanisms, with for example the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs—which oversees most public diplomacy programmes—programming some \$600 million in global exchange programmes in Fiscal Year 2017. Even in the current climate of US withdrawal from international engagement, the State Department's international exchange portal lists more than forty distinct exchange programmes with a wide range of foci.⁴ While many of these programmes have a rather generic focus on education, leadership, sport, or the arts, others are tied more closely to specific policy goals such as fostering economic development through entrepreneurship, the use of technology for empowering women, the environment and conflict resolution.

European governments have also invested in international exchange programmes. For example, funding to the Goethe-Institut from the German Foreign Office recently supported virtual exchanges between journalists in Germany and other countries whose work focuses on the impact of technology in society.⁵ The European Union has also seen value in such programmes in the past, implementing sector-specific exchanges in areas such as agriculture ('EU-China exchange programme for young farmers') and governance ('EU-Taiwan Human Rights Exchange Programme'), as well as more general civil society youth exchange programmes focused on strategically-important regions such as the Caucuses and East Asia.⁶

The Alliance for International Exchange, a Washington DC-based non-profit umbrella organisation that works on behalf of the international exchange programme implementation sector has developed a range of resources and analytical products that highlight the added value of such programmes for core areas of foreign policymaking such as security, democracy, and economic development.⁷



Demonstration in Berlin, 2018.

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WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?

Some governmentally-sponsored public diplomacy programmes have incorporated a focus on religion. For example, over the past three years the publicly-funded United States Institute of Peace has run a 'Youth Leaders' Exchange with the Dalai Lama.' This initiative brings together young peacemakers from conflict settings around the world—and from a wide variety of faith backgrounds—to engage with the Dalai Lama as well as local youth in Dharamsala, India as they undertake training in peace education, reconciliation, and prejudice reduction. Staying in the United States, the International Visitor Leadership Programme (IVLP)—the US State Department's most flexible public diplomacy platform—supports short-term visits to the U.S. by civil society leaders in other countries. The programmes are often designed around specific issues of bilateral interest and U.S. embassies and delegations abroad can seek nearly extemporaneous support through the programme to work on arising issues, or on topics that local communities have identified as a priority. Several previous iterations of the IVLP programmes have incorporated a focus on interfaith engagement, or on the role of the religious sector in addressing issues of social inequality.

Turning to the European side, numerous German foundations, such as the Bertelsmann Stiftung, have incorporated a focus on the role of religion into their transnational activities exploring shared learning and networking between different global urban contexts facing high levels of social inequality and alienation. The UK's British Council runs a broad range of exchange programmes, including one—Bridging Voices—with an explicit focus on transatlantic discussions regarding religion.⁸ In terms of direct UK government programming, from 2005-2010 the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) operated a programme called 'Projecting British Islam' which supported trips by prominent British Muslim figures to numerous countries in the Muslim majority world with a view to strengthening partnerships between British Muslims and communities overseas that could lead to grassroots follow-up initiatives.

In addition to these snapshots of religion-focused exchange activities undertaken by various EU Member States and transatlantic partners, it is also relevant to note EU support for certain longstanding civil society exchange mechanisms. One of longest standing such efforts can be found in the work of the International Cultural Youth Exchange (ICYE), headquartered in Berlin and supported by, among others, the EU's Erasmus+ programme. ICYE undertakes a broad range of international intercultural learning experiences for young people, with an emphasis on service learning and volunteer experience. ICYE is noteworthy in this context, however, because it grew out of a faith-based history—having originally been founded in 1957 as the International Christian Youth Exchange—and is today one of the largest civil society-based international cooperation networks working on broad issues of culture and society.

In the intergovernmental realm, two initiatives with a significant focus on religion and culture that incorporate aspects of exchange activity are the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the King Abdullah International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)—a partnership between Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Austria, headquartered in Vienna.

Looking across this space as a whole, it is clear that while several governments have implemented public diplomacy programmes focused on building connections between religious communities and global publics, none has done so with a primary purpose of enabling sustained collaborations on religion and social diversity.

PART II:

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?

4. RECOMMENDATION ON PLATFORM

Based on guidance received from the EU in response to options presented in our interim report and affirmed by observation and formal assessment of the pilot activities, we offer the following overall recommendation as regards the operational manifestation of a platform consistent with the mission defined above:

The EU International Exchange Platform on Religion and Social Inclusion should take the form of a programme to support short term exchanges and international collaborations between religious actors and other civil society groups seeking practical solutions to key global problems of mutual concern.

Exchange activities will provide an immersive experience consisting of dialogue, experiential learning and exchange of best practices, training/skills enhancement, and peer-facilitated project design. Mechanisms for post-exchange sustainability will ensure ongoing impact as well as connectivity between participants after the conclusion of the exchange sessions.

Implementation will occur via a service contract to a third-party organisation (or organisations) with an ongoing role for the EU and its delegations around the world in terms of establishing thematic and strategic priorities for the platform, alongside additional external governance and strategic guidance to be provided by a global advisory board.



Vienna.

PART II:

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY?

5. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PLATFORM

We propose that the EU define the primary purpose ('mission statement') of the international exchange platform on the role of religion in society as follows:

The international exchange platform on religion and social inclusion is a mechanism for enabling people-to-people contact, dialogue, collaboration, and mobility between civil society leaders and organisations in Europe and their counterparts in other parts of the world working on the relationship between religion, respect for diversity, and social inclusion. It will support a wide range of activities carried out by people of diverse beliefs and worldviews, as well as those working from non-religious perspectives, to explore how resources from religion can be mobilised to promote coexistence between people in diverse societies.

Specific objectives for the platform will be a function of the model and modalities chosen by the EU, but will likely include some of the following:

- ⇒ Facilitate the cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiential learning between participant nations with respect to best practices on the role of religion in promoting respect for diversity;
- ⇒ Create transnational networks of 'like-minded' religious actors from different faith traditions working in the same professional sector (e.g. education, community development, conflict resolution);
- ⇒ Generate, over time, a global conversation and movement focused on the role of religion as a positive force for promoting respect for diversity and coexistence;

⇒ Create shared value by evolving effective communication methods and skills for 'pro-social' religious actors, increasing the capacity of young European citizens to appropriate and be attracted to inclusive religious ideas;

⇒ Allow for citizens to understand each other better across boundaries of belief and worldviews

The primary strength of the proposed international exchange platform mechanism lies in its *flexibility and adaptability*. It provides a modular system permitting contact, mobility, and collaboration at the people-to-people level. These kinds of programmes (such as the EU's flagship higher education exchange programme Erasmus and its successor Erasmus+) can be specific to a particular sector and operate according to well-defined standards and technical parameters, or, as in the case of the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Programme (IVLP) they can provide a basic programmatic template that can then be adapted to a wide range of topical or thematic foci as policy priorities evolve.⁹ Given the fluidity in developments around religion and society-type issues, something more akin to the latter format is probably most suitable for current EU purposes.

PART III

BUILDING THE PLATFORM

Lokahi team in Al Mansouri Grand Mosque, Tripoli, Lebanon

BUILDING THE PLATFORM

As Lokahi conducted its initial research project, it gave an interim report and recommendations to the project sponsor. It was agreed that Lokahi should propose two international exchange events, creating the concept and content, and piloting the delivery as a proof of concept.

The events were held in U.K. in December of 2018 and in Lebanon in January 2019. Each group consisted of twenty individuals. A full description of the exchanges and recommendations concerning the creation and running of the exchanges, can be found in Appendix 1.

PART III: BUILDING THE PLATFORM

6. PILOT PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

The programme was neither a conventional conference, with presentations followed by questions and discussions, nor a training course. A balance of activities was created between: increasing the skill and capacity in specific areas, opportunities for exchange and mutual learning, and absorption and learning from programmes and institutions in the countries where the events were held.

A key focus of the programme design was creating the conditions for learning from each other in an international exchange. This was done in various ways, including combining the intergroup coaching with the intensive modules of training. Input from the Lokahi team was followed up with carefully orchestrated group work, feedback, and group coaching through the exercises. In these exercises, each participant drew on their own experience, expertise and insights, and used these to help others with their ideas, problems and 'stuck' areas.

This interpersonal exchange was intended to be the most significant and innovative aspect of the programme design, and it proved to be not merely a fruitful but indeed a powerful experience for the participants. However, this interpersonal and group dynamic does not arise naturally and needs to be sensitively facilitated by those who deliver the programme.

We delivered two contrasting media study modules in the U.K. and in Lebanon. The U.K. training was a morning-long, specific study of how to conduct a social media campaign through different channels. The Lebanon training was a more complex, day-long training on storytelling for social change through video, including promoting videos through a social media campaign, followed by the opportunity on another day to be interviewed individually for their own video.

Both approaches were popular and effective, although it is more desirable for participants to have a takeaway product from the training and to have it professionally coached and created.

The site visits proved to be very popular components of the workshop. For an innovative 'global exchange platform', as compared to a conference centre in a major international city, it would be more desirable to run events in an intrinsically interesting region where such experiences can be created, and to make sure the sites visited are well selected.



Lokahi Global Exchange in Lebanon.

PART III:

BUILDING THE PLATFORM

7. PROFILE OF PILOT PARTICIPANTS

Participants were diverse in nearly all respects, both geographic and demographic. Ages ranged from early 20s to later life. There was an equal balance of genders. No data was sought on sexual orientation, or on health or disability.

Religions included Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, Sikh and Hindu, and those who do not seek to identify themselves in religious terms.

Participants were selected to be working within a range of issues of social concern and religious engagement.

Areas of work included interfaith dialogue, refugees and migration, post-conflict stabilisation, post-conflict trauma, religious and community education, intergroup hate crime, empowerment and education of women and of youth, community leadership, religious leadership, CVE, stabilisation in anticipation of elections, peace-making and reconciliation.

This approach of balancing diversity of person with commonality of focus was successful. Participants were strongly positive about the diversity of the group and what it contributed to their learning and experience. Diversity and common ground need to be balanced so that the enrichment of encounter that diversity brings nevertheless allows enough common interest to allow focus and progress in the activities.

The nationalities and ethnicities were often layered and intersectional. Overall, participant national and ethnic backgrounds included French, Italian, British, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Bulgarian, Danish, Dutch, Irish, German, Bosnian, USA, Moroccan, Algerian, Ethiopian, Tanzanian, Somali, Lebanese, Iraqi, Indian, Sri Lankan, Indonesian.

8. SUMMARY OF PILOT PROGRAMME FINDINGS

Findings from the pilot events indicate:

- ⇒ The events were a successful proof of concept of an international exchange event differing from conventional gatherings, and could have a significant international impact
- ⇒ Participants were very enthusiastic about the experience, all participants reported enjoying the Exchange event, found it useful and relevant to their work, and reported gaining new knowledge and skills
- ⇒ Gathering practitioners with religious competency who are working on 'wicked problems' in society – not all of them religious problems – is an effective way to address areas of urgent need; and can be executed effectively and appropriately in a 'neutral' context. The exchange increases the quality and effectiveness with which such wicked problems can be tackled
- ⇒ Important problem sets to be tackled in a future platform include intercommunal hostility, inclusive citizenship, genocide prevention and post-atrocity stabilisation, human trafficking, interreligious dialogue, work with women and with youth, and interreligious and intercultural dialogue
- ⇒ For a future platform, as much diversity as possible in selection of participants is powerful provided such diversity can be managed sensitively and skilfully
- ⇒ The two pilots indicate that for an ongoing platform exchange, a mix of activities such as in-depth training, co-coaching, skills acquisition, and site visits to relevant projects is an effective format provided the nature of the activities and the selection of participants goes hand-in-hand
- ⇒ A key finding from the pilot is that the aspect of learning from each other, which was a key aim of the programme design, was highly successful; however, it does not arise naturally or easily and has to be skilfully created by programme leaders

PART III: BUILDING THE PLATFORM



PART III:

BUILDING THE PLATFORM

9. FORMAT OF EXCHANGES

Our assessment is that the EU's objectives for the platform can be best met through a series of exchanges—each one to two weeks in duration—to occur on a biannual or quarterly basis depending on final levels of funding and the capacity of implementing partners.

We recommend that each exchange consist of around twenty participants, a group size that is large enough to provide meaningful diversity in terms of the backgrounds, perspectives, and skill sets that participants bring to the table while still being small enough to foster close-knit relationships and a 'cohort identity' over the course of the exchange.

Given that most participants will need to take time away from their daily professional and/or community responsibilities in order to participate in these exchanges, we assess that a programme of maximum two weeks in duration represents the outer limit of what is manageable in terms of time commitment.

Where participants and (if relevant) their home organisations wish to view the exchange programme as a form of professional development activity which justifies absence from work, a one to two-week timeframe is also consistent with many currently available training and executive education opportunities. Another option would be to run multiple week-long sessions with the same participants over the course of a year or half-year with some activities structured to span the interim period and thereby create a sense of ongoing connection and impact in between in-person meetings.

What is distinctive about the format proposed here—and which distinguishes it very clearly from other short-term exchange programmes such as the US State Department's IVLP programme or the UNAOC's Fellows programme—is the focus on practical, hands-on collaboration and active network building. Rather than sending people on trips to expose them passively to different settings or contexts, the model we propose here places a premium on interactive exchange, engagement, and direct collaboration to build relationships across a wide range of contexts simultaneously through a focus on very tangible shared problems and challenges.



'Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation' speaks to Lokahi Global Exchange, London.



'Tell MAMA' speaks to Lokahi Global Exchange, London.

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10. TOPICS AND THEMES

In approaching the question of what topics, themes, and problems should be addressed by the activities of the platform, it is useful to first make a distinction between those issues which by their very nature implicate religion directly and those issues which do not necessarily have an explicit religious dimension to them but nonetheless have attracted the interest or become areas of focus for religious actors.

In the first category we might think of issues such as promoting freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) or preventing violent extremism (PVE), where religion is often viewed as a primary source of ideological motivation.

In the second category we might consider issues such as conflict resolution, humanitarian and disaster relief, or efforts to protect the natural environment—all of which represent areas of policy concern in which faith-based actors have been heavily engaged in recent years.

Given the primary purpose of the platform and the ‘religion and society’ approach outlined in section 2 above, we recommend that the platform’s activities focus on the second of these two categories. Since two key objectives of the platform relate to (1) enabling and enhancing greater collaboration between religious actors and broader civil society; and (2) mainstreaming engagement with religious actors across a broader range of issues, a focus on ‘non-religious’ areas of policy concern would seem to be more appropriate.

To be clear: this is not to say that platform activities cannot or should not address FoRB or PVE. Rather, it is our considered opinion that a stronger demonstration effect regarding the relevance of religion and religious actors will accrue from fostering exchange and partnership around pressing issues not conventionally perceived as having a strong basis in or connection to religion.

Based on interactions with pilot exchange participants (both in terms of their own areas of focus as well as their assessments of the issue areas where religious actors and broader civil society can most profitably collaborate) as well as the extensive experience of Lokahi principal researchers who have studied religious sector engagement with foreign policy issues, we have identified several topics and themes as particularly ripe for engagement via the proposed EU platform.

Common to all of them, crucially, is the fact that they represent problems or challenges that are present in Europe as well as the rest of the world—or which connect Europe to other world regions—thereby making them particularly appropriate as the basis for exchange and collaboration between European religious actors and civil society and their counterparts around the world.

Consistent with the overall thematic focus of the platform, they all in various ways also involve a focus on the role of religion in promoting social inclusion.



Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, Saida (Sidon), Lebanon.

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(a) Promoting active, participatory, and inclusive citizenship. Given high levels of civic disengagement in Europe and around the world—sometimes by individual choice, sometimes due to state closure of political space or aversion to particular groups—partnerships between religious actors and broader civil society can help to promote engaged and pluralistic approaches to issues of civic exclusion, socioeconomic disenfranchisement (lack of jobs or pathways for social mobility), and broader challenges of community development.

(b) The rise of exclusionary politics as a global phenomenon. This is a challenge found today in numerous countries around the world—the United States, Brazil, Russia, India, the Philippines, to name a few—as well as in Europe. While exclusionary groups in these settings do not always identify themselves in explicitly religious terms, they do often rely on narratives about particular types of religious identity as the bedrock of nationalism or civilisation. In many of these same settings, however, religious groups and actors in broader civil society are at the forefront of disputing such exclusionary claims and may benefit from engagement and mutual support with counterparts in other countries.

(c) Stabilisation and reconciliation in conflict and post-conflict settings. Numerous pilot participants were involved in this kind of work in a diverse range of settings (e.g. Iraq, Bosnia, Lebanon, to name a few) and there are well-developed models and methodologies that could help scale up these activities through the proposed platform. Linking up faith-based reconciliation practitioners and conflict mediation specialists between structurally similar but counter-intuitive settings—such as Iraq and Northern Ireland—may yield unique insight and innovative conflict management approaches.

(d) Fostering social inclusion through education. Many faith-inspired civil society organisations, particularly those operating in settings characterised by high levels of social and cultural diversity, are engaged in various forms of public education (often informally and outside the education sector proper) focused on shaping people in positive ways. Organisations involved in this kind of activity frequently face a common set of issues across disparate settings, including the need to carefully navigate perceptions that they are trying to challenge or undermine the formal education sector and its political sponsors. Considering the challenges faced in modern contexts, religious actors delivering such programmes are also often involved in developing innovative approaches to theology that focus on respect for diversity and inclusivity, which can sometimes create tensions with ‘incumbent’ religious authorities. Networking like-minded religious actors and their allies in broader civil society across different countries and regions may help them to develop joint solutions to some of these challenges and to create mutual support networks.



Lokahi Global Exchange visit to St. Anselm's Catholic Church, Southall, London.

PART III: BUILDING THE PLATFORM

(e) The migration and refugee crisis. In particular, there could be a focus on the challenges of intergroup hostility that are present in many settings affected by the crisis. In many countries in Europe and North America, for example, faith-based charities and religious organisations are at the forefront of delivering crucial relief and services for refugees and migrants and thereby find themselves in the thick of managing intergroup dynamics and conflicts within migrant communities as well as at the intersection of migrant communities and wider national society.

(f) Human trafficking and modern slavery. Here we see particular relevance for activities focused on the empowerment of women and efforts to address sexual violence. Many of the organisations at the forefront of combatting human trafficking are faith-based groups. Exchange activities focused on this topic could help to enhance interoperability between religious organisations working on this issue and their counterparts in broader civil society, as well as to promote transnational coordination between groups differentially located in the ‘upstream’ or ‘downstream’ components of the human trafficking ecosystem.

It is also our recommendation that each exchange should be organised around a single theme or problematic. While some who took part in the pilots welcomed the fact that their fellow exchange participants were working on a diverse range of issues and challenges, others indicated that they wish there had been more participants working on their own issue or problem. We assess that exchange sessions with a single thematic focus will be more likely to generate effective transnational collaborations and impact given that participants will have a common focus to their work and more readily identify others in the group as peers. The EU may also wish to consider specifying a particular thematic focus for each year of platform activity, with all exchanges occurring in that year to be organised around or reflective of the annual topic.



'Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, Saida (Sidon), Lebanon.



Battle damage to a home in 'Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, Saida (Sidon), Lebanon.

PART III: BUILDING THE PLATFORM

11. ACTIVITIES

Within the recommended platform format there is scope for a wide range of activity types, many of which were incorporated into the two pilot implementations undertaken by Lokahi. While post-exchange assessments permitted us to determine which activities were viewed as most interesting, relevant, and useful to the participants (as discussed below), we have also identified some broader principles which should inform decisions by the exchange programme implementing organisation(s) about which activities to include:

⇒ The essence and crux of the exchange lies in fostering active engagement, sharing, and cross-fertilisation of ideas, experiences, and practices between participants. Therefore **exchange activities should be as maximally interactive as possible**. While it may make sense for participants to listen to presentations or panel discussions for specific purposes (e.g. training or presenting project ideas), it should be made clear that these exchanges are something very different from a conference or workshop.

⇒ At least in part, the **selection of specific activities to include should be a function of the thematic focus of each exchange as well as participant profiles**. Some kinds of activities will be more or less relevant for particular themes and issues and, likewise, the different needs of participants fitting specific profiles (e.g. senior organisation leaders vs. mid-level programme managers) will best be met by different kinds of activities. This will require some degree of flexibility on the part of the implementing organisation in terms of being able to modify or adapt aspects of the exchange activities based on these factors.

Appendix 1 ('Summary Report of Exchange Pilot Activities') contains an overview of the activities included by Lokahi in the programme for the UK and Lebanon pilots. These were structured in such a way that allowed us to test A/B variants of certain activity types between the two pilot settings. We duplicated some activities exactly between the two pilots to allow us to assess the impact of other variables (e.g. different configurations of participants; variation in physical location and context).



Lokahi Global Exchange in Lebanon.



Lokahi Global Exchange in Lebanon.

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Overall, four particular activity types stood out as being particularly successful in terms of participants viewing them as rating highly across all three indicators of interest, relevance, and utility, as well as Lokahi staff observation and assessment of which activities generated the highest levels of buy-in and active participation:

Visits to local sites, neighborhoods, and districts in the exchange country that embody lived experience of the themes being addressed by the exchange.

Participants gain a very visceral sense of how the focus issues manifest themselves in everyday life through interaction with residents, local organisations and direct contact with key culture and geography. Participants in the UK exchange spent a day in the west London neighborhood of Southall, an area with high levels of religious and cultural diversity, and to exchange ideas, perspectives, and experiences with a number of local religious leaders and civil society groups working on the management of coexistence. In the Lebanon exchange, participants visited Tripoli to meet senior religious leaders and grassroots religious actors to discuss interfaith dialogue; and Saida and Sour to meet with local NGOs working on issues including education, health, environment, gender, youth and refugees.

Training sessions on technology, media, and communications led by practitioners.

Participants, we found, are universally aware of the central importance of social media and communications technology to almost any form of work today. While it is inevitable that each group of exchange participants will contain varying levels of comfort and competence with technology and media, almost all seemed to value the opportunity to hear and learn from practitioners at the cutting edge of using these technologies for social change.

In the UK exchange, the group was coached by the social media director of Yes Equality, one of the leading advocacy groups during the marriage equality referendum in Ireland.

In Lebanon, the group worked with an award-winning documentary producer and experienced social media consultant to explore the use of ‘story-telling’ to create videos and documentaries and translate them into impactful campaigns through promotion and distribution channels that were appropriate to their national context.



Lokahi Global Exchange visits Southall in London.



Modern dwellings, mosque, Roman ruins in Al-Bass archaeological site, Sour (Tyre), Lebanon.

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Individual coaching and peer mentoring. Many participants in the pilot exchanges were dealing with specific challenges and problems in their work and found great value in having the opportunity to discuss, reflect, and receive advice both from peers with relevant experience as well as the experts and consultants leading specific activities. This element of the pilot programme in our assessment was particularly strong in terms of its ‘exchange’ value in that it permitted very direct and personalised exchange of information, experiences, and lessons learned from one context to another.

Project design lab. Going into the pilots we had high hopes that participants having the opportunity to do focused work on designing and/or developing a specific project (with feedback from peers and expert consultants) over the course of the exchange programme would be very successful and popular.

Some participants had very clear ideas about specific initiatives they wanted to develop or outcomes they wanted to achieve through a new project or programme, whereas others seemed less interested in this aspect of the exchange—preferring, it seemed, to spend more time interacting with their peers.

We feel that there is strong potential in this kind of activity if incorporated systematically and comprehensively into the exchange design (which, given the range of activity types we were piloting, was impossible for us to do). For example, incorporating a project design lab exercise in the exchange would probably work best if participants are asked to propose some initial ideas for their project before the exchange begins—perhaps even as a component (and criterion) of the application process for participation. We also note that this kind of project design activity potentially creates interesting opportunities for ongoing impact after the conclusion of the exchange (per section below on ‘Sustainable impact’).

In addition to these findings regarding the value of specific activity types, our experience from both pilots suggest two further points regarding the organisation, sequencing, and ‘choreography’ of exchange activities:

⇒ It is very valuable to front load a few highly interactive, exchange-oriented activities (involving e.g. the sharing of personal narratives) in order to break down barriers and establish connections and trust as early as possible in the exchange.

⇒ Participants appreciate the ‘give’ as much as the ‘take.’ While they certainly welcome the opportunity to learn new skills and to take home ideas and perspectives gleaned from others, one important way of getting buy in from participants is to allow them to feel as if they are bringing something valuable to the table. Encouraging participants to explicitly identify particular areas of expertise or experience that they would like to share with others is one way of achieving this, and can also be particularly valuable for the peer mentoring activity mentioned above.



Lokahi Global Exchange in Britain.

PART III: BUILDING THE PLATFORM

While our pilots were deliberately trying to assess many and varied activity types, it is worth considering building individual exchanges around a focus theme and a more streamlined set of activities. For example, one could imagine an exchange programme focused on combating intolerance on social media that involves participants receiving training from technology consultants and social media strategists followed by a project design lab in which religious leaders and civil society representatives focused on racism and xenophobia work together in small groups to design joint social media campaigns (with ongoing coaching and advising by technology experts).

While Lokahi had the opportunity to pilot a range of activity types and to identify some that were more successful than others, this does not mean that other kinds of activities should be excluded from the final platform's repertoire.

It is important to recognise that the EU's partner organisations for implementing the platform may have comparative advantages and disadvantages or better capacity with respect to some of these activities as compared to others. They may have their own activities to propose based on prior experience and track record.

In this regard, when specifying implementation criteria to candidate partners, the EU may wish to focus on specifying the desired objectives or outcomes arising from the exchange activities (e.g. 'provide participants with direct exposure to local dynamics surrounding the focal theme in the host location' or 'familiarise participants with relevant communications technologies and strategies for their use in the context of the focal theme') rather than to stipulate specific required activities.



Hiba Hamzi briefs the Lokahi Global Exchange in Saida (Sidon), Lebanon.

12. PARTICIPANTS & RECRUITMENT

Given the purpose and ethos of the platform, we view the ideal participants as civil society professionals, representatives from faith-based organisations, and religious leaders whose work focuses, broadly, on issues and challenges relating to social inclusion. More precise specification of participants will be a function of the themes and topics specified for particular iterations of the exchange.

Our findings from the pilot activities suggest the following additional points with respect to the nature and configuration of participants:

⇒ The enormous diversity of participants in the pilot exchanges was viewed particularly positively. This diversity was multi-faceted in nature: people of many different nationalities; a variety of faith backgrounds; a mixture of younger and older participants and, relatedly, a mix of juniors and seniors in terms of professional status; and an almost equal gender split. If one of the goals of the platform is to develop a global network of religious and civil society leaders working on social inclusion then exchange programme participants should continue to reflect this diversity—particularly in its early stages of implementation;

⇒ When it comes to religious leaders in particular, it is important to be aware that figures carrying formal titles or occupying specific positions within clerical or ecclesiastical hierarchies do not always represent the most influential or relevant voices (even if they often act as gatekeepers). Here it will be important to identify and develop relationships with influential ‘lay’ figures within religious communities, including a recognition of the important forms of informal religious leadership provided in many contexts by women and younger individuals;

⇒ For certain kinds of activities it makes sense to assign participants to work in particular groups, but we observed that many participants naturally found their own sub-groups based on organic affinities and sources of solidarity (often based on shared areas of professional focus, common experiences, or gender). Participants should be given space and scope in the exchange to develop and grow these self-selecting relationships since they are likely to be among the more enduring connections made during the exchange;

⇒ While we sense many upsides to focusing on diversity when selecting participants, there are particular applications of the platform where it may make sense to focus on candidates from specific national or regional backgrounds (based on the EU’s designation of particular countries as strategic priorities per the section on ‘Location’), or on candidates of similar professional background and standings in order to maximise a sense of cadre or peer identity among participants;

⇒ When recruiting for a platform focused on social inclusion and international, cross-cultural engagement, it is easy to recruit disproportionately from the liberal and progressive ends of the political spectrum. Efforts should be made to ensure that a full range of perspectives are represented within the group. This is not about diversity for the sake of diversity but rather a very practical point because many of the most challenging issues cannot be addressed without expressly bringing together people who do not agree with each other.

⇒ Given that a focus on religion is one of the unique and defining features of the platform, there is also a risk of focusing disproportionately on recruiting religious figures and representatives from faith-based organisations. Given the importance of the platform as a tool for building bridges between the religious sector and broader civil society, it is important to ensure a balance between participant types in this regard.

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A key challenge facing platform implementation will be the process of recruiting relevant and high-quality participants. In our view it makes most sense for this to be outsourced to the platform implementing partners based on criteria provided by the EU.

We envisage three main mechanisms for identifying exchange candidates:

- (1) An open application process with the call for applications circulated through relevant professional networks;
- (2) A nomination process in which organisations identified as doing high quality work in religion and social inclusion are invited to put forward the names of individuals from their own networks;
- (3) Inviting EU delegations around the world to suggest candidates based on their own engagement with and outreach to civil society

These mechanisms may be used in combination with each other to produce a candidate pool.

The implementing partner will need to determine the nature and scope of application elements based on EU criteria (e.g. CV, letters of reference, statement of interest, description of how participation would be professionally beneficial; specific skills candidate can offer to exchange, etc.) and devise an equitable selection process. There may be some mechanism through which the EU has a voice in the selection process, and (per section below on 'Governance') any platform advisory board may also have a role in participant selection. The EU will need to make a determination with respect to the nature and level of political and security-related vetting that candidates need to undergo.

Given that personal demeanor and styles of communication and interaction are vitally important to the success of exchange activities, we highly recommend incorporating a personal interview via Skype or some other similar technology as part of the application process.



Lokahi Global Exchange tops up on hummus in Tripoli, Lebanon.

PART III:

BUILDING THE PLATFORM

13. LOCATION

A wide range of countries and cities would be appropriate for hosting the exchange programmes. Rather than recommending specific national or urban settings, our experiences lead us to suggest some general guidance on this question relating to both substantive and practical aspects of platform implementation:

⇒ The location for exchanges should alternate between European and non-European settings in order to emphasise the global scope of the programme and also to ensure that these are truly exchanges in the sense of participants flowing in both directions;

⇒ Where a particular theme has been specified for an exchange, effort should be made to ensure that the host location is relevant to the focal theme;

⇒ The EU's designation of particular countries as strategic priorities in other aspects of its diplomacy may hold some relevance for identifying locations in which to hold exchanges;

⇒ The nature of bilateral relations between the exchange host countries and the countries from which participants are being recruited may have bearing on their willingness and ability to participate;

⇒ Related to the point immediately above, the visa regimes of exchange host countries may have an impact on the ease with which participants of particular nationalities can travel to the exchange.



Street scene in South Africa.



Lokahi research team visits Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga.



Lokahi Global Exchange visits Southall, London.

14. IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS

We recommend that the exchange programmes be implemented by a third-party organisation selected by the EU via a service contracting mechanism. The ideal implementing organisation would possess the following attributes:

- ⇒ Capacity to implement at sufficient scale the logistical and practical aspects of international, cross-cultural exchange operations (e.g. exchange programme design and execution including associated procurement and subcontracting; participant selection; management of participant liaison & communications, travel arrangements, and visa procurement; operation and management of post-exchange impact continuity and sustainability mechanisms; monitoring and evaluation);
- ⇒ Familiarity with religion and diverse religious contexts, including sensitivity to specific religious needs and requirements;
- ⇒ Capacity to facilitate and manage dialogue and engagement between participants of diverse national, cultural, and religious backgrounds, including on politically and culturally contentious topics and themes;
- ⇒ Subject matter expertise in topics and issues likely to constitute areas of thematic focus for exchanges and exchange activities;
- ⇒ Commitment to the values of inclusion and respect for social diversity that define the ethos of the platform

It is very unlikely that any single existing organisation rates highly across all these attributes meaning that in practical terms the EU may need to invite applications in the form of organisational partnerships or consortia in the context of applying for any contract tender, or rely on prime-sub arrangements whereby its selected primary contractor issues sub-award/contracts as necessary to cover all necessary competencies and functions.

15. GOVERNANCE & MANAGEMENT

With respect to internal EU governance, an EU agency and sub-unit therein will need to be identified to serve as the primary point for providing overall strategic guidance, coordination of EU inter-service liaising regarding the platform, and managing engagement with third party implementing partners. Given the platform's international focus, the EEAS seems the natural agency to host the platform management function, but selection of both the agency and unit is obviously an internal decision for the EU to make. If the EEAS is selected, we suggest lodging the platform either in a directorate with a focus on and capacity to undertake public diplomacy programming or within a non-geographic directorate with substantive policy responsibility for the issues and themes encompassed by the exchange activities.

Wherever the platform lives within the EU, proactive coordination with other directorates would allow the EU to identify opportunities for cross-fertilising and leveraging other dimensions of EU diplomacy. For example, if the EU is providing funding for post-conflict reconstruction activities in ten countries, it may make sense for the platform to run an exchange programme focused on building civil society-religious sector collaboration on reconciliation with participants drawn from those same countries.

In terms of external governance, we recommend creating a mechanism that can be independent of both the EU and the platform implementation partners. This points to the creation of an advisory body for the platform composed of notable figures from various sectors (academia, civil society, business, former government officials) known for their expertise, experience, and track record with respect to the intersection of religion and social inclusion. This advisory board—ideally comprising 10-12 individuals—could provide overall strategic guidance for the platform, help to identify or recommend thematic priorities for the exchanges, and potentially play a role in selecting exchange participants. While a majority of its members would likely be based in Europe to reflect the provenance of the platform, it will be important to include some board members from other world regions.

When selecting advisory board members, diversity in multiple dimensions—including faith background, gender, ethnicity, and age/seniority—should be a primary consideration.

16. SUSTAINING IMPACT

In order to ensure continuity of impact beyond the duration of the platform's short-term exchanges, the platform should be conceived comprehensively to include various mechanisms for sustaining participant engagement, activities, and collaboration. Some ideas to consider include:

- ⇒ Providing seed grants that will permit participants to pilot 'proof of concept' versions of ideas and projects conceived and developed during the exchanges, particularly where they include aspects of ongoing collaboration with other exchange participants;
- ⇒ Creating alumni networks at the global and regional levels (perhaps around specific themes or areas of practice) to permit ongoing communication and engagement—via appropriate connective technologies—between former exchange participants, with successive waves of alumnus groups helping to 'grow the family' over time;
- ⇒ Periodic in-person reunions of former exchange participants at the regional and global levels;
- ⇒ Connecting platform alumni with European Union delegations in their home countries would create an ongoing relationship, and help to broaden the EU's civil society contact database in ways that may be relevant to future developments or other EU initiatives;
- ⇒ Create an ongoing collective project—such as the development of a practice-oriented toolkit—that successive cohorts of exchange participants can contribute to or develop over time.

17. LAUNCHING THE PLATFORM

We recommend that the EU organise a one-day event to launch the platform to take place in the summer of 2019 (presumably in Brussels, but precise dates and location to be determined). This event could consist of three elements:

- (1) A 'dialogue with a senior EU official' consisting of

20-25 participants in which key stakeholders identified during the platform's scoping study phase will have the opportunity to discuss their work with the EU official and each other;

- (2) A larger conference (max. 150 participants) consisting of several panels focused on the role of religion in international affairs, the promotion of social inclusion, and highlighting key issues, themes, and areas of current work;

- (3) A speech by the senior EU official formally announcing the creation of the international exchange platform and the formation of its advisory board, followed by a reception.

As a point of broader strategic communications associated with the launch event, the EU should decide whether it wants to launch the platform with the working title used during the planning and scoping study phase ('EU International Exchange Platform on Religion and Society / Social Inclusion') or to use the opportunity of the launch event to re-title the platform to something shorter and catchier.

18 POTENTIAL RISKS AND THEIR MITIGATION

Broadly-speaking, risks relating to the overall platform concept aggregate into two basic types: (a) concerns about the EU appearing to endorse religion, specific religious interpretations, or religious approaches to particular issues; and (b) the appearance of Brussels favoring specific countries (or groups within those countries) as 'EU-approved.'

Given the sensitivities surrounding religion within many modern bureaucratic policy organisations, some are likely to be asked why the EU is dabbling in religion. Perhaps ironically, a declaration from Brussels that this initiative is about something other than CVE may only heighten such concerns (i.e. talking about religion is fine if you want to counter violent extremism, but it becomes problematic if you are actually taking religion seriously).

Both in relation to the two specific risks identified above and more generalised concerns likely to attend the platform, the risk mitigation strategies are similar:

1. Both in its communications strategy and its implementation of all aspects of the platform, the EU must be clear that the ‘religion and society’ paradigm which defines and informs this initiative is about recognising and integrating religion as one among a diverse range of factors which influence and shape debates and outcomes around social issues. It is not about privileging or endorsing religion as a uniquely important explanation (‘cause’) or as a solution; nor is it about any one religious denomination or exclusively intra-religious matters.

2. This very same point can be made—perhaps even more effectively—by ensuring that platform activities are characterised by engagement and interaction between a diverse range of religious actors and a broad range of stakeholders in society, including those working from non-religious or secular perspectives.

Taken together, these two operating principles will help to ensure that the EU’s approach to religion is both right-sized and mainstreamed.

One further risk that needs to be considered relates to the fact that in some diplomatic circles, references to ‘religion and foreign policy’ often function as a euphemism or as code to mean that the true focus is Islam and security. There is therefore a strong possibility that some external (and even internal, EU) audiences will assume that an international exchange platform focused on religion is nothing more than a preventing/countering violent extremism initiative in new packaging. Indeed, some European stakeholders may wish it to be that, as may the governments of numerous potential partner countries in the Muslim world keen to emphasise their counter-terrorism credentials.

This risk can best be mitigated by finding ways of framing and explaining the platform as significantly distinct from CVE (while still acknowledging that its work may have corollary CVE effects), and—most importantly—by making sure that its initial activities are focused on a set of issues and challenges not generally considered to be part of CVE (per our recommendations above).

When it comes to platform implementation, there are several other sources of risk worth considering:

- ⇒ Certain areas of thematic focus—such as a focus on populism or exclusionary politics in Europe—may be regarded as politically controversial and aimed at criticising specific political groups;
- ⇒ When reaching out to prospective participants and stakeholders, attention to language and terminology will be highly important. For example, the term ‘pluralism’ may mean one thing to policymakers but something altogether different in conservative theological circles.
- ⇒ Given the enormous intercultural sensitivity surrounding the topics engaged by the exchange activities there is always some risk of confrontation or public incident between exchange participants and local residents in host locations (particularly when the climate surrounding issues engaged by the platform is tense);
- ⇒ Reputational and substantive risk (to exchange programme dynamics) arising from a participant’s behaviour or attitudes;
- ⇒ Risk of blowback on participant home contexts and communities if groups opposed to social inclusion seek to politicise their participation in the exchange programme;
- ⇒ Similarly, a risk of politicised blowback on local partners for exchange activities in host countries, particularly where EU sponsorship of exchange may leave them susceptible to being portrayed as ‘foreign agents’.
- ⇒ Related to the point above, how will the EU deal with situations where exchange programme alumni are subjected to persecution because they have been engaged in civic activism or inclusive citizenship promotion activities (per platform thematic emphasis) which the state views as politically threatening? Can and should the platform’s wider global network or the implementing partner develop mechanisms and resources for supporting platform alumni facing such circumstances?

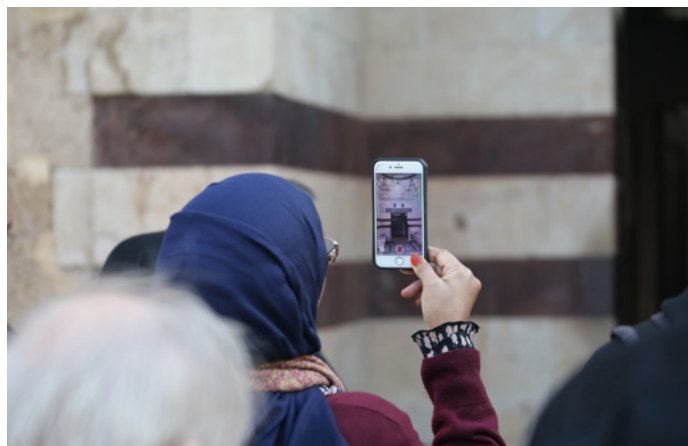
PART III:

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19. CONCLUSION

This report has made a case for the importance of engaging religion and religious actors to advance foreign policy goals. We have also sought to define a new ‘religion and society’ paradigm for policy engagement that avoids some of the pitfalls associated with previous frameworks such as ‘interfaith engagement’ that center and privilege religious belief. Rather, the approach proposed here is one that strikes a balance between the need to recognise religion as a vitally important social force in many societies around the world, but one that is always—even in its theological orientation—necessarily engaged with the specificities and contingencies of context.

As a practical manifestation of this approach, we have recommended that the EU create an international exchange platform on the role of religion and society. Furthermore, in proposing a particular format for the platform and identifying potential themes and activities, we have prioritised the importance of including a wide range of social actors—representing diverse beliefs and worldviews (including non-belief)—out of a conviction, and moreover one we suspect many religious actors would share, that religion is at its most powerful when it engages with the full spectrum of society and everyday life rather than setting itself apart in a cloistered existence. Based on extensive research and findings derived from pilot exchange activity, we have provided the EU with recommendations and guidance regarding implementation of the platform and various practical aspects of platform operation.



Lokahi Global Exchange participant in Lebanon.



Lokahi Global Exchange visits Southall.



Lokahi team member Dilwar Hussain makes a new friend in Tripoli.

APPENDIX

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS



Lokahi Global Exchange at Al-Bass archaeological site, Sour (Tyre), Lebanon.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

SUMMARY

Findings from the pilot events indicate:

- ⇒ The events were a successful proof of concept of an international exchange event differing from conventional gatherings, and could have a significant international impact
- ⇒ Gathering practitioners with religious competency who are working on ‘wicked problems’ in society—not all of them religious—is an effective way to address areas of urgent need; and can be executed effectively and appropriately in a ‘neutral’ or ‘secular’ context. The exchange increases the quality and effectiveness with which such wicked problems can be tackled.
- ⇒ Important problem sets to be tackled in a future platform include intercommunal hostility, inclusive citizenship, genocide prevention and post-atrocity stabilisation, human trafficking, interreligious dialogue, work with women and with youth, and interreligious and intercultural dialogue.
- ⇒ For a future platform, as much diversity as possible in selection of participants is powerful provided such diversity can be managed sensitively and skilfully.
- ⇒ For an ongoing platform exchange, a mix of activities such as in-depth training, co-coaching, skills acquisition, and site visits to relevant projects is an effective format provided the nature of the activities and the selection of participants goes hand-in-hand.
- ⇒ Learning from each other, which was a key aim of the programme design, was highly successful; however, it does not arise naturally or easily and has to be skilfully created by programme leaders.



Lokahi Global Exchange hard at work in London.

APPENDIX

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

PROGRAMME OF THE LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE

LONDON

SUNDAY

Introductions and reception.

MONDAY

Intensive training on project design and advanced dialogue skills.

TUESDAY

Field trips to projects and religious and cultural institutions.

WEDNESDAY

Training on social media campaigns. Panel discussion of NGOs and academics on hate crime.

THURSDAY

Field trips to Southall and multicultural religious sites.

FRIDAY

Concluding project design training.

SATURDAY

Cultural activity and visit.

LEBANON

SUNDAY

Introductions and reception.

MONDAY

Intensive training on project design and advanced dialogue skills.

TUESDAY

Field trip to Tripoli, visit to Maronite Bishop, Orthodox Bishop, Grand Mufti and Dar el Fatwa, and an interreligious dialogue project as well as religious and cultural sites.

WEDNESDAY

Training on video, documentary, and social media impact campaigns.

THURSDAY

Field trips to NGOs in Sour (Tyre) and Saida (Sidon).

FRIDAY

Concluding dialogue training, project design training, one-to-one coaching and filming individual interviews for each participant.

SATURDAY

Cultural activity and visit.

Lokahi Global Exchange participant

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

ACTIVITIES: INTENSIVE TRAINING MODULES

The programme was neither a conventional conference nor a training course. A balance of activities was created between increasing the skill and capacity in specific areas, opportunities for exchange and mutual learning, and absorption and learning from programmes and institutions in the countries which were the locations of the event.

Advanced aspects of project design were introduced on the first and last days, and mentoring not only from Lokahi staff, but training participants how to mentor and coach each other. These aspects of project design sought to enable participants to operate more strategically and effectively in designing the projects, the environment in which they operate, maximise stakeholder support, design activities that link logically through to outputs, outcomes and impacts, and more.

Deep work on dialogue and communication skills consisted of training and exercises in understanding how the fundamentals of communication affect different parts of the brain and trigger different cognitive and emotional reactions. Strategies, tactics and coaching were given in how to maximise the effectiveness of challenging conversations to achieve change.

The Lokahi team found that the more advanced the participant, the more they realised the importance of taking a more strategic approach to their work. When it came to dialogue and communication, it was found that those who were more 'senior' were often not better listeners or more skilful communicators in sensitive contexts, and participants commented positively on going deeply into the basics of communication.

Points to note:

- ⇒ A decision should be taken as to whether a 'training' component is desired, or simply a 'sharing of best practice' approach is preferred.
- ⇒ If there is to be a training component, again a decision should be taken as to whether a single subject, such as 'project design' or 'communication and dialogue' should be taken as the sole focus of training.
- ⇒ Offering choices can backfire; and providing two parallel activities also increases complexity, e.g. in providing staffing for the training. We suggest a single approach is taken: either a sampling of different areas, or a 'training' approach in a single area.



Lokahi Global Exchange coaching on hard cases when it comes to dialogue.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

ACTIVITIES: EXCHANGE AND MUTUAL LEARNING

A key focus of the programme design was creating the conditions for learning from each other in an international exchange. This was done in various ways, including combining the intergroup coaching with the intensive modules of training described above. Input from the Lokahi team was followed up with carefully orchestrated group work, feedback, and group coaching through the exercises where each participant could draw on their own experience, expertise and insights to help others with their ideas, problems and 'stuck' areas.

Points to note:

⇒ This was intended to be the most significant and innovative aspect of the programme design, and it proved to be not merely a fruitful but indeed a powerful experience for the participants. However, it took considerable on-the-ground efforts to achieve and did not happen naturally or easily. Although people will usually socialise effectively, the further step of engaging and coaching in-depth meets with confusion, reluctance or resistance if not inculcated well. If it is included in future activities, those who deliver or facilitate the event need to be well-equipped with a conception and range of skills and tactics to generate this kind of skilled collaborative work across different cultural backgrounds and expectations, all in a matter of a few hours.



Lokahi Global Exchange Mastermind Group in Lebanon.



Lokahi Global Exchange Mastermind Group in Lebanon.



Lokahi Global Exchange Mastermind Group in London.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

ACTIVITIES: MEDIA TRAINING

We delivered two contrasting media study modules in London and in Lebanon. The London training was a morning-long, specific study of how to conduct a social media campaign through different channels. Separately, we offered an opportunity for individuals to be filmed on video.

The Lebanon training was a more complex, day-long training followed by practical work on the last day. It covered the use of 'story-telling' to create videos and documentary – whether three minutes filmed on a smartphone or a two-hour documentary feature of your work pitched to a professional. It then considered promotion and distribution through social media campaigns and other channels, as well as further skills and capabilities. The professionals engaged also had data and personal experience in the social media usage and landscape of the different countries in which the participants were engaged.

This was followed by the opportunity to be trained, coached and then interviewed on video by a highly experienced, award-winning documentary producer. Both approaches were popular and effective, although differing significantly in the scope and ambition of the training. It is desirable for participants to have a take-away product from the training; and if so, to have it professionally coached.

Since media is a problematic area for many in this field, having some component of media training is a useful component for an exchange platform.

Points to note:

⇒ It is important to take a truly international and multi-cultural approach to this, rather than one loaded to European or North American experience; the data distributed by the trainers showed ample evidence that the same channels or approaches differed significantly between the countries represented and one size does *not* fit all when planning social media campaigns.

⇒ Although social media training is important, so too is the ability of practitioners and activists to speak cogently and powerfully to more conventional broadcast media or other conventional journalists. Activists and academics do not always present their own experience and expertise effectively in interview, whether broadcast or print. These more traditional forms of media should not be overlooked in favour of more 'techie' areas like social media when planning media training. Effectiveness of communication and powerful story-telling underlie all these channels.

⇒ If senior personnel attend, they will often not be the one responsible for social media posts. A focus on overall social media strategy and how it connects to organisational objectives is a more suitable focus for them than the nuts and bolts of crafting posts or tweets.



Nick Stuart of Odyssey Impact interviewing at the Lokahi Global Exchange in Lebanon.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

ACTIVITIES: SITE VISITS

In London, we hosted an exchange of a Lebanon dialogue project, visited Lambeth Palace to hear about their reconciliation programme, and visited a strikingly multicultural, multireligious area of London to visit places of worship outside the (often dominant) 'Abrahamic' traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Lebanon, we visited Tripoli in the north to visit places of worship (Muslim, Maronite Christian, Orthodox Christian), meet with three senior religious leaders (two Bishops and a Grand Mufti) to discuss efforts towards interfaith dialogue in their city, and meet with a large contingent of imams and priests from four traditions – Sunni, Alawi, Maronite and Orthodox – who were involved in an innovative religious dialogue project.

On the second day we visited Sour and Saida in the south. In Sour we met with the Sadr Foundation, a large and powerful organisation originating within the Shi'a Muslim tradition, which takes as its core theme the empowerment of women, and works in education, employment, health, environmental issues, and other areas of need in a region where local government and social provision is extremely weak. In Saida we met with a Palestinian-led organisation, Naba'a that works with refugees, both historic Palestinian communities such as those in 'Ain el-Hilweh, and the subsequent layering of Syrian refugees flowing into the same spaces. Their work focuses mainly on young people, but also on critical needs such as health care for women.

The site visits proved to be very popular components of the workshop. For an innovative 'global exchange platform', it would be more desirable to run events in an interesting region where such experiences can be created, and to make sure the sites visited are well selected.

Points to note:

- ⇒ These were experientially interesting, fun, stimulating, and instructive, and therefore received high scores on evaluation and feedback. In comparison, the hard work on skills are less fun. However, long-lasting impact on return might result more from the training, whilst the vivid experiences will remain more memorable.
- ⇒ We did not incorporate time to discuss and evaluate the projects and sites visited. In theory, this would be desirable however it reduces time on the following day for other activities.
- ⇒ Selection of projects and sites is critical for the success of this component and considerable time needs to be invested prior to the event to build relationships, assess suitability, and plan how the interaction will work.
- ⇒ Allowing for interaction and discussion with the projects was critical for participants' ability to learn and absorb how the experience and insights for these 'case-studies in real time' could be applied to their own situation. Simply passively receiving a presentation is less successful than allowing discussion and critical interaction.



Lokahi Global exchange visits Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara in Southall, London.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were diverse in nearly all respects, both geographic and demographic. There was a wide age range, from early 20s on up. There was an equal balance of genders. No data was sought on sexual orientation, or on health or disability.

Points to note:

⇒ This approach of balancing diversity of person with commonality of focus was successful. Participants were strongly positive about the diversity of the group and what it contributed to their learning and experience.

⇒ The most unusual choice was the diversity in ages and experience, and conventional conferences or training courses are either explicitly selective and targeted or tacitly self-selecting in their recruitment of appropriate participants. However, with these groups and these activities, this turned out to be highly effective and popular. The older participants welcomed the opportunity to pass on their wisdom and experience and felt the presence of young people working on similar causes gave them hope. Younger participants, if occasionally overawed on the first day, were extremely grateful for the opportunity to learn from informally and socialise closely with impressive individuals with significant achievements in their field.

⇒ The diversity in age and experience worked positively in both groups; but it does depend on the planned activities and whether they are suitable for a wide range of levels of experience.

AREAS OF WORK

Participants were selected to be working within a range of issues of social concern and religious engagement. Areas of work included interfaith dialogue, refugees and migration, post-conflict stabilisation, post-conflict trauma, religious and community education, intergroup hate crime, empowerment and education of women and of youth, community leadership, religious leadership, CVE, stabilisation in anticipation of elections, peace-making and reconciliation.

Points to note:

⇒ Diversity and common ground need to be balanced so that the enrichment of encounter that diversity brings nevertheless allows enough common interest to allow focus and progress in the activities.

⇒ The desirable level of diversity of the participants depends on the planned activities and exercises. A diversity of demographics and work areas can be successful where the activities are more narrowly focused, for example if a 'training' approach is embraced. Where a looser, 'sharing best practice' approach is taken, more common ground in areas of work will be more effective.



Last day of the Lokahi Global Exchange in London.

REPORT ON LOKAHI GLOBAL EXCHANGE EVENTS

RELIGION

Religions included Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, Sikh and Hindu, and those who might not seek to identify themselves strongly in religious terms.

Points to note:

⇒ For a future global exchange platform that deals with religious issues, it is worth distinguishing whether the inclusion of 'religion' means 1) including religious actors, whether or not their area of work deals with religion (for example 'refugees' or 'genocide prevention'); or 2) those dealing with religious issues, whether personally religious or not.

⇒ Some participants in the London exchange suggested it would be fruitful to include atheists or agnostics in the exchange. This would depend on the approach taken above. A person who does not define themselves as having religious faith could of course be part of a programme dealing with inter-religious violence or genocide. Either approach could work, but clarity in this area is desirable.

⇒ The more diversity, the more it needs to be managed sensitively but securely. Some aspects of diversity, in world-view, values, lifestyle or social-political issues for example, create flashpoints and disputes. This should be calculated from the start in selection, and in managing engagements a position taken on whether conflicts are healthy and allowed, or best minimised and softened.

⇒ Flashpoints do not necessarily arise between religions. In our experience the most likely current flashpoints will be between liberals or progressives and conservatives, often within their own religions; and secondly, on issues of gender, sex, and similar 'lifestyle' issues.

NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

Nationalities and ethnicities were often layered; for example, the current country of residence or nationality might be different from the birthplace of the participant or their parents or grandparents, and indeed the regional or national location of their work and professional experience. Geographical representation can also consist in areas of work and professional or personal experience. All of these dimensions contribute to the experience and expertise contributed by the group.

In terms of personal origin, whether ethnic, citizenship, or residence, participants were: French, Italian, British, Norwegian, Swedish, Polish, Bulgarian, Danish, Dutch, Irish, German, Bosnian, USA, Moroccan, Algerian, Ethiopian, Tanzanian, Somali, Lebanese, Iraqi, Indian, Sri Lankan, Indonesian.

Points to note:

⇒ Diversity in this area is highly desirable and there are almost no downsides apart from the practical issue of the ease with which visas can be obtained.

⇒ A decision will need to be taken whether the balance of participants is to be 'half-EU, half-not'. If so, it can lead to a perception that parts of the world such as Asia or Africa are under-represented; so the rationale should be explained to participants.

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