



VISIONHOPE

MIDDLEGROUND ACADEMY

Training in Intercultural Competences
for Development Actors

HANDBOOK

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Part 1 – Introduction

The Middleground Approach

The vast majority of the world population identifies as belonging to a religion. The number stands at around 80 per cent worldwide¹ and will be even higher in most contexts of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, since secularisation is progressing most strongly in western contexts.²

Religion is thus an important factor to consider in development and humanitarian aid. The expectation that secularisation will run its course and unite the world around its ideas seems less and less likely to most humanitarian actors. At the same time, secular paradigms need to be taken seriously as ideological frameworks of many western relief and development agencies.

“A values-based development policy which takes the individual seriously also needs to take that individual’s worldview seriously.”

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)³

The ambitious Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda 2030 can only be achieved if potential synergies are unlocked between the worlds of development and religion. This means that secular actors have to learn about religion just as much as religious actors have to learn about secular paradigms.

The Middleground Approach attempts to provide a framework for just that. Born out of Vision Hope International’s activity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it aims to provide a value-based path to cooperation between actors, communities, leaders and organisations with Muslim, Christian and secular backgrounds.

Vision Hope International

Vision Hope International (VHI) is a non-governmental humanitarian aid and development organisation (NGO) headquartered in Germany. Since 2002, VHI has been engaged in the MENA region and gratefully looks back on a history of support from faith-based donors and co-operation with faith-based partners in the countries of engagement. Those include Yemen, Jordan, Syria and Tunisia, where VHI’s work spans from psychosocial support and education through family centres and schools to water and food security projects and other activities across the spectrum of humanitarian response and development cooperation.

VHI embraces as its mandate to be actively involved and lead innovation in the field of religion and development and promote ways of cooperation between Muslim, Christian and secular

¹ Pew Research Center “The Global Religious Landscape.” *Pew Research Centre’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), December 18, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

² Compare Gallup survey results on religiosity worldwide, 2010: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>

³ Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ, 2016), *Religious Communities as Partners for Development Cooperation*, p.11.

partners. Relying on carefully expressed core values, the Middleground Approach will increase trust between stakeholders and partners as well as the impact of programs of relief, recovery and development work. The Middleground Academy is designed as a platform for shared learning with a focus on values, respect and practical application.

This Handbook

This handbook is structured to accompany the Middleground Academy, a learning and qualification initiative first piloted in 2019. The Academy consists of

1. An introductory webinar
2. A two-day classroom seminar
3. A practical phase during which the Middleground Approach is applied to concrete projects
4. A debriefing webinar

The handbook brings together quintessential thoughts from all parts of the Academy. It references external sources for further reading and gives space for reflection on and application of the guiding questions of the Middleground Academy.

Religion and Development – The Need for Religious Literacy and a New Approach

The field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid is a so-called people's business: projects and initiatives are implemented from people for people, human interaction is key. Therefore, mutual understanding on the individual level or in a team is paramount. Individuals with secular backgrounds need to understand their colleagues and cooperation partners with religious backgrounds and vice versa. Sensitive communication and mutual understanding are important to ensure the success of development projects and humanitarian aid and to have all partners on board.

In addition to human-to-human relationships, organisational capacities of development NGOs are important in order to ensure sensitive communication between their domestic staff, local staff and the local population. Many NGOs in the field of development do not have specific organisational capacities, such as policies or manuals, to deal with the religious dimensions of communication. The Middleground Academy wants to trigger a multiplier effect to raise awareness of the importance of religious literacy and of organisational capacities in the area of interreligious competencies.

It is not necessarily the well-known cultural and ideological differences and stereotypes that challenge projects of NGOs in development cooperation and humanitarian aid in the Middle East and North Africa. In all its nuances, culture and religion can exert a particular, often elusive, influence on cooperation between German NGOs and local partner organisations. In case of the MENA region, secular, Muslim and Christian worldviews are particularly relevant. During the introductory webinar, numerous statistics provided an empirical foundation for the claim that religion plays a very important role in most of the receiving societies of international development cooperation in the MENA region. Moreover, we have seen that many international and national development organisations have a faith-based background.

Despite different ideological worldviews coming together in the intercultural context of the MENA region, a middle ground can be found, a common core of ethical values and humanitarian imperatives that are relevant to Muslims, Christians and secular individuals alike. The so-called “Middleground Approach” facilitates a culture of dignity among different groups of people by promoting communication that is ethically sensitive, inspiring and conciliatory. Thereby, prejudices and fears will be reduced, and respectful human relationships can evolve.

Part 2 – A Middleground Approach to Communication

Vision Hope International has developed the Middleground Approach for trilateral communication between Christians, Muslims and individuals with a secular background, for examples agnostics or atheists. The organisation **defines a middle ground approach as a common core of ethical values and humanitarian imperatives relevant to both people of different faiths and of no faith.**

“We are not just technical relief and development experts. We require our expat staff to learn the local language and to engage with the communities.”

Matthias Leibbrand, CEO of Vision Hope

The Middleground Approach originates from realising the necessity to communicate VHI’s work to individuals and groups representing Christian, Muslim and secular worldviews in the MENA region. Thus, it can be called a 3-dimensional (3-D) approach to communication.

The first vantage point of the Middleground Approach is a comprehensive concept of peace.

‘Positive peace’ is more than the absence of conflict; namely it describes a holistic form of physical, psychological and social well-being. Another way of describing positive peace is human flourishing. The concept of human flourishing was originally addressed by Aristotle and is part of the secular-humanitarian imperative. Human flourishing as a theoretical concept is akin to the notions of *Salam* and *Shalom* from the realms of Muslim and Judeo-Christian thought respectively. Therefore, language evolving around these three concepts makes a suitable basis for intergroup communication and peace-making. Such language will shine a light on the fact that essentially, every human being on earth, Christian, Muslim or secular, has the aim and the desire to be physically, psychologically and socially well, and to live in a society where this well-being can be achieved in its ideal form.

The second central concept of the Middleground Approach is dignity as described by Donna Hicks, a renowned professor from Harvard University and global peacemaker.⁴ She describes dignity as a powerful humanistic concept for peace-making. Dignity is equally relevant in Muslim thought through the idea of the ‘*Khalifah*’ – each individual’s role as viceroy on earth. In Christian theology, the idea of ‘*imago dei*’ is the conceptual equivalent to the concept of

⁴ Donna Hicks, Ph.D. (2011): Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict. Yale University Press.

dignity. The Christian view of dignity is rooted in the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God ('imago dei').

The third and final pillar of Middleground communication is an ethic of reciprocity or the so-called 'golden rule.' The principle of treating others like one would like to be treated can be found in secular thought, as well as Biblical and Quranic teaching, as shown by the box below:

The Golden Rule Across Worldviews

MUSLIM: "Do no wrong, and no wrong will be done to you." (Quran, Surah 2,279)

SECULAR HUMANIST: "Treat each other as you would like to be treated."

CHRISTIAN: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12).

Questions for Reflection

1. Which term do you prefer to use when you talk about the good life or a better life for the people you serve and why? Peace? Human Flourishing? Or ...?
2. VHI's Middleground Manual states that "providing aid alone, such as food or medicine, was insufficient to bring lasting change. There had to be a strong relational component to the work of VHI to achieve peace in society. It demands positive relationships based on respect, acceptance, and reconciliation." What are the most relevant practices mentioned in the Middleground Manual that can help you build positive relationships? Why?
3. If you were to describe "human dignity," what stories, images, or metaphors would come to mind?
4. When was the last time you experienced a personal dignity violation? What did that feel like? How did you respond? Was somebody else's dignity violated by your response?
5. What practical things can you say and do to affirm someone's dignity?

Part 3 – Practical Application: Materials and Tasks

Part 3 of this handbook serves to accompany you through the practical phase of the Middleground Academy (Training Component 3).

The Practical Phase

The aim of the practical phase is for you to **develop practical concept papers that present an approach on how to foster intercultural and interreligious literacy in your organisation / your area of influence.**


During the Middleground Academy you will have gained a lot of knowledge regarding religion in development cooperation and humanitarian aid. The practical phase offers the opportunity to develop ideas on how you could bring your newly acquired knowledge to your work context.

The overall aim is that development organisations become more sensitive towards religion and that projects are conceptualised in a more appropriate way, respecting the religious and cultural needs of the receiving society. Projects that are better aligned with the realities of the target population are more likely to have a positive long-term impact for the people. After all, this is what we all are working for...So, let's get started!

In order to develop your practical concept paper, you should follow the steps explained below and take the action steps. At any time during the practical application phase, the team of the Middleground Academy will assist you in answering your questions and giving advice.

Step 1: Needs Assessment

This part is designed to help you analyse the competencies and needs of your organisation in working in a Middleground way. The Middleground Approach can be relevant to the level of program work, but also to communication and policies of your organisation on a structural level.

 **Action Step: Before you begin, take a moment to consider the context for which you would like to answer the questions of the needs assessment and design a practical concept.**


Maybe you work for a larger organisation that has a long track record of working aspects of faith, religion and worldview into their programs and policies. In that case, you should limit the context that you want to work with during the practical phase. Ideally, it should be your immediate area of influence, your own department or programs. However, you might also choose to consult with your organisation which department other than your own particularly needs the ideas of the Middleground Approach.

Maybe you work for a small organisation or one that has little experience in dealing with issues of faith and religion. In this case, the whole organization could be the context for your needs assessment. If you work as an independent consultant, consider extending your needs assessment to organisations or donors you worked with. You could do this by reaching out to key people in those organisations or through an online survey.

Your **area of influence** could be:

- The organisation you work with
- The organisation you volunteer with
- Your university
- Your internship organisation
- Your church, mosque, or an association (“Verein”) you are engaged with
- Your local community
-

As an independent or student participant, consider where the topic of religion and faith is present in your network / area of influence. You might consider organisations or individuals you have worked with in the past or would like to work with in the future (e.g. as a volunteer, intern, consultant, student assistant and so on). If you are currently or have in the past been volunteering in a non-profit organisation engaged in development work, you could conduct the needs assessment in this organisation. You can also consider theoretical contexts, e.g. from your coursework as a student, but please be prepared to find organisations or persons to discuss your findings with and record and evaluate their feedback. We will use organisational language in this part of the handbook, but the same thoughts might also be applicable to academic contexts, e.g. from your course work or literature.

 **Action Step: Take some notes on how you would define the area of your influence. What context can you choose for the practical phase of the Middleground Academy?**

1.1. Points of Contact

This part explores where, in your selected context, there are points of contact with the topics of the Middleground Approach. These might be needs / gaps or assets.

The following questions help you to determine relevant points of contact:

1. Where in your organisation (or other selected context) do Christian, Muslim and secular stakeholders work together on a practical level? *(For example, a field office in the MENA region, in donor relations...)*
2. Where do you see a need for dedicated communication to a secular, Christian and Muslim audience? Consider your organisation’s existing communication products and strategies. Consider also what communication products and strategies your organisation may be missing. *(For example, you might find that your organisation communicates well to Christian-background donors due to its historical origins, but less well to secular or Muslim donors.)*
3. Where do Muslim, Christian and secular worldviews meet in your organisation? Consider this question by country, by program, and also include the context of your headquarters. *(For example, a program of your secular organisation might be implemented by a Muslim partner organisation in the MENA region.)*

 **Action Step: Answer the questions above for your selected context.**

1.2. Identifying Assets

The following questions help you to identify assets in your organization / context.

1. Does your organisation commit in any formal way to engaging with the topic of faith, religion and worldview? Consider what is written in mission, vision and identity statements of your organisation. Consider also declarations and codes of conduct your organisation has subscribed to. *(For example, your organisation's mission statement might include a statement about co-operation between different world views that you haven't seen in action yet.)*
2. How would you describe the organisational knowledge on the topic? Does your organisation have documents and policy in place on the issue of faith, religion and worldview? Consider documents in active use as well as documents and projects of the past that might lie dormant or did not receive much attention or follow up. *(For example, you might vaguely recall a workshop on the topic in the past but are not aware of any concrete follow-up.)*
3. Are there individuals in your organisation that have a profile and capacity in working with issues of faith, religion and worldview? Who are so-called "knowledge carriers"? *(For example, you might be aware of a colleague who previously worked in a faith-based organisation such as Islamic Relief.)*
4. Does your organisation have experience in programming that involves faith, religion and worldview? Is this experience available in reports or other documents? Remember to consider field offices and HQ, as well as partners you might share resources and knowledge with. *(For example, you may recall a program in the MENA region on awareness-raising that worked through a religious umbrella organisation such as the Middle-East Council of Churches.)*

 **Action Step: Answer the questions above for your selected context.**

1.3. Analysing Gaps

Based on the points of contact (1.1.) and the identified assets (1.2.), where do you see gaps between how your organisation deals with aspects of faith, religion and world view currently, and how it could reach its full potential in the sense of the Middleground Approach?

If nothing comes to mind, widen your considered context. If you have too many ideas, note down no more than 10 areas and prioritise them afterwards.

By the end of this part, you should have identified at least one (ideally up to 5) areas where your organisation or selected context has potential for growth and capacity building in the area of faith, religion and worldview. Remember that the ideas of the Middleground Approach might be relevant to any part of a typical project cycle (needs assessment, project design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, reporting, fundraising, and so on), to organisational policy, knowledge management, academic discourse and other aspects of


humanitarian and development work.


 **Action Step: Analyse the gaps as explained above.**

Step 2: Practical Concept Design

As stated above, the aim of the practical phase is for you to develop practical concept papers that present an approach on how to foster intercultural and interreligious literacy in your organisation / your area of influence.

In step 2, the practical concept design, you should engage in answering the following question:

 **What concrete project or activity can help your organisation / area of influence to close the gaps identified above? Be creative and innovative!**

 Follow these steps when writing your concept paper:

- ☐ Consider the gaps or areas of growth you identified above. Reflect on where your organisation is and where it could be. *(For example, a relevant policy document might reflect cooperation with Christian and secular partners, but not Muslim ones.).*
- ☐ Now consider and define as best you can what is necessary in order to close this gap and increase intercultural competences within your organisation. *(This could include writing or rewriting a document or manual, designing a pilot project, redesigning a program or an assessment, hosting a workshop, etc...)*
- ☐ What you noted down above might go beyond the scope of what can be achieved during the practical phase of the Middleground Academy. Therefore, try to identify the next concrete steps. *(For example, instead of designing a whole new project, you might choose to design a small information campaign, or make a donor / partner mapping, or publish an interview with a "knowledge carrier" etc...)*
- ☐ What concrete steps that you listed can be developed into a project that can be completed within a month, ideally together with a partner from a field office?
- ☐ Which methods can you use in order to implement your project?
- ☐ Which methods can you use in order to multiply the knowledge you gained within your organization *(For example, host an information event, publish an interview in the internal newsletter, hold a presentation in your team or at a larger internal event?)*
- ☐ How can you track the impact of your project during the project itself and after some time has passed?

Appendix 1: Model Questions for a Survey in an Organisation

Appendix 1 lists some sample questions that provide inspiration when designing a survey for an organisation. You can also come up with your own questions or rephrase questions to suit the needs of your survey.

- In the following, please describe the program(s) you work with: [*open-ended question*]
- What ideological backgrounds are represented in the program(s) you work on (as beneficiaries, staff, and/or stakeholders)? [*list options*]
- What groups have influence in the implementation area of your projects? [*list options*]
- In your opinion, which statement describes best the relationship between humanitarian/development work and faith/religion in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region? [*come up with some statements, multiple choice*]
- Please rate the following sentences from 'not true at all' to 'very true'.
 - ☐ "Within the past 3 years, I have become aware of faith- and religion-related topics being raised in the context of the programs I work for."
 - ☐ "For the beneficiaries of my work, faith and religion are important."
 - ☐ "The programs I'm involved with are designed and implemented with awareness of the potentially helpful influence of faith and religion."
 - ☐ "The programs I'm involved with are designed and implemented with awareness of the potentially harmful influence of faith and religion."
 - ☐ "For me personally, faith and religion are important."
 - ☐ "In my work, I would feel well equipped to deal with faith-related and religious thoughts and practices of beneficiaries, partners or stakeholders."
 - ☐ "In order to achieve the goals of the programs I work in, it is helpful to include aspects of faith and religious thought and practice in the program plans."
 - ☐ "Basic knowledge about relevant faith and religious thoughts and practices is important in order to manage the programs I'm involved with."
 - ☐ "I'm aware of and have access to good resources on faith, religion and development (blogs, articles, books, tools...) for the programs I'm involved with."
 - ☐ "I experience co-operation and dialogue with Christian stakeholders as respectful and fruitful."
 - ☐ "I experience co-operation and dialogue with Sunni Muslim stakeholders as respectful and fruitful."
 - ☐ "I experience co-operation and dialogue with secular stakeholders as respectful and fruitful."
- In your opinion, how valid and helpful are the following statements to foster respectful co-operation between Muslim, Christian and secular actors in humanitarian and development work?
 - ☐ "Where faith and religion is part of the problem, it should also be part of the solution."

- "Religious actors, communities and leaders are the dominant actors in civil society in many places. Therefore they add value to development and humanitarian efforts in many ways."
- What else could foster respectful co-operation in humanitarian and development work between Muslim, Christian and secular actors and communities but has not been mentioned in this survey? *[open-ended question]*
- Please share concrete examples you might have of how faith and religion have affected your work positively in the past. *[open-ended question]*
- Please share concrete examples you might have of how faith and religion have affected your work negatively in the past. *[open-ended question]*
- Do you see a change in how faith/religion relates to development/humanitarian work? *[open-ended question]*

Appendix 2: Resources, Literature, Links

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