

Promotion of peace in Afghanistan through a cultural dialogue of Hindu and Muslim youth

Background:

The followers of the Hindu religion are one of the minority groups in Afghanistan. They have lived for a long time (as natives, they have a history of 125 years old) beside other religions in Afghanistan. Now about 377 Hindu households are living in Kabul and other provinces (Ghazni and Jalal Abad). The government of Afghanistan allows them to do their religious ceremonies freely but recently this minority group is facing challenges such as social prejudicial reactions of people in the community. For example, for burning the body of dead people, the Hindus need special places but Muslim people do not allow them to do that because they think it is sinful and also the government does not support the Hindus in this issue. Another challenge is lack of access to proper education for Hindu children. There is just one school in Shura Baazar area (in Kabul) that they are getting education. Recently the Parliament of Afghanistan also announced a law that Hindu people are not able to have a seat in Parliament. Despite these issues, Hindus still are hopeful to live with their Muslim neighbors in peace. In response to the discrimination, Hindu people try to immigrate to other countries. This lack of tolerance toward Hindus among Muslims comes from a lack of knowledge about common culture, language and historical background, so we need to sustain and encourage their common heritage, expression and values through a dialogue between Hindu and Muslim youth to identify a solution.

Project goals:

The problem is that the Hindu and Muslim youth are not much connected, so peace initiatives seek to bridge the ethnical division through developing dialogue at the community level by youth. Through engaging youth in this peace initiative dialogue, I aim to bring them closer in a peaceful process by carrying out activities that will strengthen Afghan cultural and social identity, and initiate dialogues between Hindu and Muslim youth. Culture and art represent the spirit of people living within communities. They are known and respected for their common and widely-practiced culture. These common cultures can empower self-esteem of different youth and help them to unify even among diversity. By this idea, we need to foster the relationship among the Hindu and Muslim youth in the community. The youth need to practice peace through cultural dialogues and artistic presentations, works and activities which builds unity and value. These kinds of cultural dialogue shall bring the message of peace and brotherhood among different religions and this peaceful project will create a safe environment for Hindu and Muslim youth. As this project involves sensitive issues of interfaith and cross-cultural relations, I feel it is important to note that my colleagues and I in this program passed a course about interfaith. We are experienced in how to gather the youth in the community. We need to foster a non-violent means of conflict resolution that comes from a lack of diversity awareness and peaceful exchange. By equipping the youth with knowledge through this program, we provide a model for other developmental programs in the future because this concept of interfaith dialogue is very new for the youth.

Project Design:

The idea is to create common ground for cultural and social identities. This project builds a space for the exchange of ideas through workshops, group discussions, training courses, debate, some joint voluntary activities and inspiring cultural exhibition. We will run a three-month long program for twenty youth (age 20-25) to start this dialogue. The program will be facilitated by three local mentors including me, ages 30-50, who will serve as counselors and help lead monthly workshops, trainings and other activities. We will have 12 weekly workshops in and near the community. The subjects of the training will be: Diversity, Tolerance, Non-Violent Communication, Community Change, Techniques of Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation. Inside the training, we will use the methods of small group activities, role playing, and small group discussions with specific prompts. For debates, two models will be used: 1) inviting popular leaders to meet the youth with Q and A; and 2) debate between youth with specific questions regarding behavior change and cultural issues. First, we will plan and coordinate the application process (how to collect the interested youth in the community) and monitor the process. The individuals will be selected from a similar geographic area. There

are two possible ways to identify them: 1) Meeting with Ms. Anar Kali Hunaryar (the Sikh member of the Parliament of Afghanistan who represents both Hindu and Sikh there). She will help me to identify the Hindu youth who are interested to participate in program. 2) Going directly to the community and choosing twenty youth who will come voluntarily and want to understand new issues and implement change. Therefore, this project aims to create an environment for youth to form strong relationships through common experiences. But before anything, we need to get more information. There are always some sensitivities and concerns toward such initiatives but through a pre-survey of the community, we find strong interests in our program. Our project will address the need assessments by providing an outlet for dialogue, relationship building, and community development.

Part of my MA is bringing social change and peace building and tries to respond to the raising challenges in the community I am living in. Hindu and Muslim people live in same community but they are not connected to each other, causing misunderstanding and discrimination. Through this project, I aim to implement the knowledge I am learning in my MA in this community which is facing growing challenges.

Project implementation:

During the summer of 2014, our team of three discussion leaders (including me) will facilitate 12 weekly workshops, discussion tables and several training courses. The training will be about the concepts of interfaith, violence, conflict resolution, mediation, cultural exchange and diversity, topics that are essential for youth.

During the workshops, Hindu and Muslim youth participants will meet with local politicians and national leaders, academics, and members of civil society in the field to discuss their ideas and thoughts.

Both Hindu (and Sikh) and Muslim youth participants will learn practical skills about conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, civic responsibility and political awareness that will allow them to cooperate peacefully. This will be accomplished through specific lesson plans and activities. The discussion leader will facilitate the sessions. Also through these workshops, youth will develop relationships that will strengthen their further relationships in the community. At the end of these weekly workshops and group discussions, the youth will establish an art exhibition amalgamate with cultural themes of both Hindu and Muslim youth in Kabul, providing a service of friendship among youth, which will promote activism and unity among them. Later I plan to create a weblog detailing the activities and lesson plans used in this program to serve as a resource for similar initiatives. The weblog will also feature reflections from participants, leaders, and program coordinators. Various cultural programs such as live music, theater shows, storytelling and poetry will be part of the program during the days of the exhibitions. These activities will allow the youth to express themselves to the community, develop conflict resolution strategies, and reflect on cultural values that promote the relationship among youth in both religions.

Project impacts:

My project will have a long--lasting impact on the urgently needed ethnic re-unification. It gathers the youth through a developing conversation at the community level. Through participating individuals, this peace initiative aims to deliver the message of non-violence through collaboration and discussion. The greatest success of our project would be the sustainable grassroots that inspires youth in the community to come together. The socio-cultural component of this project aims to encourage cultural reflection and expression and to facilitate socio-cultural activities that initiate dialogues between Hindu and Muslim youth. Finally, through this cultural dialogue, we aim to enhance Afghan knowledge about minorities and a common cultural identity through exchanging of new ideas, insights, concerns, and art.