

The Religions for Peace Myanmar Country Report
Submit to: Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP)

Background

Formed in June 2012 and inaugurated in September 2012, *Religions for Peace Myanmar (R/P-M)*, composing of main religious traditions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, is the country's first full-fledged representative and action-oriented interreligious body for reconciliation, peace and development. It presents a policy for religious leaders on joint advocacy, coordinated program response and training, mobilization of local communities around issues of public unrest and resources channeling through local congregations and other faith groups. With the encouragement of RfP-International, RfP-Myanmar is committed to discharge collaboration and coordination among faith groups and to expand their capacity to raise the overall impact and contribute to the enhancement of social cohesion amidst the challenges of unrest based on the diversity of religious beliefs Myanmar is facing.

Activities

R/P-M has undertaken initiatives to advance and strengthen multi-religious collaboration for child protection; deliver important services to support vulnerable children and their families; and strengthen child protection systems. With fund support from GHR Foundation and guidance of *Religions for Peace International (R/P-I)*, *R/P-M* have undertaken initiatives to deliver important services to support vulnerable children and their families and strengthen child protection systems through advancing multi-religious collaboration. In partnership with five organizations comprising of Civil Society Organizations and Faith-based organizations from Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Protestant and Baptist faith, *R/P-M* had carried out a multi-layered project “*Protecting Vulnerable Children through Inter-religious Cooperation in Myanmar*” in 2013-2014 at 15 different districts in four states and regions of Myanmar.

This project has delivered important child protection services for vulnerable children and strengthened the capacity of *R/P-M* to harness resources from multiple faith groups, to organize interreligious cooperation for a common goal grow and inter-communal harmony and social cohesion progress. Approximately 500 young mothers, pregnant women and caregivers from different religious backgrounds were trained on the 10 key practices for improving the health of children, and 4,000 youth and community support group members were trained to take action on child protection issues.

R/P-M also advocate for peace building and interfaith dialogue to augment networks and share right information on interfaith to get mutual respect. With the same five partners and the Religions for Peace Myanmar Interfaith Youth Network, “Increasing Religions for Peace Advocacy for Peace Building and Augmenting Interfaith Youth Networks in five townships” project was implemented with the small grant of US Embassy. With a focus on “representative, action-oriented and sustainable” activities, the project supports the forming of field level Interfaith Youth Network from different religious communities, and also the forming of Interfaith Committee consisting of religious leaders at each projected townships and villages.

With skillful experiences in development programme and talents to advance inter-communal harmony and social cohesion, the implementing partners have contributed to the successful implementation of both projects. The religious leaders from four main religions and their sub congregations, village communities, CSOs and other individuals have showed their interests to the interfaith program and willingly supported the interfaith dialogue and peace building activities. All these efforts have contributed to reducing of religious tensions. The shared moral and spiritual values of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism advanced by RfP-M provided a basis for communal harmony, while its grassroots multi-religious projects have translated these values into needed action.

The five *R/P-M* Core members from Buddhist, Islam, Catholic, Protestant and Hindu faith oversee the programme implementation as well as the financial management of the *R/P-M* Secretariat with four staff, while the Executive members from each faith joined various interfaith dialogue and peace talks organized by other organizations locally and abroad.

Cooperation with Other Organizations

R/P-M has been cooperating with UNICEF, Columbia University, Women Groups, other local NGOs and CSOs, Finn Church Aid (FCA) and with a number of Governments, to advance and strengthen multi-religious collaboration for interfaith dialogue and to reduce extremism. The most significant collaboration on interfaith dialogue was with the Program on Peace-building and Rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights at the "Inter-Faith Dialogue: Religious Roots of Social Harmony" convened in January 2014 and the National Conference on Faith for Children with UNICEF focusing on the role of Faith Leaders in Child Survival, Development and Protection and on the Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration for Children and Peace, convened in April 2014.

The works of *R/P-M* has gained recognition of other organizations and Governments of UK, USA, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United Nations organizations and will maintain it through increased participation in NGOs, CSOs organized interfaith action, dialogue, peace building, awareness raising activities and strategic humanitarian actions as well as through the core members and staff participation to dialogue, meetings and forums within and outside of the country.

As encouraged by RfP-International to religious communities for collaborative healing of the memories of communal conflict and suffering, *R/P-M* is also engaged in interreligious advocacy calling for cessation of violence in Rakhine state, Meikhtila, Mandalay townships and in other parts of the country where communal violence has occurred in 2012.

A number of statements have been issued on major incidents damaging peace and called for advancing inter-communal harmony and social cohesion. *R/P-M* had also joined the CSO calls for rejection of discriminatory laws for women and also participated in compilation of information for UPR 23 to submit to OHCHR.

Eight delegates from RfP-M attended the 9th World Assembly of Religious for Peace held in Vienna, Austria, in November 2013. At that Assembly, Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw Dr. Ashin Nyanissara (Chancellor, Sitagu International Buddhist Missionary Association) was nominated as the Joint President representing the Hterawada Buddhism in the world.

R/P-M have joined in **Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP)** as a full member in 2014. At the 8th Assembly of ACRP, held in Incheon, Korea, on 25-28 August 2014, the R/P-M core members attended and U Myint Swe, R/P-M Chairperson was selected as EC member and Al Haj U Aye Lwin, R/P-M Executive Core member was nominated as the Board Member of ACRP. They have also participated at the ACRP Executive Meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, 2-5 June 2015.

R/P-M Networks

Like any other R/P member countries, R/P-Myanmar has established the Interfaith Youth Network in February 2013 and Women of Faith Network in December 2014.

R/P-M Interfaith Youth Network has expanded its membership into the five projected areas and now have 139 youth members from Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and Hindu faiths. In view of building peace and welcoming the other, they have undertaken the activities of monthly interfaith/peace sharing session, visiting to different religious sites, orphanages, aged homes, volunteering services in HIV/AIDS shelter, and participation at other youth network activities. The First Conference of Interfaith Youth was conducted in Yangon and some of the youth members are given opportunities to participate at a number of youth forums and meetings in Thailand.

R/P-M Women of Faith Network focuses to mobilize the already existing religious organizations and women's groups as building blocks for multi-religious cooperation with a shared mission to build peace, protect the earth and promote just and harmonious societies. Comprising of representatives from religious women's organizations, inter-religious bodies, religious bodies and institutions from four main religions, it brings certain special value for the network, beyond the constituency and congregations of religious organizations. The strategic objectives of R/P Myanmar Women of Faith Network encompasses: 1) Empower women and end discrimination. 2) Build capacity of the Women of Faith Network. It aims to serve as a collective voice for its constituents and has a strategy for communication and action toward multi-religious cooperation.

The future plan of the WOF Network and Development for Women includes Multi-religious Prayer Sessions for Peace and Justice, Women and Business programmes and Awareness Raising Programmes for Poverty Reduction. Through networking with organizations that work for empowering women and gender equality, the WOFN multi-religious women leaders are committed to promote women's empowerment, to enhance their role in peace building and to advance its campaign on restoring dignity: violence against women.

Constraints and Challenges

To enable the legal support for the social works with implementing partners, R/P-M is processing registration under the Association law. There is still a need for advocacy of R/P-M to achieve both government support and project operation management. R/P-M Secretariat and core members faced challenges to solve the sensitive issues and eliminate misunderstandings during the process of project implementation and there is a need to provide local authorities effective approaches to deal with issues of interreligious cooperation.

Despite the efforts made for reconciliation and harmony, peace in the local community, Myanmar is still at a risk as the unrest can recur anytime. Exacerbated by groups such as Ma Ba Tha, there is a 9fear across many Myanmar communities, that Islam will replace Buddhism as the dominant

religion. The 'Population Control Bill' which has been passed into law has fed into this sequence of events. It is important to build peace and alleviate those issues by advancing inter-communal harmony and social cohesion through interreligious cooperation with the key being to harness each other's strengths into a common vision.

Future plan

R/P-M future work plan include support for advocacy activities on peace building, outreach to all religions, action-oriented interfaith dialogue. The program for 2015-2016 will focus for **“Strengthening Interreligious Collaboration in Myanmar”** and in three projected townships.

With Interfaith Dialogue programs, Welcoming the Other initiatives and Strengthening district level interreligious committees, *R/P-M* will play a strong and positive role in multi-religious peace building and development initiatives and increase social cohesion.

Conclusion

As the foremost interreligious body in Myanmar, *R/P-M* is working to serve the community. It will advance its work for peace, reconciliation and harmony between inter-religions and to enhance social cohesion through interreligious cooperation with the support of core members and *R/P-International*. It will be strengthened through securing additional funders and partnerships, mainstreaming women and youth by actively engage both youth and women networks in all of *R/P-M*'s activities and through inclusion of the Chairpersons of youth and women in the Core Group.

It will increase its participation in national level peace building and development policy making meetings, in the targeted communications, in interfaith actions (dialogue, peacebuilding and awareness raising activities , strategic humanitarian action), and will increase the engagement of *R/P-M* and the District level Interfaith Committees, Youth and Women in Pyay and Patheingyi in child protection issues in partnership with other child protection actors.

With the 2015 election approaching, *R/P-M* and the religious leaders are vigilant about possible communal conflicts and are determined to work for advancing social harmony through religious teachings and enhancing mutual understanding to avoid and mitigate conflicts among multi-religions and multi-ethnicity of Myanmar community.

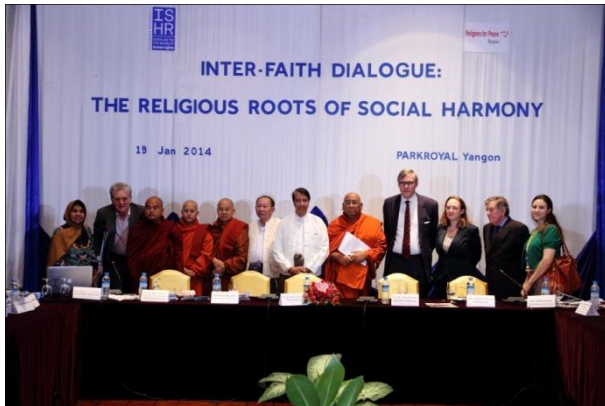
Photos to support the Asia report:



© RfP-M 2013: Religions for Peace International officials seen at the Asia and Pacific Youth Network forum in Yangon, at Chatrium hotel, 2013.



© RfP-M 2015: WOFN members from all four religions seen at the prayer session organized by Catholic faith, at the Good Shepherd sisters' convent premises on 2 July 2015, Yangon.



© RfP-M 2014: RfP-M and Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights jointly organized "Inter-Faith Dialogue: Religious Roots of Social Harmony" on 19 January, 2014 at Park Royal hotel, Yangon.

© RfP-M 2015: WOFN members and RfP-M Core members seen at the launching of Religions for Peace Myanmar, Women of Faith Network on 2nd December 2014 at the Chatrium hotel.





© RfP-M 2014: RfP-M and Interfaith Youth Network jointly commemorate the International Peace Day in September 2014 at the premises of Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), Yangon.

© RfP-M 2014: Mr. Andrea Hipple, Senior Programme Advisor of GHR Foundation observing reading and sewing activity of the Vocational Training Center in Pyay, organised by RfP-Myanmar partner Ratana Metta Organisation (RMO), as part of Child Protection programme support to vulnerable children in Pyay, West Bago region, Myanmar.



© RfP-M 2013: RfP-M Core members and Rev. Kyoichi Sugino, Deputy Secretary General, RfP-I, observing the “Ten Promises for Children” training organized by RfP-M in partnership with Positive Muslim Group (PMG), in Yangon, Myanmar.

© RfP-M 2013, Parents and village community look on excitedly over a competition of a passing game at the CRC day celebration in Nyaung Kha Shay village, Southern Shan State, Myanmar, organized by RfP-M and its partner Karuna Myanmar Social Services (KMSS).

