A SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION REPORT ON

Establishing an Inter-Religious Forum in Gondar and Debark Cities for Sustainable Peace

By

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

SCI	This Social Change Initiative
IRCE	Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia
GPG	Global Public Goods
PD	Public Diplomacy
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
AMECO	Amhara Media Corporation

Acknowledgement

I want to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed to the successful implementation of this SCI project. My heartfelt thanks go to my mentor, Chris Tuhirirwe (PhD), for his constructive comments and suggestions that guided this work. I am also grateful to Yared Debebe (PhD) for his commitment to facilitating the project's execution and providing one-day training. The University of Gondar's administrative staff offers critical support, particularly in preparing the coffee ceremony and arranging training halls. Furthermore, I would like to express my special thanks to the participants who came from various organizations and dedicated their time and effort to participating in the training. My special thanks go to the Gondar City Security Officers for facilitating the training program, which was essential to the success of this SCI implementation. Finally, I acknowledge the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) for its vital role in supporting the selection of participants and ensuring a diverse and committed group. The success of this project is a testament to the collective efforts of all those involved.

Abstract

This Social Change Initiative (SCI) aimed at revitalizing the deteriorating relationship between Muslims and Christians in Gondar and Debark cities, Ethiopia, following violent clashes in 2022, aggravated by the failure of the security apparatus, unsolved land disputes, and divisive narratives by the new media. This SCI implementation employed John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation theory to establish an inter-religious dialogue forum to foster sustainable peace through personal, relational, structural, and cultural transformations. A total of sixty participants, including youth, religious leaders, women, security personnel, journalists, and civil society representatives, were selected via snowball sampling for a two-day training on March 7-8, 2025. Activities such as storytelling, mixed group discussions, coffee ceremonies, and media literacy training aimed to rebuild trust, counter divisive narratives, and promote empathy. The Main findings of SCI in Ethiopia indicate Ethiopia's historical religious co-existence as a foundation for peace is undermined by recent maladministration and media polarization. Participants emphasized the need for an impartial security sector, transparent land administration, and ongoing dialogue to sustain peace. Recommendations include establishing inclusive governance, reforming security sectors, and institutionalizing dialogue forums through collaboration with universities, city administrations, and the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). A sustainability plan proposes community-led dialogues, media campaigns promoting coexistence, and strengthening IRCE's outreach. By addressing root causes and fostering cooperation, the SCI demonstrates that inter-religious dialogue can transform conflicts, offering a scalable model for peace building in Ethiopia's Horn of Africa region, where religious tensions persist amidst crises and insurgencies.

Key words: conflict resolution, peace building, religion, dialogue

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Introduction and Background

Historically, religions have become one of the most potent peace-building agents. Some peace and security scholars describe religion as the strongest social bond that many use to handle different problems. When other social capital is lost and cannot tighten the society, religion takes the place and plays an important role, though it is not free from challenges. In theory, all major and minor religions cherish peace and justice in their scriptures, but they often foment conflict and injustice in practice. This could have happened because of the absence of political will from rulers, which is one of the most essential political goods to be provided by governments. Unsurprisingly, religion's nexus with violence has been more exhaustively studied than its nexus with peace building, just as the media over report the former and underreport the latter. Nevertheless, to begin with the positive, several religious initiatives have fostered peace as the selective examples (Mani, 2012).

The Horn of Africa is a region of sub-Saharan Africa that borders the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and parts of the Red Sea. In recent years, crises, insurgencies, and authoritarian regimes in the region have yielded religious repression and attacks on houses of worship and spiritual leaders (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2023). Most religion-based conflicts in the Horn of Africa are associated with similar issues to those in the Middle East. Many terrorist groups originated in the Middle East, attacking many sites in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is one of the targets of terrorist groups because of the country's diplomatic ties with Western countries. Before the engagement of terrorism in Ethiopia, Muslims and Christians lived a peaceful life, though this situation has changed recently.

Ethiopia's history of religious tolerance is a good example for other countries. The country is dominated by Christians and Muslims, though there are different religions which make an insignificant contribution numerically. The first direct contact between Christian Abyssinians and Islam came during Muhammad's early preaching career in Mecca. In the years following Muhammad's death, the predominant Muslim attitude towards Abyssinia was conciliation and restraint. As the early Muslim armies swept across Syria, Persia, Egypt, and North Africa, no single offensive was made against Abyssinia. Most scholars (both Muslim and otherwise)

attribute this sparing of Abyssinia to Muhammad's legacy of appreciation for his Christian neighbor across the Red Sea. This is evident in a fascinating statement attributed to Muhammad in a *hadîth* (an account of something Muhammad said or did): "Leave the Abyssinians alone as long as they leave you alone" (Peter, n.d).

1.2. Problem Statement

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, the long history of religious tolerance played an essential role in the peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians. Following the outbreak of war in northern Ethiopia in 2020, this created a good opportunity for conflict entrepreneurs to start hostility between the two religious followers. Instability and impunity for violence in Ethiopia have also aggravated religious tensions in some regions and led to non-state armed actors attacking houses of worship and religious communities. In April 2022, alleged anti-Muslim extremists attacked the funeral of a Muslim elder in the northern city of Gondar and killed 20 members of the Muslim community. In November 2022, an unidentified armed group killed at least 15 worshippers in a drone attack on an Evangelical Christian church in Oromia State following similar drone attacks on other infrastructure in the area earlier that month (Peter, n.d). Since then, trust between followers of the two religions deteriorated significantly, conflicts erupted following minor issues, and social media has been using the opportunity to aggravate the hostility, especially among the youth. Most Muslim merchants and business people left Gondar and the Debark cities. They moved to other cities, mainly Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa, which resulted in economic deterioration of the cities above. Thus, an intervention is needed to revitalize the relationship between Christians and Muslims and bring sustainable peace.

1.3. Goals and Objectives

1.3.1. Goals

The general goal of this SCI is to revitalize the relationship between Muslim and Christian followers in Gondar, Debark, and the surrounding areas. Muslims and Christians have been practicing a peaceful relationship; however, conflict in 2022 created a hostile relationship between the followers of the two religions. Thus, this SCI aimed to restore the peaceful

relationship between Muslims and Christians through inter-religious forums for discussion, exchange of ideas and future cooperation.

1.3.2. Objectives

This SCI aims to establish a dialogue forum to revitalize the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Gondar and Debark cities. More specifically, this SCI has the following objectives.

- ➤ To establish Inter-Religious dialogue forums in Gondar and Debark cities. The forum is an inclusive platform that includes representatives from different religions, security apparatus, civil society representatives, and the media.
- ➤ To strengthen trust and cooperation between Muslims and Christians and enable them to work together to reconcile conflicts, teach the youth and the community through the forum.
- ➤ To counter local Media and the new Media about spreading false information that would create hostile relations between the two religions' followers.

1.4. Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Discussing issues related to religious matters is not an easy task. The problem becomes more complicated when hostile relationships exist between or among followers of different religions. In this case, the dialogue forum launched in Gondar and Debark cities faced some challenges. These include resisting accepting others' ideas, pointing fingers at other religious followers when the causes of conflict are raised, and saying "you are the cause of the conflict, not me." Other followers associate this with an attack on their values, which was challenging. Moreover, unique intentions were seen in forming a group for group discussion during the training day. Muslims tried to create their group; Orthodox Christians were trying to develop their group when requested by the trainer and facilitator. The good point was that religious followers other than Muslims and Orthodox Christians were very interested in being part of any group during the training days. In addition to the challenges above, there were minor issues like picking up phone calls at any time during active sessions and side-talking.

Though the forum had challenges and problems, these were appropriately managed. The first task was preparing a ground rule by collecting input from the participants, which helped us control the forum effectively. Challenges related to not accepting others' ideas were managed by

teaching them the value of tolerance; the purpose of the training was to develop tolerance and a culture of sharing ideas peacefully. Through this, I managed their feeling and started to share ideas peacefully. Problems related to group formation for discussion were managed by informing participants to call numbers from 1 to 8 and by grouping the exact numbers in one group. Finally, a well-mixed group was formed, and it was successful.

<center>CHAPTER TWO</center>

2.1. Literature Review

Dialogue between followers of different religions has become urgent in today's world. Undoubtedly, inter-religious harmony is a significant need, and the lack of it has emerged as a major challenge for peace. Understanding the role of religion in conflict resolution, in recent years, much-needed scholarship has appeared on religion. Inter-religious and inter-community harmony must be built on different faith communities' foundations and concerns. It must also seek to build bridges of understanding between these communities and to eliminate misunderstandings that are a significant source of conflict and hostile relations (Andrabi, 2020, & Jafari, 2007).

Andrabi (2020) has explained that interfaith dialogue can be an excellent way to heal societal divisions. Social science research indicates that having a positive, meaningful relationship with someone of a different background and learning about their identity correlates to viewing that person's entire group more favorably. The same logic applies to interfaith conversations. Interfaith dialogue is also needed to strengthen citizenship rights. Contrary to popular belief, most faiths (non-faiths) have more in common than many think. While many doctrines in major religions worldwide claim to be the only path, there are also aspects to those same religions that encourage peace, cooperation, and compassion. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all monotheistic. Likewise, nearly every major religion incorporates a section about loving others.

Qurtuby's (2012) research findings on the role of grassroots peace makers by ordinary people in Indonesia clearly show that religion, religious leaders, and followers have strong power to solve deadly conflicts. He further explains that religion has influenced, shaped, or reshaped a peace-making process by community representatives or government agencies. This indicates how much power a religion has in a society and at the country level. Indonesia's grassroots peace building demonstrates that interpretations and reinterpretations of religious narratives and discourses produced and reproduced by grassroots peacemakers can inspire and sustain civic peace and social stability. Religious peace building involves a collaborative, fruitful effort to build intergroup reconciliation and peace promoted by spiritual leaders and ordinary believers.

Inter-religious dialogue may contribute to four types of Public Diplomacy (PD) goals. These include Global Public Goods (GPG), national image, engagement diplomacy, and conflict resolution. Goals are fundamental in the PD Radar because they may condition the nature of power, PD practices that interfaith dialogue contributes to, and the party's strategies. Nowadays, inter-religious dialogue serves as an approach to implementing international projects across countries. China has tapped interreligious dialogue as an engagement instrument in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a key component of the Chinese Communist Party's diplomatic policy. This implies that religion-based dialogues play a lot in different areas, as mentioned above, and conflict resolution is one goal. Its use in such a context assumes that conflicts are partly due to misunderstandings, and interreligious dialogue may help reduce and eliminate misunderstandings (Zhang, 2022).

2.2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Theories serve as lenses to get insights on how to see things or situations in the real world. Many conflict resolution and peace-building theories can be applied according to the contexts. By emphasizing the importance of the reconciliation process sustained by the networks and mechanisms that promote social justice, as the guiding principle in securing the fulfillment of universal human needs, the conflict transformation theory leads to the development of multi-actor and multidimensional approaches to conflict. It has become the theoretical stronghold of the critics of the state-centric, static, and mono-dimensional nature of the traditional diplomacy and peacekeeping operations. Eventually, the conflict resolution framework developed by these theories became embodied in the multifaceted peace operations, where the third parties, acting in coordination, employ diverse instruments adjusted to the different levels of the conflict situation and its actors.

A different theory explains how conflict transforms to make sustainable peace. For this research, one major peace-building theory is selected. This is conflict transformation theory. Conflict transformation is not only solving a particular conflict that has happened in any place, but it goes beyond solving the conflict and focuses on creating sustainable peace and development, aiming to avoid the recurrence of conflict in the future. While working as a scholar-practitioner in different parts of the world, John Paul Lederach has formulated the approach to conflict that

encompasses "the full array of stages and approaches needed to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes". The core idea of his long-term conflict resolution strategy is the importance of identifying and supporting "the cultural modalities and resources" within the setting of the conflict:

> *"The principle of indigenous empowerment suggests that conflict transformation must actively envision, include, respect, and promote the human and cultural resources within a given setting. This involves a new set of lenses through which we do not primarily 'see' the setting and the people in it as the 'problem' and the outsider as the 'answer'. Rather, we understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting" (Lederach 1995:212).*

Lederach's comprehensive approach entails building an infrastructure for peace, which should involve all levels of the affected population. A sustainable and long-term strategy to conflict resolution should, hence, necessarily involve the active participation of all segments of the affected population.

According to Lederach, peace building from below (bottom-up approach) is of decisive importance since only in that way can peace be achieved within the context and not imposed from the outside. At the same time, Lederach emphasizes the role of the middle-range actors since they have the most significant potential for constructing the foundations of peace due to their impact at both top and bottom levels. In the conventional practice of conflict resolution, the actors from outside the conflict (diplomats, peace builders, etc.) were valued more highly than the peacemaking resources within the community, so Lederach's approach brought an immense shift in the peace building practice.

Both conflict and reconciliation are embedded in the relationship between parties, which is commonly the first victim of the violent confrontation. For Lederach, reconciliation is central to conflict transformation. For that reason he suggests a move away from "a concern with the resolution of issues toward a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationship by using the relational aspect of reconciliation as the central component of peace building" (Lederach 1997:24). In his opinion, the reconciliation is a process which can create

social space for facing the past, envisioning the common future, and through that make possible the process of re-framing of the present.

2.3. Change theory and how it was applied

Theories related to conflict resolution in the last decade of the 20th century have shown a significant shift and indicate paths to sustainable peace. Researchers and peace advocacies have presented comparative studies on different countries' religious dialogues, their dynamics, success and failure stories, and the history of religious dialogue across different religions worldwide. The emergence of more advanced, precise, to the point, realistic theories, as a telescope used by astronomers to identify the line of stars and their position, has also helped us to know the causes of conflicts, their dynamics, directions, and trajectories, and possible interventions.

Conflict transformation theory is one of the most essential theories selected for this SCI. As mentioned in the previous topic, I will not discuss this theory's meaning in this section. Conflict transformation theory, advocated by John Paul Lederach, presented an excellent framework for the inter-religious forum in Gondar and Debark cities to address Christian-Muslim conflicts by transforming relationships, narratives, and using new media. Conflict transformation theory focuses on sustainable peace through constructive dialogue and systemic change, considering conflict an opportunity for growth across personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions.

April 2022 clashes between Christians and Muslims caused a hostile relationship between followers of the two religions in Gondar and Debark cities. The government, local civic associations, and other non-governmental organization tried their best to control the conflict. Several discussions were held after the conflict, documentaries were prepared and aired on different media, and religious leaders tried to end the conflict. However, no organization has engaged beyond controlling the conflict, and there are signs that conflict will erupt ahead of time with minor incidents. Understanding this situation, conflict transformation theory should be applied to engage youth, religious leaders, media personnel, CSOs, and community representatives to discuss the conflict, what has been done, and what will be done. The first focus was working on personal transformation activities, such as self-reflection, storytelling, and empathy-building activities, to help participants confront biases and foster openness to dialogue,

reducing toxic narratives. Without transforming personal situations, it isn't easy to transform relations. The next work done during the training was improving relations through the relational transformation approach, which involved active discussion to avoid bias, training them to focus on supporting each other's values, collaboration, and trust building through the forum.

Conflict between Muslims and Christians did not happen accidentally; instead, there were toxic speeches, undermining each other's values through media messages for a long time. Thus, the third step applied during the training was working on structural transformation. Structural transformation activities were needed, like critically analyzing the leading causes, public outreach programs, creating awareness for the people, and working to have accountable and transparent institutions. The fourth most important work that has been done in this SCI implementation was working to achieve cultural transformation. As mentioned above, the long-existing negative values that aggravate hate and promote hostility between religions have to be changed and transformed. There is a common culture that has been practiced by some individuals, like undermining Muslims and their values in Christian-dominated areas and vice versa. This practice is against the values and principles of almost all regions. All regions give priority to humanity and peace. Therefore, to change this attitude, a part of conflict transformation theory is applied to shift false narratives toward religious pluralism through practical cooperation. Participants were asked to present ideas about humanity and peace by referring to their religious sacred book. Muslims and Christians presented excellent ideas, and what the participants presented and heard was the same.

2.4. Methods and Design

This SCI is intended to improve the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Gondar and Debark cities through inter-religious discussions. To achieve the goal of the SCI, participants were selected based on their contribution to society. The participants were youth, religious leaders, women, community representatives, journalists, and representatives from CSOs. Furthermore, Gondar city security officers were also participants in the forum. Participants were selected using the snowball sampling method. After a discussion was held with the Gondar and Debark cities Inter-religious Council office and security office together, a total of 60 participants,

who are active youth, women, and religious leaders who have been striving to bring peace in Gondar and Debark cities, were collected from each religion.

Snowball sampling was purposely employed to select influential individuals who can be important when returning to their community after the training. In snowball sampling, the researchers usually start with a few initial contacts (seeds) that fit the research criteria and are invited to participate. The agreeable participants are then asked to recommend contacts who fit the research criteria and might also be willing participants, who then recommend other potential participants, and so on (Goodman, 1961). First, five inter-religious council chairpersons and members were selected and asked to recommend other important city individuals. Based on their recommendation, another five individuals were chosen, and the process completes when the required number of participants is reached. After 60 participants were confirmed, religious representatives were responsible for collecting the contact numbers of the participants. Together with the Gondar city security officer, all 60 participants were informed to prepare for the forum organized on March 7-8/2025. All participants availed themselves of the training day and actively participated.

The above two paragraphs deal with the selection process of participants. In this paragraph, the training modalities and activities done during the training day are presented. There were two different but interrelated topics. The first topic concerns the history of religious tolerance in Ethiopia, the dynamics of religious conflicts, contemporary developments, and what shall be done in the future. The second topic was about the negative and positive role of the new media on religious conflicts. The training was not just a talk and talk. It was entertaining, open to free flow of information, and constructive. A reflective approach, group discussions, and presentation were employed to achieve the training objectives. More than anything, there was a coffee ceremony and breaking bread by the religious leader to make the training comfortable. The participants were happy, enjoyed the training, and happily answered questions.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1. Interventions and Activities

Well-designed interventions and activities were implemented to achieve the goals of the SCI and the objectives of the Social Change Initiative. These activities were designed to promote trust between religious followers, increase reconciliation; counter divisive narratives made by the Media, and bring sustainable peace to Gondar and Debark cities. The interventions and activities were designed based on conflict transformation theory, starting from personal, relational, structural, and cultural transformations. The following paragraph presents detailed interventions and activities. There were different interventions and several activities under each category.

The first intervention was making the environment attractive and conducive to launching the forum. To make these real, activities like the bread and coffee ceremony were performed, and ground rules were set early on the first day of the training. Furthermore, orientations and guidelines about the training were presented before the training started, and participants were informed to present their experiences to achieve the forum's aims. The second intervention focused on building trust among participants. Activities like storytelling and experience sharing were undertaken. One of the Muslim participants of the training shared her experience that she got her shop damaged in 2022. However, she focused on restoring her relationship with Christian neighbors and friends. This activity helped participants to learn about humanity and empathy. In addition, a positive peace approach also taught participants that if one of the pillars of positive peace fails/collapses, the whole system collapses. So, discussion centers were pillars of positive peace, such as good relations with neighbors, acceptance of the rights of others, and a sound business environment.

Another activity employed to achieve the goals of this SCI was conducting mixed group discussions. Following the conflict in 2022, there were frustrations with mixed groups. Initially, participants were seen to have a homogeneous group along religious lines. Still, a numbering system was used to mix participants. Finally, a mixed group formed, participants share their felling, experience and alternative perspectives in small groups and presented to all participants through group representatives. The other intervention and activity used in the forum was countering divisive Media narratives by the new media. To counter this, participants received

important guidelines and concepts on how fake news is transmitted to the people. Therefore, demonstrations were held to identify fake news by checking the headlines, sources, and timing. They promised to keep doing these things after the training and when they return to their community ahead of time.

Depending on the topic of discussion, trainers employed different modalities to deliver the training. Most of the time, the trainers employed active group discussion and reflective activities. Each group member was invited to forward their ideas on the issue under discussion during the discussions. The group leader organizes the group idea and presents it to the group to ensure all the group members' ideas are incorporated before the leader presents it to all participants. This process helps participants to develop trust, confidence, and teamwork. Furthermore, reflection at the individual level was another modality used in the training, which was a great approach to get experiences of individuals during the conflict, reconciliation processes, and what should be done in the future.

Participants were guided to discuss the issue and beyond at the health break and lunchtime. Though it was not comfortable to have a health break because of Christian fasting, they tried their best to use the opportunity to further strengthen their social bond. At lunch time, there were active discussions, an exchange of ideas, and shared experiences. Generally, many interventions and activities were employed to deliver the training to achieve the SCI goal.

3.2. Key findings / Impact

The training brought up many important points. It has touched several issues from historical relationships to the present-day situations. In a nutshell, the main findings of this SCI project are summarized in four main points. Firstly, it creates a good platform to share the historical relationship between Christians and Muslims in Gondar and other parts of the country. Christians welcomed Muslims when they arrived in Ethiopia in the 7th century, which significantly consolidated the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. This point was raised in the discussion to show how two religions co-existed in the past. Secondly, the issue of good governance by the Gondar city and Central Gondar province was raised. The government could not handle issues raised by both religious followers, particularly the land issue. Participants reported that Gondar and Debark cities have been known for centuries for

their peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Orthodox Christian community members. These inter-religious relations have, however, deteriorated over recent decades, erupting into view in the April 2022 attack on Muslim mourners and subsequent inter-communal clashes that prompted demonstrations and counter-reactions in multiple cities across Ethiopia. This happened following the ownership issue of land for worship in the cities, resulting in a hostile relationship between Muslims and Christians. The city governance and provincial administration's negligence and maladministration aggravated the situation.

The third finding is the issue of impartiality. Most Muslims believe that security personnel were targeting Muslims to control the problem, though Christians do not accept it. Most Muslims believed that security forces took unfair action against Muslims, and most Muslims lost their lives who were not participating in protests or conflicts in 2022. Similar concerns also rose among Christians by mentioning that many Christians were killed, wounded, and arrested by security forces. Instead of doing these cruel things, participants suggested that police forces should have taken precautionary measures, collecting and analyzing data before a conflict. Both followers agreed that there must be an independent security apparatus, working its job based on information and taking action to halt disputes, not to aggravate hostilities. A well-functioning government is essential to bring positive peace in the area, one of the pillars of positive peace. Thus, the government shall be free from bias and treat all human beings equally regardless of their religious background.

The fourth most important point is developing the culture of cooperation. These days, Muslims are cleaning plazas when Christian festivity approaches, and Christians are also cleaning when Muslim holidays are approaching. This is a good start to consolidate the relationship between the two followers and to maintain peace in the area. Controlling the conflict and hostilities would not be enough to provide peace in Gondar and Debark cities. Positive peace pillars like good relations with neighbors are mandatory to bring positive peace in the abovementioned areas. The other most important thing that should be seen in line with this point is the acceptance of the rights of others. Thus, it is a must to accept that Muslims have the right to practice their religion in public spaces and Christians have the right to practice their religion in public spaces freely. In general, the motives, commitment, curiosity, and the need for cooperation from all participants to sustain the existing peace are very high.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1. General Conclusion

The Social Change Initiative (SCI) implemented in Gondar and Debark cities aimed to revitalize the historically peaceful relationship between Muslim and Christian communities in northwestern Ethiopia. This SCI implementation is grounded in conflict transformation theory as articulated by John Paul Lederach, followed by several steps set by the theory, starting with personal, followed by relational, then proceeding to structural, and finally concluded by cultural elements through inter-religious dialogue. The dialogue created an inclusive platform for youth, women, security personnel, religious leaders, Media, and CSO representatives. Through inter-religious dialogue, this SCI created a space for trust building, empathy, and a collaborative problem-solving approach. This SCI followed carefully designed interventions and activities such as storytelling, mixed group discussions, and countering media narratives to bring and sustain peace in the selected areas.

The key finding of the SCI implementation indicates that religion has challenges and opportunities for peace building. The historical relationship between Muslims and Christians for thousands of years serves as a springboard for peace-building activities. However, contemporary hostile relations, particularly since 2022, clashes between Muslims and Christians, highlight that coexistence is weakening and aggravated by governance failures, land ownership disputes, and biased security measures. The dialogue participants recommend the importance of impartial and strong public institutions to bring and sustain peace in Gondar and Debark cities. Furthermore, the need for grassroots activities such as continuous dialogue and cooperation to consolidate peace-building efforts also rose.

4.2. Recommendations / Implications for Policy

The findings of this Social Change Initiative showed serious gaps in conflict resolution and peace-building activities to bring peace and sustain the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Gondar and Debark cities. As conflict transformation theory and trust building, inclusive governance clearly explain, systematic change should be made to avoid future conflicts

to address the leading causes of religious tensions. The following recommendations or policy implications are made based on the findings and conclusions.

First, establishing strong institutions to bring inclusive governance is essential. The findings of this SCI exposed that maladministration, especially land issues, aggravates religious conflicts in Gondar and Debark cities. Both city administrations must prioritize transparent and equitable land distribution. Furthermore, a community-based mediation committee with a good team composition should be established to resolve disputes neutrally and facilitate discussion for sustainable peace.

Second, security sector reform is required to address the feeling of bias by both Muslims and Christians. The result of this SCI indicates that both Muslims and Christians feel unfair treatment by the security sector during the 2022 dispute. Investigating concerns, reforming security sectors, and establishing an independent security institution could minimize the concern of impartiality. In addition to security sector reform, the sector should work on proactive conflict prevention mechanisms. Taking actions haphazardly after conflict arises would produce good results; rather, it may spoil the situation, and integrating religious leaders and youth into an early warning system can enable this mechanism to be more fruitful. Third, the community is highly interested in continuing dialogues in the future, arising from the need for sustainable peace. Therefore, regional government, provincial government, and city administrations should devise a policy targeting permanent inter-religious dialogue.

Third, countering media-based polarization policy is needed. The SCI findings indicate that media, particularly social media, significantly aggravate conflict between Muslims and Christians. Hate speech using social media originated from unidentified names and fueled the conflict in 2022. Thus, whether from the national or regional state council or the city administration, a well-grounded policy to control hate speech and uncontrolled media narration is hugely required to bring peace in the selected areas. Even some electronic Media like Television and Radios air hate speeches, but no measures have been taken. Policy is vital to control media narration that aggravates the conflict.

4.3. Sustainability Plan

The above sections explain the nature of the Muslim-Christian relation and contemporary developments in detail. Moreover, implications of the findings and alternative recommendations were forwarded based on the key findings. The following section will explain how to sustain peace and dialogue in Gondar and Debark cities. The first sustainability plan is to institutionalize the dialogue forum. This could help the community to share their ideas and concerns, and exchange information on the current developments related to conflict and peace-building activities. To sustain the dialogue forum, the work should be done by collaboration with universities in the area, Gondar and Debark city administrations, the Interreligious council, and CSOs. These entities should sign a memorandum of understanding to make the dialogue regular and allocate the required budget.

The other sustainability plan is to make the community the dialogue owner. Youth, women, religious leaders, students in high schools, and other concerned stakeholders should conduct, facilitate, and lead a dialogue forum monthly or biweekly. This would create a culture of peace dialogue, and positive peace can prevail in the area through continuity. Therefore, community ownership of dialogue is vital to make peace sustainable in the selected regions. Besides the above, using media to narrate the history of peaceful coexistence between different religions should be another sustainability plan. These days, most social media release fake news and conspiracy theories that affect the relationship between Muslims and Christians. To counter these challenges and bring sustainable peace, journalists working for Fana Broadcast, Amhara Media Corporation (AMECO), should create a media campaign to create awareness among the youth and the community.

Another sustainability plan is to strengthen and help the Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). IRCE is a council of different religions based on its headquarters in Addis Ababa. Having branch offices in major cities of the country plays a pivotal role in minimizing religious-based conflicts. It is a non-profit organization working on research and community outreach through training. Supporting this institution means a lot to bring peace nationwide. This institution can make experience sharing by making community representatives move from different directions and share their experience of managing these kinds of conflicts and how they

address challenges. Thus, IRCE should get support from donors to get adequate money to help the community, elites should support the institutions through ideas, and other experts should support this institution through their area of expertise to make it strong enough to solve religious conflicts.

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Appendixes 1: List of photos captured during the training day

Religious leaders from (Protestant, Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox) opening the training session by prayer and breaking bread as assign of together.

The first picture is one of the trainers in Media and peace (from University of Gondar) and the second picture is a woman preparing coffee for the trainees to make the training session attractive.

In these pictures, the trainees are actively discussing on issues of conflict and peace building while drinking coffee.

After the group discussion completed, group representatives presented in front of the trainees

Appendices 2: Clearance and Recommendation letter from RPC

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MAKERERE UNIVERSITY ROTARY PEACE CENTER

Plot 146, Pool Road. Makerere Kampala-Uganda, Email: info.rpc@mak.ac.ug
Website: www.rpc.mak.ac.ug

13th January 2025

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Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: RECOMMENDATION LETTER

Warm greetings from Makerere University Rotary Peace Center.

I am writing this letter to confirm that Mr. Yitbarek Bamlak is a student at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. He is enrolled in the Rotary Peace Fellowship, pursuing a Post-Graduate Diploma in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. His registration number is 2022/HD03/046X, and his student is 2400700046.

Yitbarek Bamlak is on course for a period of one year. So far, he has completed his onsite stay at Makerere University and is right now implementing his social change initiative titled **"Interreligious Forum in Gondar and Debark Cities for Sustainable Peace."**

The purpose of this letter is to request for your support to Yitbarek Bamlak in implementing his social change initiative.

We believe that the support rendered for his social change initiative will be impactful in promoting peacebuilding in his community.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Nambalirwa Nkabala (Ph.D),
ASSOC. PROFESSOR,
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MAKERERE UNIVERSITY.
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DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND PEACE STUDIES, SCHOOL OF LIBERAL AND PERFORMING ARTS
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