

Coalition Building for Better Religious Education Reform

Developing a good pro-pluralism religious education curriculum requires much planning and a deep understanding of the context. In a country like Iraq, where the education system is in decline due to years of conflict, weak governance and management, and a displacement crisis, this becomes a challenging task. After the US invasion in 2003, the United Nations and World Bank conducted a Joint Needs Assessment which concluded that Iraq would need to concentrate on rehabilitating up to 80 per cent of primary and secondary schools damaged by conflict and underinvestment. The report stated that physical infrastructure is not the only ‘facet of the sector’s rehabilitation needs. Out-dated curricula, obsolete pedagogical skills, and lack of policy and departmental management skills at the ministry level are other factors that need urgent attention’.¹ Two decades later, in 2015, Iraq still lags behind, where it has been found that ‘many groups are still deprived of a number of opportunities including education, development of life skills, and the use of techniques and technologies that can assist them in improving the quality of life and adjusting to the increasing socioeconomic and cultural developments’.²

Many international development organisations have worked to provide Iraq with assistance in rehabilitating its education system. UNESCO alone has 44 partners providing services across 15 governorates and supporting around 5,200 teachers. However, it has admitted that ‘poor coordination has led to service gaps, pay disparity among teacher categories and tension among partners’.³

Before introducing reform in religious education, or any other subject area, the aforementioned sectoral challenges had to be addressed when putting together a strategy of our intervention. This Learning Briefing was prepared during the implementation phase of the religious reform project to highlight the key areas of best practices and lessons learned from our stakeholder engagement. The aim is to share these learnings with programme managers, donors and partners to help inform future interventions and curricula development on effective approaches and models for improved quality education.

The coalition-building approach

The main findings of the project highlight that for any change to happen in education policy, there needs to be coalition building both at a high level and the grass-roots level to ensure horizontal leadership and buy-in. This approach has been unique in coordinating top-down and bottom-up strategies for educational reform. We combined the expertise and influence of heavyweight stakeholders

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¹ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy; Republic of Iraq 2010–2014.
² UNESCO National Strategic Framework for Literacy in Iraq 2010–2015.
³ UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2019. *Migration, Displacement and Education: Building Bridges not Walls.*



during the development of the religiously diverse curriculum with the commitment and collaboration of grass-roots stakeholders during the implementation of outputs to achieve this grass-roots approach to reforming religious education.

The key learning points are:

- 1 High-level stakeholder engagement with religious leaders, civil society leaders and cross-sectoral experts provided a deep understanding of the context. As part of a coalition, they enhanced the development of a pro-pluralism curriculum.
- 2 Grass-roots stakeholder collaboration involving local education managers and headteachers secured buy-in with schools. As part of a coalition, it helped resolve many issues on the ground through strategic decision-making and planning.
- 3 Participation of Religious Education (RE) teachers as part of a coalition also helped to bring down barriers and motivated them to assist with reaching out to students during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Lessons on coalition building

Religious education reform in Iraq has been criticised by many experts and educators as lacking clear vision, policy and strategy, hence failing to contribute to greater religious literacy, pluralism and strong social cohesion in the country's multi-ethnic society. Furthermore, reform initiatives have been challenged for mainly adopting a top-down approach, which proved to be ineffective in an education system suffering with 'out-dated curricula, obsolete pedagogical skills, and lack of policy and departmental management skills at the ministry level'.⁴

Several problems were identified during the stakeholder engagement phase of this project. Conversations with religious leaders, academics and headteachers revealed that the challenges facing the existing RE policy include:

- 1 At ministerial level: a lack of vision on the objectives of RE in teaching young people about concepts pertinent to religious diversity and pluralism.
- 2 At school-management level: a lack of strategy on how to ensure quality and inclusive learning-friendly environments.
- 3 At classroom level: a lack of competent teachers who contribute to improved learning outcomes for students.

To address these challenges, this Learning Briefing is not suggesting a shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, but rather a horizontal and holistic approach that involves both high-level and grass-roots-level stakeholders.

⁴ *UNESCO National Education Support Strategy; Republic of Iraq 2010–2014.*

Reform in religious education has been established through a coalition of stakeholders and beneficiaries comprising representatives from diverse religions and sects, education officials, school administrators and teachers. This coalition also reached a consensus on best practices and principles for developing, implementing, monitoring and sustaining reform for more inclusive and pluralistic religious education. For project managers, this coalition-building approach has enabled better strategic planning and improved problem-solving for the achievement of outputs and desired outcomes. It has created a coordinated structure where stakeholders were involved in every phase of the intervention, driving the change themselves. When the project faced setbacks, for example the shutdown of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our stakeholders recommended best practices and solutions through consistent dialogue.

The project attempted to use coalition building in three different ways to address the aforementioned challenges.

Firstly, to ensure that the development of a new pro-pluralism religious education curriculum is authentic and legitimate in addressing local needs, a diverse group of experts, religious leaders and academics were consulted. A selection of them became part of a network of key consultants who contributed to verifying concepts during curriculum development, as well as reviewing its progress after implementation. Secondly, local education officials and school headteachers were involved in every phase of the project's implementation, from the baseline needs assessment, to teacher training and curriculum roll-out. This provided a sense of ownership and responsibility for our grass-roots stakeholders to ensure effective management and quality assurance. Establishing a coalition of local education department officials and headteachers secured the initial buy-in that was needed to carry out the needs assessment. Through their leadership, we managed to overcome many challenges faced, including limited access to beneficiaries (students). Finally, the approach of coalition building also included bringing together RE and Arabic language teachers from different schools, with a focus on their role as change agents in reforming religious education. Furthermore, during lockdown conditions we found that building this network with teachers enabled better coordination and access to students.

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Coalition of religious stakeholders and experts

Over a period of six months, the project conducted a needs assessment where diverse religious and civil society leaders, academics in the field of religion and experts in education from around Iraq took part in semi-structured interviews to share their knowledge about the current challenges facing religious education. After consensus was reached on the main issues, conversations were maintained to form cross-sectoral alliances as mechanisms for the development of a pro-pluralism curriculum. A significant part of the coalition-building mechanism is to provide a platform in which minority groups have a role in defending their interests. With a lack of representation of religious minorities in existing religious education and a sense of negligence towards improving awareness about their rights, there was a need to involve religious minority leaders in the stakeholder engagement to understand and address these grievances.

During semi-structured interviews with high-level stakeholders, it was found that religious education was a neglected subject in the Ministry of Education's (MoE) reform initiatives. The priorities of the MoE were focused on rebuilding the infrastructure of an education system on the verge of collapse. This became even more apparent with the outbreak of the coronavirus and restrictions that included school closures, when the MoE was faced with difficult choices in maintaining learning. Among these included dropping the religious education examination and to merge the subject with study of the Arabic language. However, this move was heavily criticised, by both educators and students.

These developments provided insight into the MoE's vision and plans for religious education, projecting the risk of a lack of prioritisation or engagement with a new pro-pluralism religious education curriculum. It was therefore important to secure buy-in from high-level stakeholders with heavyweight influence to promote the need for this curriculum. The role of religious leaders, educators and prominent academics provided legitimacy and credibility to the call to introduce religious diversity and Freedom of Religion or Belief concepts in primary school education. The result of this six-month engagement and cross-sectoral alliance was an authentic curriculum that has so far received much endorsement from both internal and external experts.

I'm sending you my comments and hope that it would assist with the development of the curriculum – it's really a great contribution, especially targeting students and young learners as it is designed in an excellent way. I believe that we need to form a permanent team on this topic – because it may take many years to reach our desires for strengthening and enhancing the role of educational institutions in developing a culture of pluralism and diversity. (Yazidi civil society leader)

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Coalition of local education officials and headteachers

Introducing reform in religious education required careful management and cooperation with local education representatives and school management to ensure smooth implementation. Before any coalition building could take place, education department managers were approached from different geographic areas, including Baghdad, Anbar and Dhi Qar, for the selection of schools to participate in the project. We trusted the judgement of education department managers and their leadership in briefing headteachers about the project and securing buy-in. After this step, we brought together education managers and headteachers in one group on the social networking application WhatsApp, where the establishment of a coalition would facilitate the first phase of baseline assessment. Online focus group discussions were conducted with headteachers and at the same time observed by education managers. Conversations focused on the context of RE in Iraq, perceptions of religious diversity in education circles, and the main gaps and shortcomings in current RE policy. After engaging in discussions and highlighting the objectives of the project to education managers and headteachers, we secured their commitment throughout the data collection process. Furthermore, they were involved in selecting RE teachers for the Training of Trainers (ToT)

and established best practices to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum.

During focus group discussions, headteachers expressed that one of the main challenges facing reform in the education system is quality assurance and clarity on the management strategy. Therefore, one of the key objectives of this grass-roots coalition building was to establish quality assurance and strategic planning mechanisms. The benefits of this approach were apparent in the early stages of the data collection process, when we faced difficulties in accessing beneficiaries due to the lockdown situation amid Covid-19. The coalition of education department managers and headteachers cooperated with project coordinators to plan and conduct an online data collection procedure. Furthermore, there was consensus on the necessity of this coalition to maintain quality assurance of the implementation of the new curriculum by trained teachers. During the focus groups, some headteachers claimed that without any quality control or assurance, teachers may pass on prejudices to children in the classroom:

We notice that there are those who say a Christian is an infidel! And we also lack trained teachers, to inculcate quality or what is required for the learner to reflect. (Baghdad headteacher)

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Coalition of trained teachers

Teachers are one of the key beneficiaries of this project and are considered to be change agents for establishing more inclusive and diverse religious education. For this, it was essential to boost the confidence of RE teachers and empower them as part of a network. During the baseline assessment, focus group discussions were conducted with RE and Arabic language teachers to understand their needs and expectations. Prior to the development of the training, it was important to assess their knowledge and attitudes towards religious diversity. We found that in the beginning, teachers were reluctant to engage fully in the project, doubting that it would benefit students and society as a whole. However, as the conversations developed, other participants highlighted their experiences with religious minorities and other faiths. These shared anecdotes contributed to better engagement with the topic and broke the ice. Teachers then completed project questionnaires to assess their perceptions.

The approach of coalition building among RE and Arabic language teachers enabled collaboration and opened up dialogue on learning-friendly environments. Furthermore, uniting teachers in one place and on one platform provided better coordination to access student beneficiaries during the Covid-19 lockdown. It was recommended by teachers that to enhance engagement with students during these special circumstances, the coalition should also include parents.

The school has an important role to influence students and the surrounding community through daily meetings [assemblies], teachers' associations and parents' councils. (Anbar RE teacher)

Conclusion

Reforming a sensitive subject such as religious education requires a deep understanding of local needs, careful consideration of concepts, and a robust strategy for implementation. Hence, by bringing together all these coalitions, from high-level experts to grass-roots stakeholders and beneficiaries, we established a holistic approach to reform, encompassing curricular and pedagogical principles, inclusive quality education, and a learning-friendly environment in which education is provided. Coalition building led to setting the road for achieving the desired outcomes for the project. The stakeholder engagement with high-level stakeholders such as religious leaders, civil society leaders and cross-sectoral experts, provided a deep understanding of the context. Put together in one coalition, they contributed to the development of a comprehensive curriculum that has received much endorsement. Furthermore, the cooperation of grass-roots stakeholders, such as local education managers and headteachers, secured buy-in for the implementation of the curriculum in schools. With their combined efforts as part of a coalition, it was possible to overcome many challenges on the ground through an effective strategic decision-making and planning process. Replicating the coalition building with RE teachers, we also managed to bring down barriers to secure better receptiveness towards the project, as well as better access to students during the challenging times of Covid-19 restrictions.

When an education system is crippled by insecurities, outdated curricula, inadequate facilities and a lack of qualified teachers, reform becomes even harder from a top-down approach. However, key learning indicators from our project provided evidence that change can be established through a holistic coalition-building approach. As the project enters its implementation phase, we hope to continue tracking the indicators that show the effectiveness of this approach. For this Learning Briefing, it is recommended that project managers consider the following to expand on this coalition approach:

- 1 Formalise coalitions to include committees, associations and syndicates to bring about sustainable and concrete change at a national level.
- 2 Renew the interest of key stakeholders (both high-level and grass-roots-level) in the coalition-building agenda by organising shared events.
- 3 Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation process to access and track the impact of the coalition-building approach.
- 4 Conduct cost–benefit analyses on the coalition-building approach to compile evidence of the overall learning to ensure sustainability.

“Stakeholder engagement with high-level stakeholders such as religious leaders, civil society leaders and cross-sectoral experts provided a deep understanding of the context... in one coalition they contributed to the development of a curriculum that has received much endorsement”

Credits

This Learning Briefing was written by Haidar Lapcha, Project Manager, and Yusra Mahdi, Project Coordinator, for Al-Khoei Foundation.

It was produced as part of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), a consortium funded by UK Aid from the UK government which provides research evidence and delivers practical programmes which aim to redress the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, tackle poverty and exclusion, and promote people's wellbeing and empowerment.

CREID Learning Briefings are published by the Institute of Development Studies and aim to provide high-quality analysis and practical learning recommendations for policymakers and donors.

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ISBN: 978-1-78118-758-6
DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2021.002](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2021.002)

Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261
F +44 (0) 1273 621202
E creid@ids.ac.uk
W www.ids.ac.uk/creid
T @CREID_Dev

CREID partners



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