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Policy paper on Mitigating Hate Speech Through Interfaith Dialogue

**Peace
Builder**

#NoToHatespeech
#UnCamerounSansHaine

**#HATEFREE
CAMEROON**

Policy Paper by:
#defyhatenow/Civic Watch

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Executive Summary

A multicultural setting like Cameroon requires intentional efforts to co-exist, to avoid tensions which are often linked to structural, socio-economic and political factors that if not addressed can lead to violent conflict. Despite the desire to build social cohesion among Cameroonians many challenges such as tribal politics and religious fragmentation persist. Unlike other African contexts, religion is yet to produce significant discord in Cameroon. The level of religious tolerance in the country with its laic nature is solid to face threatening eventualities. However, the situation is far from being ideal; since there still exist some religiously oriented tensions between different religious groups, which can serve as a foundation to fuel tensions that can become violent at any given moment. Evidence of these tensions are visible with existing religiously motivated hate speech terms regularly used in public space within communities.

This policy paper examines the role of interfaith dialogue in conflict prevention and specifically the mitigation of hate speech along religious lines, to enhance religious tolerance and respect for diversity. It also promotes togetherness between communities by providing recommendations on how to leverage interfaith dialogue to unblock existing barriers in the process of building and sustaining peaceful societies. Built upon an evidence-based approach, the paper identifies existing good practices that can contribute to building peaceful societies via interfaith based dialogue to ensure progress towards a peaceful present and future of communities.

The #defyhatenow initiative hosted in Cameroon by Association Civic Watch is playing an important role in advocating for the mitigation of hate speech and championing the cause for a hate free Cameroon visible both on and offline. This vision rallies behind policy efforts aimed at mitigating hate speech as evident with the December 24, 2019 law, which amended and supplemented the provisions of Law No 2016/7 of July 12, 2016 relating to the Penal Code to punish hate speech. However, the quest to mitigate hate speech is yet to be realized despite existing strides.

The policy paper builds upon existing positions sampled from workshops on contextual realities around hate speech, its manifest and mitigation strides by multiple actors in respective communities within Cameroon. The policy paper does not aim to be an all knowing and all solving approach to hate speech mitigation as it requires a tailored and multidimensional approach.

This paper signifies the commitment of #defyhatenow to engage in advocacy processes to reinforce the implementation of existing legislation on the fight against hate speech and the importance of interfaith dialogue in promoting peace and social cohesion. The paper equally makes available evidence-based recommendations for the Cameroonian government, institutions and civil society to ensure togetherness and peace through conscious leveraging of interfaith dialogue in community actions for social cohesion.

Explanatory Note

Interfaith based hate speech in Cameroon

#defyhatenow works on providing community-based, cultural and data-driven solutions to the problem of hate speech, disinformation and misinformation. It focuses on creating a framework for increasing trust between citizens through mobilizing civic action against all forms of hate speech and incitement to violence. #defyhatenow seeks to support the voices and actions of citizens working against online induced conflict within and outside affected regions by bringing youth, community leaders, grassroots organizations and further civil society stakeholders into a peace-oriented media and information literacy framework. Bridging gaps of knowledge and awareness of social media mechanisms between those with access to technology and those without, #defyhatenow is a growing network of online and offline peacebuilders working endlessly to make the course of a hate free Cameroon visible both online and offline with concerted efforts that vulgarized the strength in the multiculturalism that characterize Africa and Cameroon specifically.

Production of the Policy Paper

This policy paper is the outcome of workshop discussions carried by #defyhatenow in collaboration with university lecturers, students and youth leaders. A workshop organized alongside two roundtable meetings held with lecturers, contributed to the production of this policy paper in the month of June 2024. Talks on the nature of the policy paper were handled by exchanges between the authors and editors and the recommendations therein were inputted in the final draft of the policy paper on mitigating hate speech through interfaith dialogue.



1. Introduction

According to Rustad (2024:14), Africa remains the region with the most State-based conflicts per year in 2023 (28), followed by Asia (17), the Middle East (10), Europe (3), and the Americas (1). Compared to ten years ago, the number of conflicts in Africa has nearly doubled, from 15 in 2013 to 28 in 2023 (Rustad, 2024:14). This persistence could be blamed on a number of factors amongst which we can note bad governance and the poor management of diversity, especially in multicultural settings, with the specific case of interfaith related violence gaining grounds. This brings to perspective the need for effective conflict management in multicultural societies Cameroon unfortunately is experiencing the growth of hate speech. Preventive techniques both peaceful and military do not only aim at preventing the emergence and escalation of violence. They also aim at maintaining and sustaining peace.

This state of affairs has likened the proliferation of hate rhetoric both on and offline, targeting existing identities and backgrounds. The absence of respect or tolerance of the other often is expressed through aggression in the form of hate speech. In our present world, there is a groundswell to denigrate people. This takes the form of: xenophobia, racism, and intolerance including rising anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim, hatred and or persecution of Christians. Mainstreaming any form of hate or hate speech is a threat to individual or group identity. As a form of incitement to violence, hate speech triggers discrimination, hostility or fear, and violence. Often, the immaterial aspects of a conflict (identities) are difficult to address and often under looked. In 1994, via the medium of Kangura, broadcasts from Radio Rwanda, and community meetings, Tutsis were labeled *inyenzi* (cockroaches), *ibinhindugemb*

(heinous monsters without a head or tail), and devils, which consumed the organs and innards of Hutus (Neilsen, 2015:87). Labeling an individual or group appears dehumanizing since it is accompanied with toxic and lethal connotations. Some Christians and/or Muslims make use of dehumanizing words against one another due to ignorance and fear.

So, there is an urgent need to double efforts in responding to conflicts by addressing underlying factors in order to promote a culture of peace especially through the respect of best practices in peacebuilding efforts within communities. This can go a long way to abate any eventuality of violence within communities and why not the state and the continent as a whole. This is especially based on the fact that labeling an individual or a group based on any form of dehumanization could lead to violence especially in a religiously plural society like Cameroon. Perceptions of Christian-Muslim relations nationally and around the world are different. Goddard (2008:96) observes that “it is something of truism to say that the question of relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths, and perhaps the relationship between Christianity and Islam in particular has been, and remains a controversial one, with very widely different opinions being presented.

When launching the strategy on countering Hate Speech in 2019, the Secretary General of the UN Antonio Guterres noted: “As new channels for hate speech are reaching wider audiences than ever at lightning speed, we all – the United Nations, governments, technology companies, educational institutions – need to step up our responses” (United Nations, 2023). Mr. Dennis Francis in his August 2024 remarks on the 25th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, the President of the UN General Assembly “called for a collective and continued action by various stakeholders such as governments, the UN system, youth organizations, academia,

civil society, development institutions and media. More importantly, we recognize the relentless technical and funding efforts that the UN agencies and development partners in Cameroon and across Africa are making to ensure the attainment of peace amidst heightening political tensions. These efforts echo that attaining peace entails going beyond conflict resolution to include bettering human lives through respect for life, socio-economic empowerment, education, and good governance” (United Nations, 2024)

By this, he brings to mind the need to multiply concerted efforts aimed at ensuring peace and social cohesion between communities. It also highlights the fact that in the religious

sphere, mitigating hate speech through interfaith dialogue is a proactive approach that can foster understanding, tolerance and compassion. This thus explains the *raison d’être* for the development of this policy paper, advocating for conflict prevention efforts to be modified in order to avert any possible tensions likely to jeopardize peace and social cohesion due to interfaith based tensions originating from hate speech.

2. Objectives

The overall objective of this policy paper is to advocate for the leveraging of interfaith dialogue to prevent hate speech and violent extremism thus promoting peace and social cohesion within learning institutions and respective communities.

It is also to inform policy on adequate tools to counteract hate with love, interfaith dialogue, and best practices in multiculturalism.

The paper equally aimed at influencing policy with research content that promotes peace and social cohesion in a multicultural setting.

3. Conceptualization

3.1. Hate Speech

Perceptions of identities or cultural differences in a plural society requires respect, understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of the ‘other’ irrespective of race, sex, age, religious affiliation or beliefs, and political affiliation. In *Surek v. Turkey* for example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) directly and explicitly employed a definition of the term ‘hate speech’ that had been given by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe back in 1997: ‘the term ‘hate speech’ shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance (Brown, 2017:435). According to the United Nations

(2019) the term hate speech refers to “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (ICCPR) (1967), calls on governments to prevent hate speech. Article 20(2), “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”. While the ICCPR calls on governments to condemn and prevent hate speech, it equally calls on governments to put in place measures to prevent its usage in order not to spur up violence. For violence to erupt, it is an accumulation of frustrations and discriminations on religious, ethnic, racial, political or sexual grounds. The UN’s International Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination understands

hate speech as “a form of – other directed speech which rejects the core human rights principle of human dignity and equality and seeks to denigrate the standing of individuals and groups in estimation of society. Realizing that hate speech is a real threat, national civil society organizations and international governmental and non-governmental bodies advocated many countries, Cameroon inclusive, to enact laws against hate speech. The hate speech law of 24 December 2019, is an amendment of Law NO. 2016/7 of 12 July 2016 relating to the Penal Code for hate speech. This law however highlights elements of hate speech (contempt of race or religion, tribal or ethnic origin with the aim to arouse hatred) but does not clearly define what hate speech is. The use of hate speech in Cameroonian society has been neglected for long until Law No. 2016/7 of July 2016 was enacted and amended in Law No. 2019/ of December 2019.

3.2. Inter-Faith or Inter-Religious DialogueSpeech

Inter-faith or inter-religious dialogue is often misunderstood in many religiously plural societies in two ways: firstly, as a converting avenue; and secondly, even scholars or religious people and followers perceive inter-religious dialogue as an avenue to downgrade others practicing other religions. Cameroon, like many other sub-Saharan African countries and other parts of the world, is characterized by religious pluralism (Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions). Islam, Christianity and many other religions are characterized by peace and forgiveness. These concepts are dominant in the practice and professing of most religious beliefs. In order for religious pluralism to be positive in any Cameroon, there is need for constant inter-faith or inter-religious dialogue to build understanding among people with different religious beliefs. As per the data derived from World Factbook (2022), Roman Catholics 33.1%, Muslim 30.6%, Protestant 27.1%, other Christians 6.1%, animist 1.3%, other 0.7%, non1.2%. According to Andrabi (2020:264) “inter-faith

dialogue”, it is a cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious faiths and spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional level with the aim of deriving a common ground in belief through a concentration on similarities between faiths, understanding values, and commitment to the world. To Cetinkaya (2020), inter-religious dialogue is a conversation between two or more people with different religious traditions in order to express their opinions freely and to listen to the other respectfully. As such, knowing what religion is of importance to its practitioners, defining religion requires one to avoid reductionism in order to understand its substance or polythetic approach. For example, according to Kevin Schilbrack (2022) the five religion making characteristics could be these: (a) belief in super empirical beings or powers, (b) ethical norms, (c) worship rituals, (d) participation – believed to bestow benefits on participants, and those who participate in this form of life see themselves as distinct community. According to Durkheim (2001), religion names the

'beliefs and the practices' relative to what is sacred and 'sets apart' what unites into a 'single community' those who adhere to them.

In defining religion, it is important to take into consideration elements of culture, ideology, mystification, tradition and memory, identity, object of organizational belonging, instruments to structure social behavior and instruments of or for power balancing. Inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue requires religious leaders and their followers to express viewpoints of their religion in order to help people and leaders know and understand the religions(s) and to prevent false perceptions about the other(s). Inter-faith dialogue is an ancient practice. For example, the Emperor Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar the greatest of Mughal emperors of India, reigned from 1556 to 1605 and encouraged tolerance in Mughal India, a diverse nation with people of various faith backgrounds, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Christianity

(Andrabi, 2020:265).

In the recent past, the case of the Central African Republic (CAR) exemplifies the development of hate/intolerance between Christians (anti-Balaka) and Muslims (Séléka). In 2013, as violence intensified in the CAR, key national leaders of Catholic, Evangelical and Muslim communities joined forces to de-escalate the crisis. In order to enhance interfaith dialogue and diffuse violence between Muslims and Christians in the CAR, in 2013, the Platform of Religious Confessions of the CAR or Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses de Centrafrique (PCRC) was created by Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbango (president of the country's evangelical Christian alliance), Cardinal Diuedonne Nzapalainga, and Imam Abdoulaye Ouasselgue head of the Petevo Mosque in Bangui and coordinator of Islamic Relief in the CAR. Interfaith or interreligious dialogue occurs on four levels, knowledge, action, spirituality and morality. These elements are mutually reinforcing and should not be neglected in any process of inter religious dialogue.

4. Identifying Interfaith Stereotypes in a Religiously Plural Society

In our continuously mutating communities/societies, religious pluralism can or should not be neglected because of its immaterial substance. In plain terms, religious pluralism is the existence of multiple religions in a given environment. Objantoro (2018:2) defines religious pluralism as "existential acceptance of the other as the other, that is, without being able to understand or co-opt him". Leonard Swidler states that, "in the past, during the age of divergence, we could live in isolation from each other; we are forced to live in one world. We increasingly

live in a global village".

At the base of interreligious violence, stereotypes are often used to dehumanize the "other". Stereotypes are unfair or untrue beliefs that some people have about others or themselves or things with particular characteristics. Commonly used stereotypes between Christians and Muslims in the Cameroonian society include: assumption that Christians are more corrupt than Muslims; Muslims are more violent than Christians; a particular religion is the best (subjective) and is the only way to God; Christians are more democratic than Muslims; Catholics are idol worshippers; Islam discourages women from being educated or

engaging in social life; and Christians are always proselytizing (especially Pentecostals, also called “Born Again”).

Faith-based stereotypes result from a number of factors and are mutually reinforcing: fear, ignorance, instrumentalization, perception of superiority or inferiority and perceived group threat. The idea that perceived group threat increases negative attitudes towards the outer groups forms the premise of Christian-Muslim discrimination in a multicultural society. Two types of perceived threats are commonly distinguished: realistic threats to a group’s power, resources, and general welfare versus symbolic threats to a group’s religious values and belief systems (Stephan et al, 2008, cited in Kanas et al., 2015:106). More to this, perceptions of superiority or inferiority also fosters the use of hate interfaith and intrafaith stereotypes between Muslims and Christian, Christians of different faiths and Muslims of different ideologies. A stereotyping effect exists when a subject underestimates certain groups and over estimates the differences between contrasting groups (Axelrod, 1973:1225). The use of intrinsic traits in demeaning a person or group is a form of essentializing that group or person. Drawing from G. W. Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Jost and Hamilton identify essentializing as deciphering a stereotype code or function, and argue that essentializing is not a benign process. Essentializing ascribes an inner essence to a stereotyped group that conveys something about group members’ basic nature (Jost and Hamilton, 2005:213). Essentializing is biased on the fact that

it is subjective and cannot be generalized to a group especially between Christians and Muslims and even followers of different religions because there are moderates, conservatives and extremists.

The constitution of Cameroon establishes the State as a secular one. Consequently, freedom of religion and equal protection under the law prohibits all forms of religious intolerance. In order to avoid violence in a religiously plural society like Cameroon and many other parts of the world, no superior religion exists and religious leaders should avoid influencing their followers to use hate speech towards believers of other faiths or religions. Knitter (ed. 2005) cited in Asadu et al. (2020) advocates for religious pluralism. He however condemns in strong terms any attempt by any person to hide under the cloak of religious autonomy and perpetrate violence. Seshagiri (2005) also holds that, religious dialogue is sine qua non in a multi-religious society as it helps to address ignorance about faiths of others and give rise to prejudices and misrepresentations which in turn, results in the unwillingness to accept the integrity of followers of other traditions. Seshagiri (2005) holds that “it is the lack of sensitive understanding of others’ faith that has often led to mutual recrimination and bloodshed.

5. Understanding Religious Instrumentalization

Religious instrumentalization as any other form of instrumentalization (ethnic or racial or political) serves as a means to attain political objectives. This takes three forms: first, it may refer to religious leaders that use their religious authority to rise to position of political power such as Cardinal Mazarin in France in the 17th century or Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in the 1970s; second, it is often tied to accusations of politicians playing identity politics with religion, emphasizing the salience of religious identity and presenting themselves as defending the interests of a particular religious group in order to gain favor among important constituencies; and thirdly, political leaders instrumentalise religion when they justify and seek support for particular policies, decisions or behavior with reference to religious scriptures or teachings (Bitter & Frazer, 2020:2). The instrumentalization of religion in a religiously plural society often fosters the use of hate speech as others who practice other religions could be perceived as unclean or threats to other religious faiths.

Where religion is instrumentalized, it functions as a form of cognitive framing or heuristic device that causes people to conflate their perceptions of the other and themselves and denigrates the other as a lesser human. Instrumentalization creates an 'in-group' identity and an 'out-group' identity'. This exists between Christians and Muslims, Christians and other Christians having different ideologies and Muslims having different ideologies. To say someone is 'instrumentalizing religion' is to suggest that their appeals to religion

for the purpose of justifying political choices or policies are not based on shared concerns with the community, whose identity or beliefs they reference; rather, they are pursuing their own separate political agenda, and simply framing their appeals in a way that they believe will mobilize the support of that community (Bitter & Frazer, 2020:2). In the process of instrumentalization (religion, ethnicity, race, political affiliation), the use of hate speech against others is normalized.

The use of hate speech is informed by cultural differences and often reinforced by socio-economic conditions. Stabb (1989) in Vollhardt et al., (2007:20), suggested that often difficult life conditions and sudden changes such as economic deterioration, societal chaos, group conflict, and war – are among the factors that frustrate basic human needs for security, control, a positive identity, connection to others, and understanding of one's world and one's own place in the world. The inability to fulfill these psychological needs as well as economic needs in a constructive manner in a religiously plural community, individuals will fulfill them through other means. Even though human beings have the need for self-determination, in-group perception often turns to dominate individual self-determination through instrumentalization and could lead to dehumanization. Based on the classification of dehumanizing speech as one of the eight stages leading to genocide (Genocide Watch), the occurrence of hate speech is a favoring factor for genocide. The sense of in-group and out-group is a critical resource to diffuse in mitigating hate speech through interfaith dialogue. In addition to the adaptive value of resource sharing and mutual protection that relatedness affords, the need for belongingness or relatedness provides a motivational basis for internalization, ensuring a more effective transmission of group knowledge to the individual and a more cohesive social organization

(Deci and Ryan, 2000:253). The stigmatization or instrumentalization of religious belongingness creates frustrations and must be diffuse to prevent the emergence of violence. This is a call for concern in religiously or culturally diversified communities.

6. Identifying Subtle Forms of Dehumanization through Hate Speech

Dehumanization is often a component of social prejudice, with some theories of prejudice proposing that the relative value of others, persons or groups, or even non-human entities, is ultimately based upon their perceived degree of humanness, suggesting that all prejudice is based on assigning greater or lesser degree of humanity to others (Murrow & Murrow, 2015:339). Gordon Allport (1954) cited in Murrow & Murrow, 2015:340) considered as the founder of the psychology of social prejudice, studied it by recording and analyzing expressions of prejudice and dehumanization. Allport's (1954) classic, *The Nature of Prejudice* is a reference. Because it was researched and written in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust which was strongly associated with dehumanizing rhetoric and hate speech, Allport coined the psychological term 'antilocutions' described as follows: 'Antilocutions' (Allport, 1954/1979), from the Greek root meaning 'against' and the Latin root meaning 'to speak' are prejudiced speech, which include ethnophaulism [ethnic slurs] as well as other linguistic factors in hostile prejudice, such as derogatory outgroup jokes (Murrow & Murrow, 2020:340)

Dehumanization is a frequent element of hate speech and it is used to vilify the target (Genocide Watch, in Vollhardt et al., 2007:27). Dehumanization creates frustration and to the extreme, it favors the

development of extreme violence like the Rwandan case of 1994 (genocide) where the Tutsis were labeled as "cockroaches" and in Central African Republic (2013) with the uprising of Christian extremist (anti-Balaka) and Muslim extremists (Seleka). Dehumanization between Christians and Muslims often takes the form of Christians perceiving Muslims as 'terrorists'. This perception has been preconceived and propagated by Western media houses who often tend to ignore that, the Westernization of other cultures is the source of the "Clash of Civilizations" as expressed by Samuel P. Huntington. It is important to create awareness on the fact that, terrorism is not associated with any religion. Rather, it is the instrumentalization of religion by some individuals that pushes people to commit violent actions.

According to Schwartz and Struch (1989:153), "people's values 'express their distinctive humanity", so "beliefs about a group's value hierarchy reveal the perceiver's view of the fundamental human nature of the members of that group. The ability of an individual or group to be irrational on the basis of religious beliefs towards another individual or out group or other faiths poses real security threat. Haslam (2006) developed a classification of different forms of dehumanization. The first category is present wherein individuals or groups are denied characteristics that constitute human uniqueness. These characteristics include civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality or logic and maturity. Accordingly, we can speak of "animalistic dehumanization" when others are labeled with any of the following characteristics: a lack of culture, coarseness, amorality or lack of self-restraint, irrationality, predominance of instincts, or childlikeness (Haslam, 2006:258). A second kind of

dehumanization occurs when individuals or groups are denied characteristics that constitute human nature, such as emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency or individuality and depth (Haslam, 2006:258). Religiously plural societies without or with little or no inter or intra religious communication or dialogue or where there is little or no tolerance, moderation of religious perceptions towards the religious beliefs, religious leaders the State and civil society organizations are required to develop a framework through constant dialogue to decipher misperceptions. This will prevent dehumanizing perceptions to be manifested through words and actions.

7. Identifying Interfaith Stereotypes in a Religiously Plural Society

Although humans are frequently well-known for their cultural, spiritual, and ethnic personalities, their origins are similar (Shehu, 2008, in Rafiqi and Haq, 2022:53). Inter-religious dialogue does not require each individual who engages in dialogue to imitate the teachings or practices or faith of the other. Rather, it builds understanding of the teaching, practices and respect of the other religion. Interreligious dialogue alludes to constructive coexistence, reciprocity, and cooperation between adherents of various beliefs.

According to Allport (1954), for intergroup contact to reduce outgroup negativity four conditions must be present: (1) contact is of equal status, (2) common goals are being pursued by members, (3) there is intergroup cooperation, and (4) there is institutional support from authorities, laws, norms, customs and so on. In order to sustain a peaceful religious diversity in Cameroon and to address inter-religious in other parts of the world like India, Myanmar just to name a few, it is important to engage in the following: raising awareness regarding the use of hate speech against people of different religious beliefs; training and consoling; initiating research into human rights issues and the protection of sacred sites; encouraging participation in interfaith or intra-faith dialogue initiatives between

Muslims and Christians, Christians and Christians of different denominations and Muslims with different beliefs.

Like ethnicity, religious affiliation is an immaterial aspect of identity and should not be overlooked as an aspect of incitement to violence. The lack of knowledge and understanding on Christianity and Islam is a push factor for people to have prejudice or false perceptions about the “other” and even about themselves. Hans Kung stressed interfaith dialogue’s significance because living with peace is impossible as long as interfaith conflicts are not resolved. Hans Kung stated: “No peace among nations without peace among religions. No peace among religions without peace among religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of religion (Morgan 2011, cited in Rafiqi and Haq, 2022: 51). Interfaith dialogue does not only seek to address problems of understanding. It also seeks to promote peace, tolerance, respect, trust and it is a facilitating avenue for reconciliation in a religiously plural community which fosters conflict transformation. Interreligious dialogue also seeks to promote understanding and solidarity to respond to moral issues, social justice and social change for the common good which are doctrinal and interpretative.

7.1. The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue to Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a complex and dynamic process of changing relationships, perceptions, attitudes, behavior, interests, and underlying structures that

encourage and perpetuate violent conflicts (Jah & Mabas, 2022:5). Peacebuilding does not only take place in a conflict affected environment. Peace among people in a diversified society is managed and sustained. The pillar for a continuous and harmonious relationship between Muslims, Christians and other religions in Cameroon and many other African Countries and the world at large lies on understanding and reconciliation, achievable only through the promotion of a continuous and sustainable inter and intra religious dialogue. As McCandless and Karbo (2011:31) puts it, peacebuilding refers to a strategic process involving a synergetic series of actions targeted at addressing the sources of conflict and supporting the structure and capacities for peace: usually includes a variety of institutional and socio-economic measures, at the local and national level aimed at institutionalizing justice and building positive peace. Violence or conflict characterizes human nature. In the present dispensation of religious pluralism,

identifying the common challenges and finding common interest(s) in addressing challenges related to religious extremism will decipher false perceptions, thus curbing or preventing the development of hate speech based on faith, doctrines, and practices.

A challenge that is susceptible to arise during an inter-faith or intra-faith or religious dialogue stems from the fact that others might perceive the process as an avenue to proselytize others to their faith or religion. To address this, a framework for inter or intra religious dialogue needs to be developed, where it incorporates and sustains good communication, raises consciousness and bridges the subjective mindsets about the existence and practice of a perfect religion in order to enhance acceptance, recognition, tolerance and respect of the others' faith. As inscribed in the United Nation Strategy and Plan of Action Against Hate Speech, "tackling hate speech is the responsibility of all – governments, societies, the private sector, starting with women and men. All are responsible and all must act".

8. Recommendations

- **Creating Awareness through Education:**

Our communities are religiously plural and require a synergy in preventing or managing any form of religious intolerance that could lead to violence. Educating people in order to create awareness about different religious beliefs and practices dispels stereotypes and misperceptions. This could be done by organizing workshops, seminars and conferences that promote inter-religious dialogue.

- **Dialogue and Communication:**

Constant dialogue and communication is sine qua non between people of different faiths, especially their leaders. Expressing views without proselytizing enables leaders and followers to share their views, experiences, beliefs and perspectives. This will encourage mutual respect and empathy.

- **Promote Community Engagement:**

Community engagement aims to promote and support initiatives that enhance inter-religious cooperation and collaboration. This could be attained through joint community service projects or interfaith prayer gathering.

- **Encouraging Media Engagement:**

Through conventional media and social media, showcasing inter religious interactions will build a stronger relationship among represented religious communities. Providing resources and guidelines to private and public media houses to create avenues in their daily programs to talk about the benefits of interfaith or interreligious peaceful coexistence and avoiding the use of stereotyping an individual or group based on religious affiliation or belief(s). Positive online interactions should be promoted and encourage people to report and refrain from posting hateful content.

- **Advocacy and Policy:**

Civil society organizations, lawmakers in collaboration with the institutions of the sacred should frame policies and laws that advocate for religious tolerance and religious freedom. Consequently, engaging government officials, civil society organizations and the institutions of the sacred to raise awareness about the dangers of hate speech no matter its form, not only in religious milieus, but also in our communities. The importance of interfaith dialogue should be stressed upon in order to sustain peace.

- **Encouraging Training and Education for Leaders:**

Religious leaders like community leaders and educators need to be trained on how to promote interfaith dialogue and address hate speech in their different communities. This is an empowering method on how to take a proactive role countering hate speech and limiting violence.

9. Conclusion

This policy paper brings to perspective existing tensions fueled across religious differences, as manifested with a surge in religiously motivated hate rhetoric in communities and public discourse despite the laic nature and religious tolerance that characterizes Cameroon. Hate speech, being an existential threat to social cohesion, has been an oral tool used by warlords to build the foundation of discord and frameworks for possible violence in multicultural settings like Cameroon. Plagued by the instrumentalization of religious affiliations linked with tribalism, to orchestrate tensions for political and economic gains, Cameroon though yet to experience a religious conflict, is far from being untouched by the latter, especially looking at growing concerns on religious cleavages gaining ground in Cameroon. Thus, the need to promote interfaith dialogue as a catalog for tolerance, acceptance, love and togetherness between communities for sustainable community resilience. This is added to the need to educate, advocate, create synergies and promote community engagements to foster best practices in interfaith dialogue for sustainable peace and development in Cameroon.

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Annex: Workshop Presentations

- Understanding Interfaith Dialogue in Multicultural Communities:

Link:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1bmMYsQQmdJKqMAJYE2fCoViOD8Th8AYo/edit#slide=id.p1>

- Engaging Peacebuilding Through Interfaith Dialogue:

Link:<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1JYIQUgxDgb1AraKFV4bhnF77hztzZK3A/edit#slide=id.p1>

- Identifying faith based existing stereotypes:

Link:https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vyzjlfQnlfjksMC_P5CoVikDgxLMPbH_/edit#slide=id.p1

- Peacebuilding Best Practices in Multicultural Communities:

Link:https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1fnDS-InOeC8RQNdO_BYIT5FTQtrSORJX/edit#slide=id.p1

- Conceptualisation of Hate Speech How to Identify Hate Speech? How to Mitigate Hate Speech

Link:

- Leveraging on Interfaith Dialogue to Mitigate Faith Based Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence

Link:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1FH3y3gYmrXt9ZJx0qMDr6gry1dVIEb-EJ/edit#slide=id.p1>

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