

RESULTS SUMMARY

Promoting Inter-Religious Coexistence in Marginalized Communities

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PROJECT	Title:	Promoting Intercultural Dialogue for Development (Phase VI)
	Partner:	Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services - CEOSS
	Country:	Egypt
	Period:	January 2022 - Ongoing

CHANGE	<p>In marginalised and religiously divided areas in Egypt, CEOSS, with support from Danmission, has supported the establishment and implementation of a new inter-religious community model, allowing children of all religions to attend community schools and receive lessons in different religions. This has inspired neighbouring villages to apply the same model and gained recognition from the Egyptian Ministry of Education, opening the possibility of the model to influence wider structural reforms supporting cross-religious co-existence.</p>
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CONTEXT	<p>In Egypt, communities are populated by a large Muslim majority, with Islam being the state religion. In many rural communities, like Al-Duwaina village in Assiut Governorate, communities are characterised by religious division, where the majority group and different minority groups live in the same village, but lead largely separate lives. Previously, religious education in the community school in Al-Duwaina village education centred solely around Islamic studies and its related values, leading minority children to not attend this school, adding to the village's social and cultural division.</p>
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CONTRIBUTION	<p>Danmission and CEOSS collaborated closely with religious and community leaders to develop a sustainable community model to foster cultural shifts, with the aim of increasing inter-religious co-existence. Through the training of 115 religious leaders from different religious backgrounds on inclusive community initiatives, effective leadership, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, the project contributed to these leaders' enhanced abilities to lead religiously diverse communities towards more social cohesion. The success of the project was made possible through CEOSS, which engaged different Egyptian civil society organisations in supporting the norm shift, and through Danmission's approach of integrating dialogue into development work, combining community-led change with cultural reform. Cooperation with local partners such as the Businesswomen's Association, which oversees community schools and has strong links with the community and government sectors, has also been an important contributing factor.</p>
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IMAGES	 <p>Community members are attending an awareness session in one of the religious sites.</p>	 <p>Children, parents and teachers attending an inter-religious awareness event</p>
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ACTIVITIES

The project formed an inter-religious committee to support and supervise the implementation of the inter-religious community model. Teachers were trained to educate their students on both Islam and Christianity and to support student diversity and peaceful co-existence in class, opening the way for the integration of children from religious minority backgrounds. The trainings were supported by sheikhs and priests, who, through the project, worked together for the first time. In addition to the training, awareness initiatives on coexistence, dialogue and respect for diversity were implemented at the community level to enhance inter-religious knowledge and tolerance, including visits to religious sites, attended by the students, their families and teachers, to increase knowledge and social bonds between groups.

LESSONS

Despite the success of the project, the implementation has faced different challenges. First, the villages targeted were characterised by a high level of cultural fear, especially with parents from the minority groups, who were hesitant to send their children to schools. This fear was to some extent supported by narratives from religious and governmental leadership, and therefore, including and targeting these leaders was essential for change to happen. The success of the project was made possible through the inclusion of such leaders as well as trusted community members who could create awareness of the inter-religious division in a language that is accepted and understood by the villagers. This learning underlined the importance of localising and adapting methods to match the needs and culture of the targeted community. Tools on dialogue, conflict mediation, and peacebuilding are often developed by an international entity, lacking the specificities of the local context.

EVIDENCE

The change is documented by a monitoring report based on data from outcome harvesting and interviews conducted with societal actors and rights-holders. First, the report highlights a 30% increase in enrollment among children from minority families in the community school, signalling a beginning norm shift. Secondly, the report documents how investing in the capacity-strengthening of religious and community leaders broadens their frame of mind and boosts their ability to work together across religions. Interviews have shown that their collaboration went beyond the school initiative to include other community concerns, proving an increase in interreligious collaboration overall. Lastly, after the implementation of this initiative in the village of Al-Duwaina, the Egyptian Ministry of Education expressed interest in using the project as a model for education enhancement in other parts of Egypt with similar challenges, providing evidence of the effect and value of the project's results.

DOMAINS

Development strategy priorities:

Democracy and Human Rights

Changes in the lives of people facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability

X

Changes in laws, policies and practices that affect people's rights

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Changes in the capacity of organisations and communities to support rights

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Changes in partnerships and collaborations that support people's rights

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Changes in participation of groups facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability

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Changes in local leadership of development and humanitarian work

X