

POLICY BRIEF #26

SUPPORTING A MORE SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE SOCIETY IN BANGLADESH: SEEKING LESSONS FROM DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 economic and social crisis offers opportunities to review fundamental questions about national approaches to pluralism, religion's role in society, and national goals for peace and social cohesion in Bangladesh. This brief offers examples from different countries that address the challenges of living together in diverse societies through secular and religious education efforts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Previous findings have highlighted significant fissures within Bangladeshi society. This is accentuated by the dearth of multicultural and interfaith content within textbooks and school programs.
- Promoting universal citizenship goals through deliberate interfaith and multicultural education policy and programing could help avoid interfaith and interethnic conflict.
- Educators, faith leaders, faith-inspired organizations, and other civil society organizations can play an integral role in advocating for more socially cohesive education policies.
- Recognition of past interfaith and ethnic conflict in Bangladesh and within the region in textbooks can help advance reconciliation efforts and bridge divides.



This brief draws on two Berkley Center/WFDD/CPJ Bangladesh reports that analyzed the country's faith-inspired education landscape, as well as a review of textbook treatment of religion and pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

A goal for national education systems is to support shared narratives and visions for an inclusive common future. Our research, however, highlights that significant fissures within Bangladeshi society are accentuated by a dearth of multicultural and interfaith content within school programs and textbooks. Yet effective approaches grounded in education can support more cohesive and sustainable societies. To realize universal goals like citizenship, civic values, tolerance and respect for varying faiths, and heightened social justice, civil society actors and faith leaders can work to convince policymakers that deliberate measures to advance cohesion and interfaith education approaches are an essential good for society. Advocating for inclusive values and goals in the public sphere and identifying ways to turn them into practical policy can support the goals for a more socially cohesive society.

This brief highlights relevant institutional and country case studies as examples of how various international approaches to address social cohesion and pluralism are designed. The focus is on school curricula including textbooks. Approaches to integrating faith leaders and approaches are also explored. These cases offer pertinent insights on how Bangladesh and other countries might benefit from tested global approaches. An underlying hypothesis is that promoting universal citizenship goals through deliberate education policy and approaches can help avoid interfaith and interethnic conflict.

BANGLADESH'S EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION PROFILE

Statistical profiles of Bangladesh suggest a homogenous population: 98% are ethnic Bengali, sharing a common language, and 90% are Muslim. Bangladeshis have taken pride in the nation's harmony and inclusivity. From several perspectives, however, Bangladesh is one of South Asia's least socially cohesive societies. Bangladesh's surface homogeneity masks complex social divisions, for example within Muslim communities and by economic and social class. Changes linked to modernization, including migration (internal and international) and rising inequalities, have accentuated divides. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan make up the "South Asian Cluster" of Asia's socially fragmented countries, compared to more cohesive countries: China, South Korea, and Singapore.¹ Growing signs of interfaith conflict, growing Islamic fundamentalism, and violent attacks on secular activists and intellectuals undermine both the reputation and reality of a harmonious society. The COVID-19 crisis, with nationwide shutdowns and sharp economic downturns, has brought social and religious divisions closer to the surface.

Berkley Center/WFDD/CPJ research focused on religious delivery of education and teaching about religion in the national school system, drawing on interviews with religious leaders, organizational reviews, and National Curriculum and Textbook Board and Quomi madrasa textbook content

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Social cohesion is defined here as "...the ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, which developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society."²⁸

analysis. Quomi madrasa and national school textbooks were assessed based on various socially cohesive criteria, exploring Bangladesh's national and religious school systems' approach to teaching about religion, citizenship, and social values via textbook content. A content analysis of how major world faiths other than Islam are covered in textbooks was part of the research. Findings from "Faith and Education in Bangladesh: Approaches to Religion and Social Cohesion in School Textbook Curricula" suggest a primary focus on the superiority of Islam and Bangladesh/Bengali ethnocentrism and the absence of attention to indigenous and folk religious traditions. The analysis suggests concerning trends and attitudes, notably majority ethnic and religious identities that obscure the heterogeneity of Bangladeshi society, various forms of gender stereotyping, tokenism, and limited recognition of social inequalities and injustice.² Current and past social tensions and conflicts between majority and minority groups within Bangladesh and surrounding neighbors like India and Myanmar are not addressed,³ so understanding the nature of conflict and conflict resolution tools is largely absent.

The national school curriculum⁴ has large roles in enhancing critical thinking skills and fostering a national identity among students. Textbooks have the ability to reproduce social constructs, shape worldviews, and advance the enterprise of nation-building.⁵ Through nuanced and systematic approaches to conceptualizing and addressing social injustices via textbooks, students can be taught to think critically about and analyze such issues through a widened worldview and a more tolerant lens.

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES: INDONESIA, SINGAPORE, ARIGATOU INTERNATIONAL, AND BANGLADESH

Interfaith Curricula in Indonesia

Indonesia boasts a relatively strong social cohesion in a very diverse society. As the world's largest predominantly Muslim country and its third-largest democracy, there are six official state religions and over 240 ethnic groups. Indonesia has maintained complex relationships between religion, state, and society in a fairly harmonious way.⁶ This cohesion builds on common historical experiences, interreligious dialogue, a productive nation-building process, indigenous traditions, and the promotion of a common language.⁷ Indonesia stands out for the role that interreligious dialogue has played in promoting universal values and tolerance, through universities, NGOs, and youth groups across the country and in transnational interreligious institutions.⁸ Challenges to social cohesion are mounting, however, with significant radicalization trends, indications of growing intolerance among Muslim communities, and widening economic inequality.⁹

In this large, multicultural, and democratic nation, Indonesia's public schools offer compulsory religious education whereas religious schools offer an Islamic-focused education. A review by Dr. Jamhari Makruf, a lecturer at Universitas Islam Negeri, highlights significant differences between public and religious school education, which are both governed by different ministries and have limited coordination between them.¹⁰ Both public and religious school texts reflect some conservative and extremist ideology and slight intolerance for

other major world faiths. The review finds that in religious schools, extremist ideology is more limited, while there is a split allegiance between Islam and Indonesia.

Various civil society organizations are working to enhance the educational impact on pluralism and cohesion by reviewing and revising textbooks, cooperative interfaith programs, citizenship education, and incorporating progressive human rights values in texts. Introducing comparative religion as a subject in schools aims to foster a deeper understanding between ethnic and religious groups. By fostering more interethnic and interreligious cooperation and interactions, youth can learn that they have a stake in society and see the commonly linked values and virtues within all the major world faiths. Next steps include expanding quality teacher training to help educators internalize and share more comprehensive ethics education. The use of properly vetted social media as a tool for learning in a progressive and collaborative way can promote unity and expression of universal values, though it can also be wielded to narrow or distort positive agendas or serve simply as propaganda.

These education-focused efforts come in tandem with Indonesia's longstanding and active non-government and government-supported interreligious efforts. Interfaith leaders play important roles in helping to mitigate interfaith tensions and propel a more pluralistic society forward. In 2018, for example, several Indonesian religious, cultural, and interfaith figures drafted the Jakarta Treatise, responding to rising religious conservatism that threatened to destabilize the country.¹¹ It warned that right-wing conservatism could become a serious threat if it morphed into religious exclusivism, thus running the risk of becoming a tool for political interests.¹² The treatise states: "Religion needs to be returned to

its role as a spiritual and moral guide and not just be focused on the ritual and formal aspects, especially those that are exclusive in nature, in both public and governmental spheres."¹³ Interfaith bodies are working together to put pressure on the government to enact measures to protect religious freedoms and secularism, discourage extremism, and protect minority religious rights thus encouraging a more harmonious society.

Indonesia's experience suggests that mandatory interfaith studies in education curricula can help materially in bridging gaps between different groups and ward off extremism.

Singapore's Plural Society

Singapore's experience is cited often to show that it is possible for a nation with a highly diverse religious and multiethnic landscape to flourish. As recently as 50 years ago, many viewed Singapore as a hopeless basket case. Today, in sharp contrast, it is the world's most religiously diverse nation and a harmonious one at that. Singapore today is considered to be one of the world's most socially cohesive countries.¹⁴ From its birth, the Singaporean government has recognized the importance of fostering a multicultural society. Success is due in large measure to strong national leadership and deliberate socially inclusive policies. Singapore's violent and fractious past in the 1950s and 1960s is acknowledged rather than obscured. Today's textbooks highlight race riots during that period as a reminder of past intolerance to minority ethnic and religious groups.¹⁵ Enshrined rights protecting a citizen's religious beliefs, stringent laws organizing interreligious organizations that counsel radicalized individuals, and a robust education system play central roles. Many civic rights stem largely from a history of racial and religious tensions that were

particularly inflamed prior to independence from Malaysia in 1965.

Then deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said in 2015 of his country, “We were a nation that was not meant to be; what’s interesting and unique about Singapore, more than economics, are our social strategies. We respected peoples’ differences yet melded a nation and made an advantage out of diversity.”¹⁶ The notion was that when people of different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds inhabit the same community, social harmony is created through daily interactions and exposure to one another’s customs and lifestyle. Singapore has maintained ethnic diversity mandates in all neighborhoods through ethnic quotas put in place to lead to increased integration and cohesion.

Singapore’s educational institutions are a vital link where multiculturalism and social cohesion are encouraged and fostered. Singapore has long implemented robust educational policies that encourage multiculturalism and place a strong emphasis on world religions. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) found that 100% of school leaders surveyed reported that their teachers believe that children and young people should learn that people of different cultures have a lot in common (OECD average 95%), and 99% of principals said most of their teachers feel that schools should encourage students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to work together, and that respecting other cultures is something students should learn as early as possible.¹⁷ Teachers and schools in Singapore have embraced a high percentage of migrant students as an opportunity to integrate multicultural learning into their curriculum and school programming.¹⁸ Schools celebrate an official Racial Harmony Day that commemorates the anniversary of the 1964 race

riots, to promote interracial peace.¹⁹ By embracing the migrant population, highlighting what they have to offer, while upholding national civic values that various cultural groups can personally identify with, Singapore manages to facilitate multicultural learning in meaningful and peaceful ways.

Singapore’s experience is viewed by some as a miracle, though criticisms surround its invasive social policies, quasi-authoritarian system, and limitations on free speech.²⁰ Singapore is also a wealthy country with a strong social safety net and high levels of development and employment. These could play roles in high levels of cohesion. However, much can be learned from their robust education model and governmental policies encouraging multiculturalism and welcoming an immigrant population.

“Learning to Live Together”: The Arigatou Approach

Arigatou International, a Japan-based non-profit organization founded on Buddhist principles, works to bring diverse groups and people together with the goal of building a better world for young people globally. It works primarily through interfaith and intercultural collaboration,²¹ with the primary goal of ensuring that values-based education is an integral part of programs. This in turn can help prevent violence and promote peacebuilding and collaboration among different communities. Arigatou International promotes ethics-based education and skills needed to live in a harmonious and diverse society, working in fragile communities within Kenya, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, and Tanzania, among others. Preparing youth to live in harmony with people from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds promotes a cohesive and ethical society. Recent work sets the goals in the

COVID-19 context, suggesting that promoting plural values during the crisis can build skills that help communities rely on each other for support and guidance.

Arigatou's Ethics Education program focuses on the idea of citizenship and highlights common values among people, with a focus on youth. The program focuses on common humanity as a foundational principle. The "Learning to Live Together" program, supported by a manual aimed at ages 12 to 18 years old, aims to bring ethics to a practical level in ways that children can understand without overt moralizing or focusing on wrong versus right. The overall goal is to mainstream ethics education and weave it into interfaith approaches that empower youth. Work to develop the underlying concepts for broad ethics education for children began in 2003. A lengthy preparation process drew on experts and extensive country testing to design approaches that nurture children's spirituality and teach them to learn to live together with people from different backgrounds. The manual focuses on four values shared by people from different world faiths: respect, responsibility, reconciliation, and empathy. These are seen as vital contributions to a better understanding of the "other" and as a way to learn to live together. During a testing phase, local community leaders and educators participated to ensure relevance to the local context. The effort differs from approaches focused on either a secular or Christian angle; Arigatou has sought to ensure that children's multiple religious identities are shared and promoted. Encouraging a free space where children feel comfortable in talking about their identities is a critical element. Current efforts focus on younger children (ages 6 to 11) and expanding international coverage.

"Faith in Action for Children," also an Arigatou program, addresses violence against children and

builds on roles faith leaders can play, especially during crises and situations where children are vulnerable. The campaign focuses on supporting children who may be experiencing violence in the home during the COVID-19 pandemic and promotes a virtual movement to strengthen ties between religious communities and child protection organizations, to influence positive behavioral change. Tools include activity booklets for children 4 to 18 years old that guardians and teachers can use to support children's socioeconomic and spiritual needs. Faith leaders, faith organizations, and NGOs can work together to mobilize and promote ethical and compassionate information to their communities. Nurturing youth through compassionate care and ethics education can equip them with tools they need to prosper during periods of recovery and to face demands they will confront in rebuilding post-pandemic societies.

SOCIALLY COHESIVE EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: THREE INNOVATIONS

Across Bangladesh's complex education system, there is scant evidence that the diverse secular and religious education-providers share a unifying vision.²² The BC/WFDD/CPJ textbook reviews found some threads of pluralistic thought, but they are not woven together as an overall framework to support social cohesion. Fragmented efforts to add pluralistic values to textbooks are largely overshadowed by broad themes that implicitly reinforce divides in Bangladeshi society.²³ Efforts among Bangladeshi education-providers to foreground social cohesion in their programs are present but limited. Initiatives by some education-providers to offer socially cohesive education merit further exploration. The overall environment in the wider education system is, however, not supportive,

and most initiatives face significant internal constraints.

The *Tahfizel Qu'ranil Fazil Kamil Madrasa*, a male-only Alia madrasa, was founded in 1992 by Professor Syed Ali Ashraf, a Bangladeshi Islamic scholar. Its outlier status within the madrasa system results from its commitment to rethink the contours of Muslim identity and shape the ideals of Islamic education in progressive and intellectually rigorous ways while upholding the fundamental ideals of Islam.

The Tahfizel madrasa's underlying philosophy, derived from Professor Ashraf's framework for religious education, combines the values of all major religions while upholding unity and diversity. This inclusive philosophy seeks to nurture spiritual growth across diverse religious traditions while maintaining the traditional purposes of Islamic education as firm pillars. To this end, Tahfizel uses a mix of government textbooks, Alia madrasa books, materials from English-medium curricula, and Professor Ashraf's philosophical and spiritual scholarship. The madrasa's claims to promote diversity face significant operational and administrative difficulties. The curriculum and extra-curricular programs, while they reflect diverse religious approaches, nonetheless are marked by traditionalist perspectives that can inhibit intellectual and spiritual growth.

Caritas Bangladesh (CB) offers another example of efforts toward inclusive education. Founded in the aftermath of Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence, CB is guided by the Christian Gospel and the fundamental principles of Bangladesh's constitution. Approximately 300 multi-grade CB education centers offer non-formal education across remote parts of Bangladesh that

help underserved children to transition gradually into mainstream government schools. CB works to ensure that through all its programs education is delivered to female children, children with special needs, indigenous communities, and other generally excluded groups, with no distinction by caste, religion, or other markers of social difference.

CB works to foster social cohesion through training elements of its education work. Since 1992, Caritas has delivered teacher training with a special emphasis on moral and ethical values. This training is offered to teachers drawn from diverse educational institutions, including madrasas. Titled "Education to Reality and Values Education," about eight to nine such trainings are conducted annually, with about 25 to 30 participants per training program. Similar training programs that focus on instilling moral and ethical values in young people aim to develop leadership and life skills, as well as enhance employability. Issues of gender equality, health, and hygiene are also covered. These teachings highlight universal values, such as the primacy of the human person, social justice, empowerment for the powerless, respect for the earth, and holistic development along every dimension (including intellectual, cultural, and social). They focus on enhancing interfaith harmony, emphasizing the importance of interreligious dialogue and non-communalism. The training programs face difficulties in drawing in participants from madrasas, and experience suggests that trainees of different faiths do not interact with one another or attempt to address the deeper cleavages that divide Bangladeshi society into faith-bound communities. CB also grapples with insufficient funding and support and works within an increasingly stringent regulatory environment.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) illustrates innovative approaches to education in Bangladesh, though it serves

only Hindu students. ISKCON established its Bangladesh chapter in 1972 to promote the well-being of human society by revitalizing spirituality. ISKCON has three residential *gurukuls* (temple-based schools) in Bangladesh. Jagrata Chatra Samaj trains students to preach Krishna consciousness in 75 temples across Dhaka. A distinctive part of ISKCON's educational work is youth forums, where courses are based on the teachings of the Vedas. ISKCON offers courses that approach faith-inspired education from a fundamental existentialist inquiry into the self, designed to initiate a process of experiential learning that develops the individual's consciousness and stimulates transformation.

While ISKCON's approach to spiritual education has an inclusive philosophy, its practice is less so. Its exclusive reference to Hindu philosophical thought undermines the statement that individuals of all faith groups can benefit from ISKCON's educational programs. ISKCON chapters elsewhere offer courses to individuals of all castes and religions, but in Bangladesh, it limits this offering to persons of Hindu faith only. They maintain a strict gender divide with classes segregated from age 12 onwards, and only female teachers are assigned to teach female students.

Each case study shows possible avenues toward more inclusive approaches but with significant deficiencies. These are due both to internal limitations and external constraints. Efforts to respond to new social demands in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis might draw insights and learnings from the experiences, building on their individual and collective potential to respond to the shared goal of promoting social cohesion in Bangladesh.

WAYS FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the COVID-19 crisis that has heightened social and economic pressures, social as well as political tensions are likely to rise. Universal values and goals can be undermined in the pandemic's economic fallout and related social impact. Active efforts to address social cohesion have critical importance as governments, civil society, and religious communities respond to the challenges of rebuilding nations. The risk of flagging momentum in implementing national goals, within the broader Sustainable Development Goals framework, is real. Progress and decades of positive development efforts could be undone. Social fractures will inevitably widen due to the pandemic. Secular and interfaith leaders and institutions can play large roles in mending fractures and providing social protection for the vulnerable groups who have been hit the hardest.

Pertinent lessons from experience in Bangladesh and other countries for post-COVID-19 recovery efforts include:

1. ***Mandatory interfaith education and events:*** Bangladesh's constitution highlights the nation's secular character, but there are existing ambiguities surrounding religious identities. Given the religious diversity and tensions within and among religious communities, mandatory, comparative interfaith education that covers the major world religions including indigenous and folk faith traditions could promote increased understanding and harmony. Teaching an underlying philosophy that is grounded in common values of major religions can support unity in diversity. Similarly, unbiased and critical social-scientific education that espouses di-

verse worldviews could enhance robust national and faith-managed education systems.²⁴ Studies highlight that interreligious courses can positively change the attitudes of young people and lead to more positive feelings toward religious and ethnic minorities.²⁵ By acquiring knowledge about other religions, students are better equipped to make rational and informed judgments about certain faith and morality issues.²⁶

2. *Teacher and textbook writer training:* For educators in Bangladesh to be better equipped to teach lessons relating to universal values, ethics, and interfaith studies, they need better training. Caritas Bangladesh holds universal values teacher trainings for teachers from all faiths, similar to the Arigatou model. Such approaches could be replicated. Textbook lessons and activities need defined learning outcomes that speak directly to diversity and pluralism themes.²⁷ Implementing routine government-sponsored teacher training sessions could allow teachers to gain tools and worldviews to explore diverse topics relating to multiculturalism and to properly and appropriately teach their students. For teachers in faith-managed schools and madrasas, this is key as many of these institutions are seen as on the fringe and less rigorous than the national schools. Similarly, textbook writers could be trained via multicultural textbook specialists from both the South Asian region and abroad to gain new insights and to equip them to write more tolerant and sensitive curricula. Stronger public oversight and monitoring by government agencies could help ensure that schools, educators, and textbooks are operating at a high level.
3. *Nuanced reflections on the past:* More explicit recognition of past conflicts in Bangladesh and the region in educational texts and programs could bridge divides and advance reconciliation efforts. Like Singapore, examples of historic interfaith conflict between Muslims and Hindus, acts of home-grown terrorism, and accounts of other violent incidents can serve as reminders of the past and offer lessons for reconciliation and healing for the future.
4. *Mobilizing interfaith youth organizations:* Youth from various faith traditions and local NGOs and educational institutions working together can contribute to a more harmonious and socially cohesive environment. The Arigatou and Indonesian experiences demonstrate how mobilizing youth groups with an interfaith focus can promote peace, understanding, and harmony. Interfaith youth clubs in national and religious schools with various faith institutions can lead to collective action, solidarity, and the promotion of mutual understanding. Educators and faith leaders can help establish such platforms either in-person or virtually to promote interfaith dialogue, social justice, and to expand the worldview of Bangladeshi youth. ISKCON youth forums illustrate positive linking of spiritual approaches to broader education programs. Youth are pivotal actors in shaping more sustainable economies and societies, and much can be done to engage with government and development entities.

NEXT STEPS

Promoting religious and cultural diversity and literacy is easier said than done. Much depends on identifying and moving toward sound models and acting to address weaknesses that are often unseen and unacknowledged. Significant gaps in interfaith approaches in Bangladesh educational institutions and curricula are threats to social cohesion, but there are inspiring examples to draw on in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Robust education systems with mandatory interfaith studies and attention to values focused on pluralism and common citizenship offer positive examples that can help build socially sustainable and cohesive nation-states. Educators, faith leaders, faith-inspired organizations, and other civil society organizations can all play integral roles in advocating such measures.

Government officials and policymakers need to give explicit support and recognition to interfaith learning and dialogue as an integral part of curricula. Pressures to empower and concede to special interest groups on education policy can hinder the core objectives of national unity and social cohesion. Religious and secular platforms that address education requirements need to work together to identify and further practical steps toward socially cohesive policies and curricula. This will better prepare students to become highly functioning and peaceful citizens of Bangladeshi society.

NOTES

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The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University is

dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center's work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD)

is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, DC, WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ)

is a multidisciplinary academic institute which promotes global peace and social justice through quality education, research, training, and advocacy. CPJ is committed to identifying and promoting sustainable and inclusive solutions to a wide range of global concerns and issues, including fragility, conflict, and violence.