



Jumuga Journal of Education,
Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)
editor@jumugajournal.org
<http://www.jumugajournal.org>
Volume 7, No. 2, 2024
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35544/jjeoshs.v7i2.77>

Towards a Dialogic Community:

Roman Catholic Church's Dialogic Models for Construction of Religious Moderation and Social Cohesion in the Coastal Kenya

Richard Ooko Airo

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8133-0674>

Pwani University, Kenya

&

Stephen Asol Kapinde, PhD

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6984-6702>

Pwani University, Kenya

&

Tsawe Munga wa Chidongo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6035-9910>

Pwani University, Kenya

&

Stephen Muoki Joshua

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3091-9822>

Pwani University, Kenya

Abstract

This article sets out to analyse the forms of interreligious dialogue (IRD) adopted by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) Archdiocese of Mombasa towards the promotion of social cohesion in the Coastlands of Kenya. RCC has been working with local communities in moderation of religious extremism and promoting harmonious interreligious relations. This research article argues that the RCC dialogic models are geared towards creating a dialogic community which is inclusive and cherishes equity over inequality, justice over injustice, peace over violence, and unity over disunity. In an attempt to build such a community, the RCC dialogic models was increasingly influenced by the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) and post-conciliar exhortation including Papal messages and Encyclicals. Thus, RCC took a multidimensional and integrated approach in partnership with other groups both Christian and non-Christians, faith-based and secular towards promoting interreligious dialogue. In a nutshell, it reviews that the four models of dialogue: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of religious experience, and the dialogue of theological exchange, adopted by the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa, from 1983 to 2023. The four dialogical models re-mapped the ground for community development within a frame of ideas, such as friendship and solidarity based on mutuality, hospitality, and reciprocity between different religious groups. It also discusses some of the obstacles the RCC faced in its IRD initiatives. In conclusion, this article provides a contextual analysis of RCC's pastoral approach and practice of IRD to social cohesion in the Coastlands of Kenya.

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church, Interreligious dialogue, dialogic models, Archdiocese of Mombasa, Coastal Kenya.

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is essential for promoting inter-communal relations and social cohesion globally. However, interreligious dialogue in Africa and Kenya in particular has been shaped by socio-political processes. Nearly all African countries went through violent colonialism with its cultural subjugation that undermined peaceful co-existence and social cohesion. Scholarly articles and books have been written on the contribution of the Church in the public space but with less focus on their interreligious dialogue activities as alternative peacebuilding methods. Extant literature on religion focused on the democratization process, reconciliation, and national building rather than on alternative non-violent approaches to inter-religious dialogue (IRD) and social cohesion. There is less accounts on Christianity and social cohesion in Kenya, which this study is striving to achieve. The term national integration is the awareness of a common identity and working towards unity amongst the citizens of a country. The process of national integration and social cohesion has been marked with ambivalence since those charged with the responsibility both the religious institutions and the state have been indicted of engaging in divisive politics and with less regard towards peaceful co-existence. In this study, I investigated the pastoral contribution of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) Archdiocese of Mombasa on inter-religious dialogue (IRD) towards social cohesion in Coastal Kenya between 1983 and 2023.

In 1983, RCC established the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Commission for Ecumenism which were both merged in 2019 to create the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism (CIRDE). This study, however ends in 2023 which climaxed the IRD initiatives of the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa. The RCC IRD programs had impulses from the Vatican II Council (1962-1965). The Council provided an opportunity for the RCC to engage with the Christians and Non-Christian religions and cultures globally. According to Jean-Baptiste Sourou (2014), the RCC and other Christian missionaries were aggressive towards African cultural practices and religion. Often describing them as fetishism, animism, and paganism since the beginning of evangelization in Africa. The Vatican II Council resolution, as expressed in *Nostra Aetate* (NA) marked a significant step towards the development of the theology of IRD. The RCC broke from its past exclusive attitude and for the first time called for respect toward other religions and cultures, "inviting Christians to charity, dialogue, and collaboration toward the progress of moral, social, and cultural values." The works of Sourou (2014) are important in understanding the development of IRD, however, it did not map comprehensively the internal contestations that continued within the RCC as different theologians and religious leaders digested what IRD would mean for the Church.

Although many Catholic theologians and priests accepted IRD, they continued debating its impact on mission and evangelism. This was informed by the three paradigms that emerged within RCC; exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. According to Didier Pollefeyt (2007) exclusivism and inclusivism is characterized by theological absolutism and relativism is attributed to pluralism, and the declaration of the impossibility of the dialogue (usually attributed to particularism). The exclusive attitude was more Christological in nature insisting that salvation is only possible through Christ, the redeemer but also ecclesiological as the RCC maintained "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" ("no salvation outside the Church"). Contrary to the inclusive paradigm advocated by the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) which opened space for religious freedom and IRD.

From Vatican II Council, the RCC has increasingly utilised dialogue as a viable non-violent mechanism for negotiating peace in fragile multicultural, multireligious, and pluralized societies. The term dialogue stems from the Greek διάλογος (dialogos, conversation); its roots are διά (dia: through) and λόγος (logos: speech, reason). In Latin, dialogue is rendered as *dialogus* which translates to 'speaking across' or converse and/or mutually exchange between two or more different parties. For Bohm, dialogue is practical as it takes the form of a group of people coming together to explore individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings. German Philosopher, Martin Buber described dialogue as more than an exchange of views, ideas, and values but entails development of human relationships, both between human beings, as well as between humans and god. Buber's thoughts marries well with the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire who defined dialogue as a critical pedagogy for the emancipation of people by cultivating critical attitudes and capacities to reflect on their experience in the world. Considering the views of Buber and Freire on dialogue, IRD therefore refers to the critical, constructive, and mutual exchanges between people of different religious traditions, ethnic, and cultural persuasions. Thus, dialogue is a "human's way of being-in-the-world" and communities coming together to negotiate over societal challenges. This study analysed from an empirical perspective the core practical ethos underpinning *dialogue as an encounter* and *dialogue as praxis*. Essentially, examining the pastoral approach of the RCC towards social cohesion in Coastal Kenya.

Like dialogue, the definition of social cohesion is problematic and multidimensional depending with the socio-cultural and political context. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim defines "social cohesion as an ordering feature of society that defines

interdependence, shared loyalties and solidarity... glue that holds society together". Thus, social cohesion measures the level and nature of individuals' (and regions') satisfaction with their relational needs and their consequent solidarity, acceptance of diversity and sense of belonging to a society. Social cohesion crosses different spheres of life including religious, social, economic and political spectrums. Thus, scholars have acknowledged that social cohesion is multidimensional with both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The latter refers to state-centric relationships with the citizens and their trust in the institutions. For this study, vertical social cohesion refers to complementary dialogue initiatives that are intended to promote peace and national unity. Horizontal social cohesion however refers to local and community linkages through IRD aimed at building harmonious relationships, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among members of the society. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) measures social cohesion as an aggregate of both horizontal and vertical linkages including shared prosperity, trust, equity, peace, diversity and tolerance between different ethnic, political and religious groups. In this study, social cohesion is defined broadly as the process of promoting shared values between communities by recognizing and appreciating cultural diversity and working towards reducing social, religious and ethnic disparities by building a peaceful and stable society. In consideration of the pastoral contribution of RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa on IRD, this study argued that social cohesion is a process rather than an outcome of dialogue processes.

As a religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) plays a significant and diverse role in promoting national integration. Besides its crucial contribution to humanitarian and development programs, the RCC through its agencies has continued to play a vital role in peace-building and societal cohesion in conflicting societies. Studies conducted in Kenya have documented the ambiguous role of Christianity in peace-building and societal cohesion. In the 1980s into 1990s, mainline Churches pushed for democratic and constitutional reforms as necessary ingredients for societal cohesion. However, in the mid-2000s the same Churches were accused of stoking divisions and ethnicity that led to the 2007-08 post-electoral violence. Instead of serving as a 'binding glue' towards national integration and social cohesion. Existing studies have been grappling with this ambiguity of Christian Churches with less attention to the contribution of specific denominations such as the RCC in promotions of national integration and social cohesion through non-violent mechanisms such as IRD. In particular, the RCC has been working with state and non-state actors to address political violence and religious extremism in the Coastal region of Kenya. The region is made up of people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. While this diversity is good for development, often it has been used to stoke unnecessary conflicts either along religious, ethnic and political lines. In its evangelization endeavors, the RCC has the added obligation to maintain, direct, teach and catechise their faithful in matters of peace and societal cohesion. This study empirically analyzed the pastoral contribution of the RCC Archdiocese of Mombasa and forms of dialogue towards social cohesion between 1983 and 2023. It sought to establish the dialogic models employed by the RCC to moderate religious extremism and build social cohesion.

Materials and Methods

The article applied Grounded theory to understand the pastoral contribution of the RCC on interreligious dialogue (IRD) and dialogic models adopted by the Church towards social cohesion in Coastal Kenya. The Grounded theory approach was adopted for three reasons. First, Grounded theory was applied as a qualitative theological method to understand social realities from the participant's perspective. Secondly, the grounded approach has been appraised as an inductive process for generating data from research participants based on their own experiences. Thus, the approach allows for themes to naturally emerge through simultaneous data collection and ongoing data analyses efforts. Thirdly, the study while focusing on the RCC dialogic models for religious moderation and social cohesion was motivated by the desire to gather data from a diverse pool of respondents including participants drawn from major religious traditions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Coastal Kenya. Thus, grounded theology granted me the opportunity to generate data from a diverse pool of respondents' and draw empirical findings based on their own personal and practical experiences on interreligious dialogue and social cohesion.

The research study employed purposive sampling technique, where 40 respondents were identified for interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). On the other hand, random sampling technique was employed to select 100 lay Christians who had attended interreligious dialogue seminars and participated in dialogue activities within the Archdiocese of Mombasa for purposes of filling the questionnaires. The lay Christians were drawn from parishes within Mombasa and Kwale counties where numerous interreligious programmes had taken place.

Out of 40 respondents, 30 were subjected to interviews included bishops, priest, sisters, Muslims, Hindus and ATR practitioners. I also conducted two sets of FGDs including men and women in Likoni and Ukunda. One set had four people and another was composed of 6 individuals. In total, the FGD had ten people who had participated in a previous IRD workshop held at Our Lady of Africa Tudor pastoral centre. These respondents were engaged through a semi-structured interview guide, where I formulated the questions but modified them during fieldwork based on the category of persons being interviewed. Those selected for interviews had practical knowledge and experience in different religious traditions which was not limited to theoretical knowledge of the subject. Many had worked closely with the RCC through its Interreligious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C) and Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC).

Forms of Interreligious Dialogue Adapted by the Roman Catholic Church

This research article found that in both contexts the adoption of interreligious dialogue was informed by international trends and the theology of dialogue as defined by the Vatican II Council (1962-1965). However, the pastoral approach and interreligious practice were shaped by local agencies based on empirical realities that demanded the construction of religious moderation for peaceful co-existence and social cohesion against the backdrop of suspicion, extremism, fundamentalism, and conflict in Coastal Kenya. The study categorized the types of dialogue adopted by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) into four *viz*; dialogue of life; dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and theological dialogue. These dimensions of dialogue corresponded to the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) fourfold models of inter-religious engagement outlined in *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

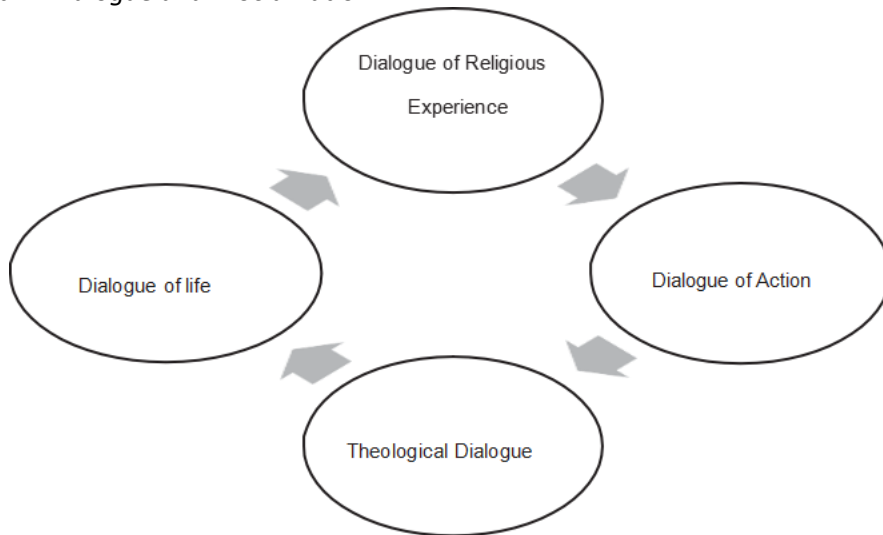


Figure 1. The Dialogue Four Model Cycle

The dialogic model described in Figure 1 is based on the Roman Catholic Church classification to develop a systematic analysis of the various kinds of interreligious dialogue that the Archdiocese of Mombasa undertook in Coastal Kenya. The study is aware that such classification is not comprehensive in the understanding of the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue in general. The existing classifications for instance focus more on the forms and tasks of dialogue without reflecting on the goal and motivation behind interreligious dialogue. By contrast, however, interreligious dialogue is complex and multilayered and practical contextual analysis informs the goal and motivation for dialogue by itself. The fundamental object of dialogue in Coastal Kenya was/is to moderate religious extremism by building social cohesion between and among different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church as reflected in this study implemented all four models of interreligious dialogue. The analysis that follows goes beyond the dialogue content by critically considering how each model was embodied by the Church.

Dialogue of Life: Living, Working, Walking and Learning Together

In *Dialogue and Mission*, this form of dialogue implies concern, respect, and hospitality toward the religious other. Moreover, dialogue of life creates space for understanding the other person's identity, modes of expression, beliefs, and values. The Catholic Church engaged in a *dialogue of life* with Christian and non-Christian communities by "living, working, walking and

learning" together. In an interview with Fr. Nicky, he says, "Christianity is not a monolithic religion in Kenya, there are other religions so dialogue of life in a pluralistic context entails a pilgrimage of 'living, working, walking and learning' together about our religion and other religious traditions and practices". Through the *dialogue of life*, we examined how the RCC through pastoral training created awareness among Christians to co-existence with their neighbors from other faiths in the course of everyday life. As outlined in '*Dialogue and Mission*', in this form of dialogue "one experiences own limitations and becomes aware that one does not possess the whole truth but needs to walk together with others towards that goal".

Broadly, this form of dialogue is fundamental in building a dialogic community and social cohesion because it involves persons of all backgrounds. As Chidongo observed, this type of dialogue extends deeply into all aspects of human relationships thus creating a sense of solidarity and togetherness. By living together Roman Catholic Christians should be culturally sensitive in their communication with the "religious other" and neighbors to avoid mistrust and suspicion. This entails striving to be open, transparent, and nurturing neighborly spirits by sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. According to Sintang *et al.* (2012), it is a learning process of seeking to understand and tolerate the way of life of people of the "religions other" via daily interaction and exchange. As observed in many exhortations of PCID, "Christians must overcome religious prejudices and cultural biases both towards those they serve and toward those with whom they serve since their mission is to alleviate suffering and bring healing and wholeness in a pluralistic society". This demands building relations with other religions and "neighbors" including those who practice different faith traditions. The Roman Catholic Church Christians who participated in this study talked about their relationships with their colleagues who form part of a different religious tradition as cordial and friendly. One of the participants, Esther Nyadzua observed:

My grandmother is a Catholic and my grandfather is a Muslim. My father is an Anglican but my cousins are Muslims. They all practice their own religion. I can say with confidence that our home is a cocktail of different religions. Interfaith Dialogue is an everyday experience in our homestead. We do fast both during Lent and during Ramadan. We attend social ceremonies together and participate without restriction of religion.

RCC Christians embodied religious moderation by living their everyday lives dialogically, learning from their peers, and supporting interfaith collaboration in social development. Thus, dialogue of life was both *relational* and *experiential* to RCC Christians as well as people of other faiths they interacted with in everyday life. Christians who participated in interreligious forums argued that the teachings helped in building their relations beyond the dialogue business. Michael L. Fitzgerald former co-president of PICD says that, *dialogue of life* is not something passive or mere co-existence rather it is an open desire to enter into relations with others for purposes of living in peace and harmony. There was also the element of communion among RCC Christians and members of other religions and cultures. This was expressed through sharing in ceremonies, religious and community cultural practices and rituals. Interviews with Jane Jilani, Imam Takbir, Samuel Lewa, and Fr. Harrison Yaa observed how the dialogue of life is experienced in everyday life through acts of communion among members of the community. Fr. Harrison Yaa cited how burial ceremonies in African communities were marked by funeral and burial rites of different religions and culture. He argues, thus:

In a burial of Christian among the Midzi-Cheda, the priest performs all burial rites related to Christianity and then cultural rituals and beliefs associated with ATR will also be performed, sometimes with the priest's knowledge or without. But if we consider other burial rituals such as *Nyere za Mwezi*, you still find Christians and traditionalists collaborating in commemoration of their departed kinsmen and women.

In African communities, people communion in happiness, sorrow, death, and tragedy regardless of their religious and denomination affiliations. The African communitarian philosophy of "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am" is an expression of dialogue of life. During, the Hindu feast of *Diwali*; and Muslim iftar dinners during the Holy month of *Ramadhan*, Christians and other faith traditions do participate. By so doing, individuals demonstrate their commitment to establishing friendships and relationships in a spirit of neighborliness and openness.

Dialogue of Action: Working Together for Common Good

Dialogue of action or works entails collaboration with other religious groups in humanitarianism directed towards human liberation and advancement. The RCC's interreligious dialogue was more pronounced in a *dialogue of action* or works. This was evident due to three major factors. First, the church had structures endowed with material resources and human capital from a large pool of lay professionals and volunteers. Secondly, the social theology of the RCC both the liberation paradigm and Catholic social teachings created conditions for a *dialogue of action* over human welfare and social development. Third, the local context including social, religious, and political challenges demanded the Church's continuous interreligious engagement.

For the Roman Catholic Church, *dialogue of action* refers to collective and joint activities it undertook with believers of other religions and cultures towards addressing common goals including acts of charity.

In the *dialogue of action*, as Bishop Martin Kivuva observed "Christians and others collaborated for the integral development and liberation of people from unjust conditions that impoverished and render them in a state of hopelessness." Adding his voice, Bishop, Willybard Lagho of Malindi Diocese described dialogue of action as a spiritual commitment where faith communities work together for the betterment of society. In a predominantly Christian but religiously pluralistic society such as Coastal Kenya, it is integral for religious groups to work together for purposes of building social cohesion and establishing a just society. The RCC developed an elaborate pastoral program targeting vulnerable and poor members of society from diverse religious groups and cultures. The RCC's pastoral approach and dialogue practice bridged the gap between prayer and fraternal charity regardless of religious affiliation. The works of charity by the church were in line with Pope Francis' (2020) encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* which reminds humanity to bridge social division through fraternal relations, friendship, and solidarity. Fraternal solidarity occurs when Christians collaborate with "religious others" in responding to the contemporary challenges facing humanity including pandemics such as COVID-19.

The *dialogue of and for action* became more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic as RCC members including priests, sisters/nuns, and laity teamed up with other religious and faith communities in acts of charity. This dialogue with religious others according to Michael promoted a sense of fraternity, leading to a "dialogue of action" In Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, and Taita Taveta, the Church teamed up with other religious leaders under the banner of Mombasa Interfaith COVID-19 Committee in distribution and provision of essential materials to vulnerable people including food, sanitizers, face masks and clothes e.t.c. In an interview with the chair and coordinator of this caucus, Sheikh Rishard, he observes that:

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was disruptive to human life and faith communities in Mombasa, it also provided us with an opportunity as religious groups to work together, learn from one another and know each. Our main goal was to promote the life and dignity of the human person. The interfaith group created a sense of community, and we all worked as a team regardless of [our] religious affiliation to help the poor and vulnerable members of society.

The COVID-19 context also shaped the interreligious leadership in Coastal Kenya which was initially domiciled within the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC), the creation of the Mombasa Interfaith COVID-19 Committee shifted how different religious leaders could cooperate and engage in a *dialogue of action* in a multireligious and pluralized society. More importantly, it generated a dynamic and rich vein of interreligious cooperation and added value to the RCC's programs on development and peacebuilding. On one hand, Bishop Tee Nalo of Praise Chapel Mombasa observed that "the interreligious joint activities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that most religions shared similar values of charity to humanity and were motivated by their social theologies to work in the same direction towards fairer, just and more cohesive societies". On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic as Rev. Anyenda of the Baptist Church argued was challenging to interreligious dialogue as some religious groups contested the health protocols outlined by the government.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the RCC through its partners such as Caritas and Agiamondo engaged in charitable activities including its "peace connecting projects" aimed at liberating people from unjust structures of oppression and poverty. The commitment to *dialogue with action* underpinned most of the Church's development cooperation with other religious groups and cultures. By partnering and collaborating with other religions on development matters, the Roman Catholic Church shows the significance of values of solidarity, honesty, and social awareness for interreligious coexistence in harmony and social cohesion. In this regard, the RCC has condemned the killing of elderly persons from the Midzi-Cheda community on claims of witchcraft. According to Fr. Harrison Yaa the brutal murder of the elderly can create interreligious conflict and discord in the community and that there is need to educate people on cultural diversity and respect to the elderly. For this reason, the RCC has opened its door at "Little Sisters Home" for vulnerable elderly people from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Dialogue of Religious Experience: Walking Together in Faith

This is the third form of interreligious dialogue known as a "dialogue of spirituality or religious experience". This type of dialogue provides an opportunity for sharing one's own religious traditions or spiritual experience with the religious other. In many cases, individuals do "share their spiritual riches of experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for God or the Absolute." Furthermore, *dialogue of religious experience* also gives the Roman Catholic Christians the opportunity to offer to the 'religious other' the possibility of experimenting existentially with the values of the Gospel. The *dialogue of religious experiences* emphasized the religious traditions of individuals and the sharing of their corporal and spiritual riches in seeking God.

The *dialogue of religious experience* took place on three levels. First, the RCC's Inter religious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C) organized workshops that provided space for Muslim Imams to share their faith with Christians. This formal sharing and exchanging of religious experiences was enriching as religious prejudices were demystified by both parties in the dialogue. The second level which is closely related to the first one was a comparative study of religious text by both Christians and Muslims. They identified similarities and differences in their religious text. The third level involved spiritual support for the vulnerable through individual and symbolic corporate prayers. During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, different religious groups provided spiritual support to victims through prayers. By performing corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, the Roman Catholic Church like many other religious groups and faith traditions demonstrated dialogue of religious experience.

The fourth and last level entailed visitation of one another's worship place. Roman Catholic Christians visited Kaya's sacred shrines, temples, and several mosques to gain deep spiritual and religious experience. Broadly, this form of interreligious dialogue is challenging as others usually avoid it for fear of being accused of syncretism. The RCC has often faced criticism from other religious groups for forcing their religious experience on others, particularly in Catholic-sponsored schools. In 2015, Bura Girls National School in Mwatate and Eldoro Girls in Taveta, both sponsored by the RCC, suspended 63 Muslim students for failing to attend communal mass. This attracted condemnation from the Council of Imam Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) citing discrimination of Muslim students in education.

To address the conflict, CIPK called for the nomination of a Muslim representative in the Board of Management (BOM) of the schools. In this context, there are agreements that the suspension of the students had to do with internal disciplinary measures rather than religion as the school allows the girls to put on the veil (*hijab*) and attend to their routine prayers in the mosque. But this does not absolve the Roman Catholic Church for failing to promote dialogue in its secondary schools. In 2009, during a conference on Christian-Muslim relations, Archbishop Boniface Lele acknowledged that there were pending questions to be resolved regarding Islamic students in RCC's schools and called for greater cooperation and coordination between Muslims and Christians working in interreligious dialogue. Considering the challenges of proselytization as expressed by Muslims in Catholic schools; and fears of syncretism by Christians engaging other religions, dialogue of religious experiences appears counterproductive as some universalistic religious communities respond defensively, consequently undermining efforts concerning forms of interreligious engagement.

Theological Dialogue: Learning the "Religious Other"

This form of dialogue involved experts from different religious traditions who sought to deepen their understanding and knowledge of other religions. Thus, theological dialogue or dialogue of experts is aimed at exploring, comprehending, and appreciating other religious heritage and spiritual values often by drawing comparisons with one's belief systems and doctrines. The value of engaging in theological exchanges is to learn from each other through exposure to other religious traditions based on respect and mutual understanding. In *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II described this form of dialogue as learning other religious heritage and spiritual values as "the treasures of human wisdom and religion" and "the spiritual riches with which God has endowed the peoples of the world. In this type of dialogue, the partners come to recognize and appreciate each other's spiritual values, cultural categories, and practices and promote communion and fellowship among people. Arguably, scholars have criticized this form of dialogue for being elitist and less democratic compared to other models of interreligious engagement. This study also viewed this form of dialogue as having less impact on nurturing social cohesion and community integration within the grassroots communities due to its top-level approach. Partly because it takes place at the expert level where scholars, academics, religious leaders, and clergy debate on the nature, aspects, direction, and future of interreligious dialogue.

It must not be overlooked that the *dialogue of theological exchange* is also appraised for addressing religious stereotypes and prejudices of the "religious other". According to Bishop Kivuva, "dialogue of theological exchanges is important in the Roman Catholic Church and has created spaces for demystifying the religious "other" and addressing interreligious conflicts and tensions" born of suspicion due to lack of knowledge about other religious traditions and communities. Consequently, the RCC has historically engaged in this form of dialogue through workshops, conferences, and webinars organized by its institutions including Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), the Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA), and Tangaza University College. The latter hosts the largest Institute of Interreligious Dialogue and Islamic Studies (IRDIS) in Africa. The Archdiocese of Mombasa has been seconding its clerics and religious leaders for studies on interreligious dialogue and Islam to Tangaza University College. Furthermore, the IRDIS and its development partner

Agiamondo have been collaborating with the Archdiocese of Mombasa and other churches in social projects aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue, social cohesion, and intercultural understanding in Coastal Kenya.

The RCC has also organized numerous workshops and conferences in partnership with AMECEA and the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) in Africa. At the time of collecting data for this study, the Holy See's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue at *Donum Dei* in Nairobi organized a consultative workshop on 'Christianity in dialogue with Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR)' which was graced by Catholic bishops and clergy, Christians and Muslims from various African countries including officials from the Vatican. In his opening remarks to the gathering, Archbishop Martin Kivuva called for respectful dialogue in order to bridge the division between African Traditional Religions (ATR), Christianity and Islam. For Kivuva religious extremism can lead to disintegration of a nation and underdevelopment. He says:

Today we choose a different path. We choose to listen, learn, and build bridges of understanding between Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion," "Understanding and appreciating our differences paves the way for collaboration on issues of shared concern. Let us move forward with a renewed spirit of cooperation, building bridges of understanding and respect," By fostering dialogue, we can dismantle stereotypes, create a more inclusive society, and work together to address the pressing issue of our time.

In his presentation, Kivuva encouraged dialogue of knowledge where people are acquainted with the principles, history and traditions of diverse religions other than their own. Fr. Nicky Hennity stressed on constructive and openness to dialogue which demands approaching discussions with intellectual humility. In a recent article by Josephine Akan and Anthony Ajah (2022), they questioned the possibility for missionary religions (Christianity and Islam) having an authentic dialogue with ATR. For them, the imperative to convert rooted in the epistemic authority of these two religions hinders productive interreligious dialogue. While this is major problem facing interreligious dialogue, the Roman Catholic Church have often restrained from the desires of conversion of other faiths and has continued with workshops aimed at promoting theological exchanges.

At the Kenyan Coast, the Roman Catholic Church has partnered with CICC and other institutions in creating platforms for theological exchanges. Previously, we discussed how the Church initiated numerous training programs for its members on religious heritage and belief systems of other religions. According to Lilian Japani, the coordinator for Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, "training on other religions was fundamental in building change agents within the Archdiocese of Mombasa". The goal was to build knowledgeable Christians with much awareness of other religious traditions (as well as their), and who were motivated to connect and cooperate with people from other religions in advocacy for justice and development (to take action). The Interreligious Dialogue Commission (IRD-C) provided a space for empowering the clergy and laity to be change agents.

Another important institution that created impulses for *dialogue of theological exchanges* was the CICC, which organized workshops to deliberate on topical issues across different religions. During the Holy month of *Ramadhan*, for example, the IRD-C partnered with CICC to deliberate on the "Tradition and Practice of fasting across Religions and cultures (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Jains and African Religion,". During the conversation, it was observed that fasting was not limited to Islam but cut across all religions. The workshop as noted by Rev. Anyenda, one of the organizers was "intended to enrich individuals' experiences of their respective religions and enable them to make manifest the most fundamental values of their religions". One of the organizer, Gloria Lupoi observed that this was one of the most successful online dialogic workshop. It attracted online audiences who participated through questions and answers.

In dialogue of theological exchange, the Roman Catholic Church avoided a form of dialogue that I may describe as *polemical* dialogue. This is a form of theological exchange where adherents of two or more religions engage in doctrinal debates. Although the assumption in much literature is that interreligious dialogue is usually a constructive engagement among religions, this is disputed by Wandera in his study of polemical street preachers (*Muhadhara*) in Western Kenya. He argues that Christians and Muslims engage in a public doctrinal dialogue primarily to win converts and assert their epistemic authority. The public forum provides an avenue for theological exchanges over doctrinal issues (for example: Is Jesus the Son of God? Was Jesus Crucified? Muhammad in the Qur'an). Similar studies have claimed that polemical preachers undermine interreligious dialogue as they tend to promote the superiority of one religion over another. In her studies, Scharrer observes:

To look at *muhadhara* in this way elucidates two different aspects. On the one hand, what is displayed is a competition in which one can be more successful than the other, not a conflict which is either won or lost. On the other hand, it gives the group organising the meeting the possibility to feel superior to the other and hence strengthen its self-confidence and unity.

The argument by Tabea Scharrer (2022) has been confirmed by some recent studies on interreligious dialogue in Africa. Missionary religions have not overcome the desire to proselytize and convert the religious other which according to Cornille (2013) "is rooted in a sense of epistemic authority that one holds the best version of the truth. For authentic interreligious

dialogue to take place, Chidongo argues that Christianity must embrace intellectual humility, and ‘overcome unacceptable arrogance of religious absoluteness and exclusivism’. This according to Fr. Nicky and Bishop Kivuva requires the church to listen without judgment and attend to the empirical realities of interreligious dialogue in Africa. Indeed such an engagement calls for the Roman Catholic Church to re-invigorate its pastoral program for interreligious dialogue in all its parishes for purposes of building social cohesion.

In summary, I argued that the Roman Catholic Church has modeled four types and forms of dialogue that are interconnected (See Figure 1 above). The forms of dialogue entail in the words of Fr. Nicky Hennity, *“Living, Working, Walking and Learning”* together. The dialogue of life comprises all four components as it embodies the living experiences of people in society. This involves constructing positive relationships with people from other religious heritage at home, workplaces, schools, and the community as a whole. In addition, dialogues *of* life and *of* action are more effective when informed by religious experiences and theological basis. This as Fr. Nicky asserted makes those engaged in dialogue make informed decisions that can facilitate spiritual and social development. In addition, knowing other religions through theological knowledge protects RCC Christians from the dangers of relativism and syncretism”. Thus, theological exchanges at all levels of religious experience can enlighten interreligious experiences and facilitate social cohesion. More importantly, this thesis maintains that interreligious exchanges (within a frame of ideas such as dialogue, hospitality, and respect) help to create a dialogical context relevant for addressing contemporary concerns - economic, social, political, cultural and ecological among other challenges facing Kenya. The next sub-section analyses some of the challenges that hinder RCC’s interreligious dialogue initiatives in Coastal Kenya.

Barriers and Challenges to Interreligious Dialogue

This session sampled the views of the respondents as captured in the 100 questionnaires distributed across the Archdiocese of Mombasa. The respondents appreciated that dialogue helped members of different religions access reservoirs of meanings and practices that enriched their understanding, interpretations, and motivations of their faith as well as others, but championing interreligious dialogue was fraught with many challenges and barriers that hindered its empirical practice among religious communities. The participants' responses are tabulated below.

Table 1. Problems Facing Interreligious Dialogue Programs

Statement/Indicators	SA	A	UND	D	SD
Inadequate awareness	80	16		4	
Political interference	64	20	6	10	
Lack of institutional goodwill	90	6		2	2
Extremism/fundamentalism	88	12	-	-	-
Leadership challenges related to trust and suspicion	62	34	1	3	-
Doctrinal differences	72	15	3	4	6
Poor coordination of interreligious activities	73	10	1	2	14
Inadequate funds for interreligious dialogue	68	23	2	7	-
Cultural differences	78	13	-	4	5
Gender Issues	57	24	3	6	10
Interreligious wars/conflicts	78	14	-	4	4
Historical and identity conflicts	86	12	1	-	1
Proselytizing, or attempting to convert others	52	40	2	6	-

The respondents agreed that extremism was a major challenge to interreligious dialogue (IRD). The majority (87%) argues that doctrinal differences affect interreligious dialogue. Others cited lack of focus by interfaith actors (96%) and political differences (84%). However, lack of good will (100%). The discussion that follows is based on triangulated data from

quantitative survey and interviews with other respondents. Thus, some of the challenges were not captured by the questionnaire but were reported by the interviewees. The challenges and barriers to IRD were categorized broadly as social and religious factors, historical and political, economic, institutional barriers, recurrent conflicts, inadequate media support, environmental challenges, ineffective dialogue models and lack of dialogue evaluation mechanism.

Social and religious factors impacted on horizontal dimension of social cohesion. The majority of respondents (87%) argues that doctrinal differences affected interreligious dialogue (IRD). Thus, the findings of this study confirms those of Okechukwu (2024) that theological fundamentalism contributed to conflicts and served as a barrier to interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. In this study, doctrinal and theological disparities emanated from contrasting interpretations of scriptures, differences in religious rituals and practices, and diverse understandings of core theological concepts such as the nature of God, salvation, and the afterlife. The study observed that encouraging open and respectful discussions on doctrinal differences, promoting interfaith education and literacy, and fostering a spirit of tolerance and acceptance were essential steps towards bridging the theological divides that exist between religious communities. Other social and religious factors cited included proselytization desires through comparative preaching, radicalization and religious extremism, gender inequality, inadequate education and awareness on ongoing IRD programs and lack of trust and suspicion among religions.

Historical and political factors also had a negative impact on RCC's IRD. The historical legacies of religious and political conflict were identified as a challenge to building a dialogic community and promoting social cohesion. Also socio-economic disparities contributed to ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts in Coastal Kenya. Economic marginalization and deprivation exacerbated social grievances and resentment among communities, fueling interreligious and ethnic divisions in competition for scarce resources. Indeed, this study argued that recurrent conflicts were brought about by stiff competition over limited resources. The study also established that institutional barriers impacted interreligious initiatives. The main institutional problems included: lack of good will, inadequate funds for interreligious initiatives, poor coordination of interreligious activities, and limited institutional framework on IRD making them more vulnerable to external interference and lack of continuity. Measuring the IRD processes and outcome was problematic due to ineffective dialogue models as well as lack of assessment and evaluation tool. The study came up with strategies for addressing some of the challenges but acknowledged that interreligious dialogue (IRD) was complex. There was urgent to revamp IRD structures both at the local (parish level) and national levels. In addition to involving more youths and women into IRD processes and programs, there was need to develop evaluation tools and frameworks for IRD outcomes. Lastly, the study called for regulation of comparative preaching and particularly online programs.

Conclusion

The article has observed that, as an elementary dimension of mission, interreligious dialogue was an integral part of the mission of the Roman Catholic Church. Consequentially, RCC's engagement in social development and partnerships with other non-Christian religions in Coastal Kenya was not mere political actions but an important expression of Christian faith and mission as expressed in *Dialogue and Proclamation*. The Church adopted the four models of interreligious dialogue which were interconnected. In *dialogue of life*, the RCC encouraged its members to build mutual relationships and understanding with people of other religious heritage. The church also promoted *dialogue of action or cooperation* through social development and interfaith connecting projects such as water wells and COVID-19 charity activities. Moreover, the interreligious initiatives of the Roman Catholic Church were not limited to challenges such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their interreligious encounters were normalized and mainstreamed across the religious landscape. Also, the RCC promoted *dialogue of theological exchange* by creating spaces that were enabling, participatory, inclusive, and liberating to Christians and non-Christian religious communities. The study appreciated that dialogue helped members of different religions to access reservoirs of meanings and practices that enriched their understanding, interpretations, and motivations of their faith as well as others, but championing interreligious dialogue (IRD) was fraught with many challenges and barriers that hindered its empirical practice among religious communities. Thus, there emerged a discrepancy between dialogue theories and their pastoral practical application in the field. The study established that social and religious factors, historical and political, economic, institutional barriers, recurrent conflicts, inadequate media support, environmental challenges, ineffective dialogue models and lack of dialogue evaluation mechanism served as obstacles to IRD in Coastal Kenya. Broadly, we can conclude that the interreligious model adopted by the Roman Catholic Church was; *informational* (learning about other religious heritage, basic beliefs, and fundamental teachings); *confessional* (permitting its members to define their understanding of their own faith and those of diverse belief systems of

other religions); *experiential* (engaging other people on their religious traditions, rituals and belief systems); *relational* (developing relationships and friendships beyond the dialogue business) and *practical* (cooperating with other faith traditions in advocacy for social justice and development). Thus, the RCC has demonstrated its value as a major facilitator, convener, innovator, and creator of spaces for interfaith dialogue as well as a service provider and advocate for peaceful co-existence and social cohesion in Kenya.

References

- Akah, J.N. & Ajah, A.C., (2022), 'Interreligious dialogue as a myth', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7706.
- Anyenda, S. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 5th February, 2024 at CICC offices, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.
- Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue*, New York: Routledge.
- Boyo, B. (2005). *The Role of the church in the Social and Political Issues Affecting the Kenyan Context: A case study of the theology of African Inland Church*. PhD Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, USA.
- Brown, M. J. & Zahar, M. J. (2015). Social cohesion as peacebuilding in the Central African Republic and beyond, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 10(1), 10-24.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.
- Chidongo, T-M., (2023), 'Towards developing an atmospheric space for inter-religious dialogue in Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(2) HTS [accessed May 12 2024].
- Cornille, C. 2013, 'Conditions for inter-religious dialogue' in C. Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to inter-religious dialogue*, pp. 20–33, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex
- Dialogue and Mission (1984) nos. 29, 31, 33, 35, pp. 938-940.
- Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Document of Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, https://w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html. (1991:42).
- Dragolov, G., Ignacz, Z. S., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., Boehnke, K. & Unzicker, K. (2016). *Social Cohesion in the Western world. What holds societies together: Insights from the social cohesion radar*. Springer.
- Elfversson, E. (2019) Patterns and Drivers of Communal Conflict in Kenya In: Ratuva, Steven (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fitzgerald, M.L & Borelli, J. (2006). *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Francis II. (2020). *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Vatican. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html (Accessed on 08 April 2024).
- Gathogo, J. (2008). "Some expressions of african hospitality today," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics*, 99(2008), pp.275-287. <https://doi.org/10.7833/99-0-669>
- Githigaro, J.M (2012) "Faith-Based Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the National Council of Churches of Kenya," *Peace and Conflict Studies: Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 4*.
- Heidegger, M (1962). *Being and Time*, Trans by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, 1st ed, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford OX4 1JF.
- Hennity, N. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 3rd February, 2024 at St. Patrick, Bangladesh, Mombasa: Kenya.

https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/health/coast/article/2001482947/church-reveals-how-tens-of-elders-are-hunted-and-killed#google_vignette [Accessed on 20th March 2024].

Japani, L (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 5th February, 2024 at CJPC offices, Cathedral, Mombasa: Kenya.

Kasomo, D. & Napoo, N.G. (2013). The Relationship between Church and State. *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 3(2), 9-18.

Kivuva, M. (2024) KENYA: Building Bridges Between Christians, Muslims and African Traditional Religion Calls for Respectful Dialogue, Conference speech 9th April 2024. [Accessed on June 20th 2024].

Kivuva, M. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 7th February, 2024 at his home, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.

Lele, B. (2009). Address at conference on Islamic-Christian relations in Africa, held in Heythrop, Great Britain. *Agenzia Fides* 3/11/2009 [Accessed on 12 April, 2024].

Lupoi, G. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 5th February, 2024 at CICC offices, Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.

Marcus, B. (1996). *A Wider Vision: A History of the World Congress of Faiths 1936-1996* (Oxford: One World).

Mendes-Flohr, P. (2014). "Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger in Dialogue." *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2014, pp. 2–25. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/673540. Accessed 22 Dec. 2024.

Mitchell, D. (2016). Pope Francis' New Interreligious Dialogue of Action. *The Interfaith Observer*. Available online: <http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2016/1/27/pope-fanciss-new-interreligious-dialogue-of-action.html> (Accessed on 15 May 2024).

Mongare, T & Nandi, J.O. (2022). Religion and Peace-building Paradigm in Kenya Merit Research Journal of Education and Review (ISSN: 2350-2282) Vol. 10(6) pp. 055-062.

Nalo, T. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 6th February, 2024 at Praise Chapel, Mombasa: Kenya.

NCIC (2014). 'The Status of Social Cohesion in Kenya' https://cohesion.go.ke/images/docs/Cohesion_Index_Status_of_Social_Cohesion_in_Kenya.pdf [Accessed on 20th July 2023].

Ngozi, A.J (2018). Religion And Ethnicity: The Need For National Integration In Nigeria, *African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2018, p. 12-23.

Nostra Aetate (1965). "Vatican Council II Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians." NA, 2. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html [Accessed on 6 Feb.2024].

Nwachukwu, F.O. (2024), Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria: Problems and Necessities. *Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Studies* 4(1), 21-30.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. (1991). Dialogue and Proclamation. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (Accessed on 15 May 2024).

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches. (2020). Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action during COVID-19 and Beyond. Pp, 4-5 Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ServingWoundedWorld.pdf> (Accessed on 15 May 2024).

Press, R.M. (2004). *Establishing a Culture of Resistance: The Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy in Authoritarian Kenya 1987-2002*. PhD Thesis, University of Florida.

Scharrer, T. (2022) Creating an atmosphere of intellectual superiority: Islamic missionary work in Kenya as staged competition in a climate of religious diversity, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 37:2, 203-222.

Sintang, S., Baharuddin, A. & Khambali, K.M., (2012) 'Dialogue of life and its significance in inter-religious relation in Malaysia', *International Journal of Islamic Thoughts* 2, 70–80. [accessed May 12 2024].

Shah, H (2024). *Digital recording*, interview by the author on February 9th February, 2024 at Nyali, Mombasa: Kenya.

Sourou, J-B. (2014), African traditional religion and the RCC in light of the Synods for Africa: 1994 and 2009. *AFRICAN HUMAN RIGHTS LAW JOURNAL* 14 AHRLJ 142-149.

Taqbir, U (2024). *Digital recording*, interview by the author on February 3rd February, 2024 at Masjid, Saada, Mkomani, Mombasa: Kenya.

The Star Newspaper (06 July 2015) https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2015/July/100575/muslims_want_say_in_church_sponsored_schools.aspx [Accessed on 17 April, 2024].

Redemptoris missio, (1991). On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, RM, 42. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ip-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html [Accessed on 8 March 2024].

Reed, R. L. (2018). *African contextual realities*. Langham Publishing.

Rishard, S. (2024). Digital recording, interview by the author on 5th February, 2024 at Sheikh Khalifa Secondary School, Bombolulu, Mombasa: Kenya.

Wandera, J. (2009). Muslims, Christians and State: The Contest for Public Space in Kenya, *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, Issue No. 10, 17-22 p. 20.

Yaa, H. (2024). Digital recording, dialogic interview by the author on 4th February, 2024 at Timbwani Catholic Church, Likoni, Mombasa: Kenya.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge their sources of information, peer reviewers who moved fast enough in reading the research article and offering useful ideas, and the editorial reviews who helped in reshaping this research article.

Ethical Pledge

The researchers confirm that they followed full ethical considerations and acknowledged their sources appropriately without plagiarizing or duplicating other people's works.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships or undue interests that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this research article.

Author(s) Contributions

The researchers acknowledges that they are the sole authors of this research article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this research article are those of the authors and not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors or the Journal itself.

Ethical Considerations Statement

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects. No ethical clearance was needed and/or required for this article.