



GUIDE

EDIN

Empowering Dialogue and Interfaith Networks

Peer-to-Peer Capacity-Building Training
Between Young Religious Leaders and
Young Media Makers



edin.uncct.unaoc.org

THE EDIN GUIDE

Implementing inter-religious dialogue for preventing violent extremism on social media

This document aims at extracting general guidelines and recommendations from the experience of the trainers and the participants for the benefit of future, similar projects. It is prepared by all the trainers and participants under the lead of Julien Darmon.

This Guide has been developed alongside the EDIN Toolkit (prepared by all the trainers and participants under the lead of Taras Dzyubansky) and is designed to be read in parallel. The purpose of the Toolkit is to provide a foundational knowledge of all of the relevant theory, content and principles necessary to execute an inter-religious dialogue for preventing violent extremism campaign on social media.

Executive summary

The Introduction explains **what the EDIN project is** and briefly explains **the role religion can play in preventing violent extremism**.

Section I explains **how prevention is a key strategy for troubled times**, with meaningful insights from the United Nations Secretary-General.

Section II consists of an **analytical assessment** of the participants' campaigns for the first iteration of the EDIN project.

Section III examines more closely the **challenges and opportunities of conducting a social media campaign in a time of global health pandemic**.

Section IV, "the Journey", takes a closer look at how this first iteration developed and **how participants can assess the impact of their campaign**.

Section V consists of **Recommendations**: best practices, how to work towards peace in a world of conflict, arguments for the efficiency of Inter-religious dialogue for mediating conflicts and countering extremism, and propositions for the role the United Nations and member states/governments can play in assisting in such a project.

What is EDIN?

EDIN – Empowering Dialogue and Interfaith Networks – is an innovative initiative that engages young religious leaders and young media makers in peer-to-peer capacity building trainings focused on using religion and interfaith dialogue on social media to defuse sectarian tensions, to counter terrorist narratives and to promote social cohesion.

On the Role of Religion in Preventing Violent Extremism

Overall, religion can be understood as a system of beliefs and values pertaining to certain organizational forms (especially ritual practices), and to a metaphysical deity that symbolizes and originates certain absolute truths. In the interest of clarity, this guide follows in this vein through employing a broad working definition of religion.

Many people view religion as the main driving factor behind violent extremism (ignoring the many instances of secular totalitarianism in the 20th century), while others refute any link between religion and violence. The late Sir Jonathan Sacks, grand rabbi of the UK and the Commonwealth, argues against both views. He makes the case that religion is foremost a factor of increasing cohesiveness in a large enough human group and of mobilizing said group against people perceived as being on the outside. Religion can thus act as an amplifying factor of social violence as well as a powerful pacifying force, depending on the way its discourse and values are employed (Not in God's Name. Confronting Religious Violence, 2015).

Faith-based leaders and organizations have a significant role to play regarding utilizing the power of religion to terminate conflicts and build just and lasting peace

Remarkably, Johan Galtung's distinction between 'negative peace' (the absence of direct violence) and 'positive peace' (the absence of indirect and structural violence) is extensively used in the recent literature concerning the analysis of situations of peace and conflict. Clearly, due to the mutable nature of conflict, drawing a clear distinction between causes and effects, and clear conclusions is not an easy task. Therefore, a holistic approach that incorporates contextual variables is vital. Religion might possibly be one of these variables, whether as a factor that has the potential to ignite or to ameliorate conflict. Accordingly, religion's role should not be taken for granted. Hence, faith-based leaders and organizations have a significant role to play regarding utilizing the power of religion to terminate conflicts and to build just and lasting peace.

In this era of turmoil, future generations of religious leaders should be equipped to offer essential solutions to prevent sectarian violence and counter terrorist narratives, using efficient communication tools and strategies to reach their community. Parallely, there is an urgent need to provide young social media users with religious literacy and competencies to debunk terrorist propaganda and promote religious understanding as key to social cohesion.

I Prevention as a Key Strategy for Troubled Times

The last decade has seen a phenomenon without precedent in world history: the reality has duplicated itself. We now live in both a physical and a digital world, which interact continuously. Notions that seemed out-of-reach utopias not so long ago, such as a “global community”, “a world without barriers”, “total freedom of speech”, “instant communication”, etc. have become part of our everyday routine. New communities, based on shared interests and values, have sprung up, freed from the shackles of spatial and linguistic barriers. Those new relationships are in no way “virtual” or “less real” than those that happen in the physical world, and they have very real consequences in the “analog” world.

The transformative potential of this digital revolution is enormous, akin to the invention of the printing press or even of writing, but it also carries a dark side. Hate speech has an unprecedented reach and numerous echo chambers, as do cyberbullying, calls for physical violence, terrorist propaganda and planning – all the while helping the nefarious spreaders of such discourses evade responsibility, by saying “I just forwarded something”, “It’s just words”, etc.

The gist of Project EDIN is to acknowledge this reality and to implement successful strategies to counter those violent uses of social media by taking advantage of their good aspects, namely, to foster meaningful dialogue across cultural and denominational barriers in order to cut violent extremism at its digital root. The key word here is prevention, which is to be achieved by developing counter- and alter-narratives. This is in line with the innovative approaches which the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism/UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNOCT/UNCCT) are applying. In this context, inter-religious dialogue and intercultural dialogue are the tools and means

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through which prevention is being done, providing counter narratives and promoting the values of trust, peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and respect, etc.

In line with this vision, we are to understand how violent extremists exploit faith in order to develop successful strategic communications interventions. In this regard, there is a need for campaigns that are sensitive to preventing violent extremism, which draw upon relevant stories, rituals, practices and texts that motivate people to tackle violent extremism.

Similarly, we should define good practices for preventing violent extremism sensitive campaigns, which aims to undercut the appeal of violent extremists whilst simultaneously promoting cohesion and cooperation between different groups. In addition to using media and online dissemination to bolster offline efforts to PCVE and promote interfaith/

intercultural cohesion, we should not underestimate the significance of “credible messengers” and trusted actors in this space, including trust in religious leaders, which is not always a given or even particularly robust.

In the same vein, the respect for human rights is essential to preventing and countering violent extremism and maintaining peace. The main key is to broaden the notion of “inclusion” of actors conducting counter narratives, to include civil society organisations, religious leaders, youth and academic experts in an “all-of-society” approach. Due to the delicacy of counter narratives work, a balance between civil society autonomy and state interests in supporting participation via resources and cohesive (meta) messaging is vital.

“A future of peace and problem solving requires an embrace of international cooperation and solidarity”

The United Nations Secretary-General
H.E. Mr. António Guterres, 18 June 2021

II

Analytical Assessment of the Participants' Campaigns

General analysis

The 20 participants have been running 17 campaigns, 2 of them being joint campaigns with 2 or 3 young religious leaders/young media makers working together (<https://edin.uncct.unaoc.org/>). The solo campaigns have made good use of the group dynamics, with participants featuring each other in their respective campaigns, across denominational lines.

The platforms of choice were, in order: Instagram (13 campaigns), Facebook (8), Twitter (4), YouTube (3), and Spotify/Apple (2). This is a reflection of the participants' age demographics and of their targeted audiences, but also of their choice of content and format.

Many of the campaigns have focused on carefully crafted designs, images and quotations as their main format, usually supplemented by short videos of testimonies that constitute the core part of the second phase of the said campaigns. Two campaigns were focused on longer interviews featured as videos and podcasts, and one campaign

combined testimonies with a musical project. From the start, some participants focused on specific national contexts (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Lebanon, Norway, Ukraine), while others envisioned a more general approach to deconstructing the processes of prejudice, hate speech, discrimination, abuse, and radical extremism through dialogue.

The overarching approaches and themes can be classified in categories, not mutually exclusive:

- Tolerance and mutual respect and friendship in a multicultural context;
- Raising awareness of religious pluralism and fostering national cohesion in specific regional contexts;
- Deconstructing prejudices and pushing alter-narratives;
- Denouncing and preventing religiously motivated abuse and violence.

Progressing together through peer-to-peer learning

Although all the participants had a solid experience of inter-religious dialogue and knowledge of the three Abrahamic faiths prior to entering the project, they benefited tremendously from the presentations of each group's faith at the beginning of the project. It gave them an insight of how each one perceives and experiences the values of their own faith beyond textbook knowledge,

especially when it comes to group study of Scriptures, the importance of debate, and the spiritual value of social work.

Participants originated not only from several countries, but from various regions, namely Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. This international dynamic allowed them to

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familiarize themselves with the diversity of cultural sensibilities and regional challenges. At the same time, it opened their eyes to the constant and global character of some problems – hate speech, divisiveness along religious lines in national contexts, prejudice born out of ignorance, religion and tradition as a pretext for inter- and intra-community violence. From there, they were able to elaborate together common solutions to these problems: understanding the mechanisms of radical discourse in order to defuse it through counter- and later-narratives, mining the resources of religious literature to highlight the seeds of tolerance and coexistence contained therein, building a solid knowledge of various faiths and their scriptures and history to debunk fake news, promoting social cohesion through shared values and cultural markers, etc.

Given the particulars of the project, with campaigns lasting for a few months with a focus on creating content and maximizing outreach, and the participants' choice to aim primarily at an audience their age or slightly younger, the participants mostly opted for image-centered campaigns on appropriate platforms such as Instagram and, to a less extent, Facebook and Twitter, that mostly functioned as relay/cross-posting platforms.

Two campaigns, which tackled difficult issues, namely radicalization and physical or verbal aggressions, tactfully opted for a longer, podcast/interview format. Most campaigns mobilized a variety of formats, combining quotes and graphic designs around a core of video testimonials.

Working across boundaries

Since one of the key notions of the project is the virtue of dialogue, all of the campaigns were required to incorporate a pluralistic approach and to feature participants and interviewees of different faiths, gender, age and cultural or professional backgrounds.

Five of the 20 participants chose to do a joint campaign, based on the similarity of their projects

and outlooks as well as on the complementarity of their expertise, especially between young media makers and young religious leaders. Others chose to pursue solo campaigns but have made good use of the group dynamic by featuring one another in their respective campaigns, notably with participants from different faiths. This has allowed them to kickstart the pluralistic aspect of their campaigns and

motivate external collaborators to participate in it, despite the sensitive political contexts and tensions on the ground that took place during the project.

Overall, the shared sentiment was that the project allowed the participants to realize, beyond their expectations, that they shared values and beliefs across different faiths and nationalities, as well as perceptions for the

future and how to act, which has strengthened their confidence in the value of dialogue. It also allowed them to have a deeper understanding of how people from other backgrounds are living and to show them the best aspects of their culture, all the while fostering a deep sentiment of friendship and brotherhood in humanity. Getting to acquire a deeper knowledge of the others has led them to better

know themselves. They have been building bridges with other young religious leaders and young media makers and witnessed the convergence of their projects and aspirations. They stated that they felt the connections that have been established would last long beyond the project.

Another point that many of the participants emphasized on is that, contrary to what one may think before undertaking such a campaign, you do not require huge resources to make a change; having a group dynamic involving passionate

individuals is a much stronger determinant of success. The fact that the participants were part of a group allowed them to pool resources and expertise, challenge their assumptions about their audience, and cross-feature each other to amplify their content and their reach.

Contrary to what one may think you do not require huge resources to make a change; having a group dynamic involving passionate individuals is a much stronger determinant of success

III

Conducting a Social Media Campaign in a Time of Pandemic

The intertwining of the global pandemic crisis and the issue of hate speech on social media is highlighted in the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19:

"Since the start of the pandemic there has been an alarming surge in hate speech and incitement, both online and offline, targeting vulnerable communities or those perceived to be spreading the virus. This has included xenophobic rhetoric against foreigners, migrants and refugees, hate speech against ethnic and religious groups, antisemitic conspiracy theories and anti-Muslim attacks. COVID-19 related hate speech is closely connected to, and is often the result of, misinformation and disinformation. Tackling COVID-19-related hate speech is therefore closely linked to efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation around the pandemic."

Our biggest challenge — and at the same time our greatest opportunity — is to use this crisis as a chance to turn things around."

– The United Nations Secretary-General, H.E. Mr. António Guterres, 18 June 2021

The pandemic has had an ambivalent impact on the social media campaigns as well as on the project itself. The first two phases of the project envisioned a face-to-face capacity

building which did not take place because of the global pandemic. As a result, participants never met in person and the programming team delivered trainings virtually. It has, to be sure, limited the type of content that could be produced, such as visual content, filming on location, in-person interviews, as well as preliminary training sessions (including zoom fatigue) and joint campaign coordination.

On the other hand, in some ways it made it easier to do interviews online and not in person. People proved to be easier to get in touch with since they were all not as busy as they usually would have been. And of course, with people spending a growing portion of their time

online, it gave greater exposure to the social media campaigns.

According to the participants, the best practices in such a situation are:

- To plan everything well in advance, and be prepared for the unexpected.
- To give preference to formats that can be crafted remotely, like video interviews and podcasts.
- To favor personalized, personal and emotional campaigns in order to maximize impact, since, in such a situation online campaigns become the main space to share experiences and knowledge.

IV

The Journey

How social media campaigns matured and evolved

The project teamed young media makers with young religious leaders, some of the latter having limited experience in social media. As such, their assumptions were challenged and this helped them refine their campaign. As Hashim put it, *"I didn't have that many expectations as having a social impact requires a longer sort of campaign and our campaigns were short. I realised that even though your campaign was for a small period you could have an impact."*

The teamwork allowed them to go beyond their comfort zone and overcome their fear of failure. As Yannis said, *"I couldn't have come so far without the support from my community and network in which I am, but also without the support from my wonderful friends from outside, who helped me a lot with their skills and expertise."*

Many of the participants reported having had difficulties finding people to interview. *"I tried asking over 15 people to take part in my video interviews but most of them were concerned about being filmed and speaking about religion"*, shared Farah. Jessica, sharing the same sentiment, found a solution: *"It is very difficult to get people to share personal*

experiences in depth on camera. So, I made longer interviews trying to get more out of them and then resolve the issue in editing."

"Due to the less popular topic of religion, I then decided on the overarching theme of inclusion, which also includes religion and dialogue, but is perceived positively by society as a whole. This enabled me to find more volunteers who were willing to take part," Yasemin reported.

The more sensitive the approach, for example when dealing with aggressions, prejudiced assumptions, and *"mistaken identities"*, it was crucial to fine-tune the format and pay extra attention to equity of representation of minorities, and to show extra care for the sensitivities of the interviewees and the potential audience. The support of the trainers has been particularly crucial in such instances, said Thaly.

Assessing impact online and offline

Being able to measure the impact of a campaign is crucial, but should not be reduced to quantitative indicators. This stems from the fact that religion in general and interfaith in particular are sensitive topics and people are less likely to publicly manifest their approval or engagement – even though they are, in fact very much engaged in these subjects, more than in other, lighter topics. In fact, the trainers specifically reassured the participants that the quality of engagement was the key focus, and that even if few people were seemingly affected by the campaigns, that would be worth it. One should not be discouraged by a lack of visibility or followship on their campaign: preventing violent extremism starts with small steps. Each person who renounces violent extremism is a great victory.

Qualitative indicators, such as those provided by the social media platforms, are more useful. Several participants testified that they expected to have an impact only on their community, but soon realized that the campaign went beyond their usual reach. They also realized that, depending on the type of language they used, they could reach different age demographics.

Offline feedback and support are also a good indicator of the success of a campaign and also helps driving online engagement and virality, sometimes with a snowball effect: guests gave suggestions of more guests. Several participants reported that their workplace was keen to promote it. Colleagues were fascinated by the project and liked what they heard.

The online campaigns also lead to real-world effects. Participants were pleased to witness the incredible support they received from interfaith communities. Many of them were also asked to participate in conferences and official meetings to highlight their campaigns and experiences under EDIN. Their campaign raised awareness of how important it is to make religion a public point of discussion, and helped show the many different facets and layers of religious people, which has started breaking down stereotypes. Colleagues at work initiated discussions around the campaign, including questioning whether company recruitment processes, for example, are too alienating at times for religious people. As noted by some

participants, many faith communities are not very supportive of interfaith work, but this project has given them lots of opportunities to see how interfaith friendships are not only

non-threatening to one's own faith, but are important for societal relations. For many, the project mainly made an impact offline. The social media aspect was a lovely way to bring light to it, but the friendships made offline were the most important outcome. The campaigns helped on a local level, bringing communities together who had never met. Many people commented that now they realise we are not so different – which is the whole point of interfaith work.

Religion in general and interfaith in particular are sensitive topics and people are less likely to publicly manifest their approval or engagement

V

Recommendations

This section consists of more detailed, practical recommendations gathered from the participants' experience in leading such social media campaigns. They could be useful for policy makers, religious leaders and media professionals and many more of those, which recognize the value of conducting similar to EDIN's work on social media.

Best practices

- Be Respectful. Be Open-minded. Stay Passionate. Be Patient. Stay connected. Have clear objectives. Aim high. Build lasting friendships. Aim to inspire. And be sincere to your beliefs.

- Get comfortable with people who are not part of your usual community, because even in a formal environment, nothing good can ever come out if you're walking on eggshells around each other.

- Remember that peer-to-peer capacity building and the exchange of good practices is as much about giving as about receiving.

- Most of the work is in the preparation phase. Give yourself space and time to really reflect on the impact that you care most deeply about having online as a person of faith. Only then start thinking about fleshing out your campaign.

- Make sure to do lots and lots of research before working on your campaigns. Gain social media skills. Learn more about the three Abrahamic faiths and about interfaith dialogue.

- Conducting a joint campaign allows you to divide the work, share the budget, and support each other whenever facing difficulties. However, it also increases the time spent in coordinating meetings.

- The podcast format works great, especially during the pandemic and we could anonymise guests easily. Instagram is also useful for promoting it as is Twitter.

- Promotions and paid advertisements are very powerful for getting more reach.

- Having a professional graphic designer and/or illustrator to create original content is also a really great opportunity. To stick out, you need something original.

- Time management is key. Do not publish and promote everything all at once.

Peer-to-peer capacity building and the exchange of good practices is as much about giving as about receiving

- Religious topics often touch upon potentially controversial issues. Even if they are treated in a very balanced way, they run the risk of being blocked by social media platforms when you try to promote your posts.

- As the message does not always have something to do with the person doing the campaign, it is useful to have messengers in order to give them a voice concerning the issues they face.

- Messengers are essential assets for the success of a campaign: they bring insight, experience, an audience, and a new point of view.

- Make sure to always choose persons of interest that have a kind of authority or standing in their own community. Being an agent of change in their community, they will act as a lighthouse for the project. Their visibility helps increase the outreach via their followers and social media accounts.

- Calls to action appended to the messages help to spread campaign ideas more.

- Don't set your sights too high and then feel disappointed. Take small steps, recognise your restrictions and then see how you can make a difference on a small level.

How to work towards peace in a world of conflict

- Faith communities have an important role to play in public society, are contributing in amazing ways, and are modelling friendships across differences that everyone can learn from.
- There are amazing efforts for peace taking place by individuals and groups. These need to be broadcast, promoted and supported.
- Listen to both sides of the argument, validate them and try to understand both sides and use religion as a unifying factor over politics which is often the divisive factor.
- Cultivate interfaith friendships. Do not hesitate to start small, at the simple level of an individual friendship, which will certainly be inspiring to many people and create a ripple effect.
- Always look for content that would help inform people and let your audience decide or build their own views based on your work.
- Be careful what you share. Make sure that what you will share will deescalate and not escalate tensions.

Do not hesitate to start small, at the simple level on an individual friendship

- We should strive to humanize the people living inside the conflict area. Conflict affects people, regular citizens, much more than governments and states and armies.
- Host events to 'heal' together, talk through in safe spaces that you create together. Facilitate the breakdown of barriers and restore peace in our own spaces, then work to implement your shared values of harmony and unity in other spaces.
- There is a lot of misinformation out there and both parties share biased and misleading information, so one should be aware of that and work around it.

Inter-religious dialogue as a tool to mediate conflicts and counter extremism

- All religions teach the same core peaceful beliefs – this can be used to unify people above racial and political divisions.
- All divine Scriptures actually urge for mediating conflicts and countering extremism.
- Difference is a divine norm that should be accepted to let all people coexist together based on love and mutual understanding and respect. Recognise that diversity is an asset and should be cultivated at all costs and always put the human before the stereotype.

- Conflicts are between groups of people, and people can be individually targeted and reached. It is not about changing a whole community, it is about reaching individuals that will themselves influence others.
- Make sure to include religious people from liberal to conservative and give them space to express their own religious views, even if you do not automatically agree with all of them.
- The key lies not in specific arguments, but rather in examples. The most efficient way is simply to tell the story of each participant of this project, for instance, to give examples of what all of us do on a daily basis.

- Countering violent extremist narratives is all about monitoring passions, neutralising hatred, fostering critical thinking, creating bridges and mending wounds. Strive to occupy social media with testimonies of believers and informational facts showing the true colours of religion.

- We are all in this together, we must act in unison because extremism can happen anywhere and target any one of us, indiscriminately.

Diversity is an asset and should be cultivated at all costs

- Instead of always talking about the problem, try to solve the problem.

- Religion is much more integrated into people's lives than the Western world wants to admit. Faith is vital, and for most people it affects their everyday life, morals and choices. To have inter-religious dialogue and interfaith friendships is important, because stereotypes are broken and people are able to see that the other people are more similar than they first thought.

- Know how interfaith relations and other communities work in your local context. Applying a global project to a local context is key for a successful campaign.

Engagement of the International Community

- Use people like us and those at grassroots level to plan and implement and front these campaigns. States and governments should promote these campaigns at a national level and sponsor it to promote religious understanding and cohesion in the country.

- Governments are invited to start focusing on ensuring there is enough educational content about the three Abrahamic faiths on the internet.

- Connect future participants with local United Nations offices, and involve more local actors from the region.

- If the governments could be informed of the campaigns from their country, and then in any way promote it in their country on a higher level, it would be amazing.

States and governments should promote these campaigns at a national level and sponsor it

Summary of Core Values

I

Thou shalt not hate

II

Use religion to unify,
not divide. We are
stronger together

III

Love your neighbour
as yourself

IV

Celebrate and
cherish differences

V

Be humble so you can
learn more & respect
other views

VI

Don't judge a person until
you have experienced
firsthand what they are
dealing with

VII

Listen and give a
voice to the "other"

VIII

There is no hierarchy
of sensitivities

IX

Justice and peace
must be central to
your endeavours

X

With rights come
responsibilities; we have a duty
of care to our siblings in faith
and humanity

Annex

List of EDIN participants and contributors to the Guide

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