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Effect of Interfaith Dialogue Programs on Social Cohesion in Multi-Religious
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Effect of Interfaith Dialogue Programs on Social Cohesion in Multi-Religious Communities: Evidence from the Netherlands

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze effect of interfaith dialogue programs on social cohesion in multi-religious communities: evidence from the Netherlands.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Interfaith dialogue programs in the Netherlands have a generally positive but moderate effect on social cohesion in multi-religious communities. Evidence shows that participation in structured dialogue improves trust, reduces prejudice, and strengthens cooperation between religious groups, especially when engagement is continuous and inclusive. However, the impact varies depending on participation intensity, education level, and urban–rural context, with stronger effects among highly engaged and educated participants. Overall, while interfaith dialogue does not eliminate religious tensions, it significantly contributes to improved mutual understanding and gradual strengthening of social cohesion.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Intergroup contact theory, social capital theory & social identity theory may be used to anchor future studies on the effect of interfaith dialogue programs on social cohesion in multi-religious communities: evidence from the Netherlands. Interfaith dialogue program designers should prioritize sustained and structured engagement rather than one-off events, as repeated interaction produces stronger trust outcomes. Policy frameworks in the Netherlands should formally integrate interfaith dialogue into national cohesion and integration strategies, recognizing it as a preventive tool against religious polarization.

Keywords: *Interfaith Dialogue Programs, Social Cohesion, Multi-Religious Communities*

INTRODUCTION

Social cohesion refers to the degree of trust, cooperation, and shared norms that bind people in a society, including trust across groups, civic engagement, and reduced intergroup tensions. In developed economies such as the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, social cohesion is generally supported by strong institutions, although interpersonal trust varies. In the United States, only about 34% of adults say most people can be trusted, showing a long-term decline from earlier decades, which still impacts community cooperation and civic participation (Pew Research Center, 2025). In the United Kingdom, average trust scores improved slightly from 5.0 to 5.4 on a 0–10 scale between 2002 and 2023, indicating moderate but stable cohesion over time (Social Mobility Commission, 2025). In Japan, social cohesion is strongly reinforced through cultural conformity and low crime rates, although generalized interpersonal trust remains comparatively moderate, often below many Western European averages (Pew Research Center, 2020). These trends show that developed economies maintain functional cohesion despite declining or uneven trust patterns across groups.

A second illustration of social cohesion in developed economies can be seen in community collaboration and reduced religious conflict. In the United States, religious diversity coexists with varying levels of intergroup trust, where some communities report up to 70% trust within their groups, but national trust remains uneven due to polarization (Pew Research Center, 2025). In Japan, religious conflict is extremely low due to cultural homogeneity, which contributes to stable community cooperation and minimal interfaith tensions. In the United Kingdom, although civic participation remains relatively strong, trust in institutions and neighbours has declined in recent years, with reports showing only around 41% trusting neighbours in some surveys (ONS, 2020). Overall, developed economies demonstrate that strong institutions can maintain cohesion even when interpersonal trust and community perceptions fluctuate.

In developing economies, social cohesion is often shaped by inequality, urbanization, and reliance on informal community systems. In India, for example, strong local solidarity exists through village and kinship networks, but generalized trust across strangers remains relatively low compared to developed economies. In Brazil, studies show that interpersonal trust levels are often below 30%, reflecting concerns about crime, inequality, and institutional weaknesses that reduce cross-group cooperation (OECD, 2024). Despite these challenges, community-based organizations and informal support systems remain important in maintaining cooperation and daily survival. Religious and ethnic diversity sometimes creates tension, but local-level cooperation often compensates for weak national trust systems.

A second example is Indonesia and India, where social cohesion is maintained through cultural traditions of mutual assistance despite economic and demographic pressures. In Indonesia, the concept of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) strengthens community bonding and collective action even when national trust levels are moderate. In India, rural areas tend to show stronger cohesion than urban centers due to tighter social networks and shared cultural norms. However, rapid urbanization and inequality continue to weaken generalized trust across broader populations. These patterns suggest that developing economies rely heavily on informal structures rather than institutional trust to sustain cohesion (OECD, 2024).

In sub-Saharan Africa, social cohesion is strongly influenced by ethnic diversity, economic inequality, and the strength of community-based survival systems. In Kenya, trust levels vary by region, but rural communities often demonstrate stronger cohesion due to kinship ties and shared economic activities. In Nigeria, generalized trust is relatively low compared to global averages, yet strong religious and family networks provide essential social support systems that maintain cooperation in daily life (OECD, 2024). Religious coexistence is generally high, although localized intercommunal conflicts occasionally disrupt cohesion. Despite these challenges, informal networks remain the backbone of social stability across many communities.

A second example can be seen in South Africa and Ghana, where historical and political contexts strongly influence cohesion outcomes. In South Africa, inequality and historical segregation have reduced generalized trust, although civic engagement and community activism remain strong in many townships. Ghana, on the other hand, shows relatively higher social trust in the region, supported by political stability and active community organizations. Across sub-Saharan Africa, religious conflict is usually localized rather than national, and community collaboration plays a central role in resilience. Overall, while measured trust is lower than in developed economies, strong informal systems sustain functional social cohesion (OECD, 2024).

Interfaith dialogue participation can be conceptually understood through four key dimensions: attendance, frequency, depth of engagement, and continuity of participation. Attendance refers to physical or virtual presence in interfaith meetings or forums, which creates initial exposure to diverse religious groups. Frequency captures how often individuals participate in such dialogue activities, shaping the consistency of intergroup contact over time. Depth of engagement reflects the extent to which participants move beyond superficial interaction into meaningful discussion, emotional exchange, and problem-solving around shared community issues. Continuity of participation refers to sustained involvement over time, which strengthens trust formation and reduces intergroup bias (McKenna, 2018; Verkuyten, 2020).

These four dimensions of participation are strongly linked to social cohesion outcomes, particularly trust among religious groups, community collaboration, and reduction of religious conflict. High attendance and frequent engagement increase opportunities for intergroup contact, which reduces prejudice and strengthens mutual understanding across religious divides. Deep engagement fosters empathy and shared identity, which improves cooperation in community initiatives and collective problem-solving. Sustained participation (continuity) reinforces bridging social capital, leading to more stable intergroup trust and reduced likelihood of religious tensions. Empirical evidence shows that structured and repeated interfaith contact significantly improves cohesion outcomes in diverse societies (McKenna, 2018; OECD, 2020).

Problem Statement

In increasingly multi-religious societies, social cohesion has become a critical indicator of peaceful coexistence, trust, and intergroup cooperation. However, in many European contexts, including the Netherlands, rising religious diversity, migration, and secularization have contributed to fragmented social relations and weakened intergroup trust (Bokányi, 2026). Although the Netherlands is often ranked high in overall social development, recent studies indicate a gradual decline in network closure and increasing social polarization, suggesting that traditional forms of cohesion are weakening over time (Bokányi, 2026). At the same time, interfaith dialogue programs

have been introduced by government, religious, and civil society actors as a deliberate strategy to enhance mutual understanding among Christian, Muslim, and secular communities. Despite these interventions, there is limited empirical clarity on whether participation in interfaith dialogue meaningfully improves trust, reduces religious tensions, and strengthens everyday community collaboration.

Existing evidence suggests that interfaith dialogue initiatives can foster empathy, reduce prejudice, and promote peaceful coexistence through structured engagement between religious groups (Neya, 2025). In the Netherlands, pilot programs such as interfaith youth dialogue initiatives highlight potential improvements in trust and belonging, yet these outcomes remain context-specific and not widely generalized across communities (Kerk in Actie, 2026). Furthermore, participation levels in such programs vary significantly in terms of attendance, frequency, and depth of engagement, raising questions about which dimensions of participation most strongly influence social cohesion outcomes. Without clear empirical assessment, policymakers and practitioners lack sufficient evidence to determine whether interfaith dialogue programs are a sustainable mechanism for addressing religious polarization and strengthening social cohesion. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the effect of interfaith dialogue participation on social cohesion in multi-religious communities in the Netherlands.

Theoretical Review

Intergroup Contact Theory

This theory argues that structured interaction between members of different groups reduces prejudice and improves relations when conditions such as equal status, cooperation, and institutional support are present. It was originally developed by Gordon Allport (1954), but remains widely applied and refined in modern intergroup relations research. The main idea is that positive, repeated contact reduces stereotypes and builds mutual understanding. It is highly relevant because interfaith dialogue programs are structured forms of intergroup contact aimed at improving religious relations. Recent research confirms that intergroup contact significantly improves trust and cohesion by reducing perceived threat and increasing cooperation (McKenna, 2018).

Social Capital Theory

This theory focuses on networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that enable communities to function effectively. It was pioneered by Robert Putnam (2000), who emphasized that bridging social capital (connections across groups) is essential for cohesive societies. The core theme is that stronger cross-group relationships increase trust and civic participation. It is relevant because interfaith dialogue programs build bridging social capital between religious communities. Recent studies show that cross-group interactions significantly increase community trust and civic cooperation in diverse societies (OECD, 2020–2023 synthesis reports).

Social Identity Theory

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), this theory explains how individuals derive identity from group membership, which can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group bias. The main idea is that stronger group identity can either create division or, when reframed, support

inclusive identities. It is relevant because interfaith dialogue helps reframe rigid religious identities into more inclusive “shared community” identities. Recent evidence shows that identity-based interventions in diverse societies improve intergroup attitudes and reduce polarization when common identity is emphasized (Verkuyten, 2020).

Empirical Review

Versantvoort (2023) examined the relationship between religiosity, interfaith dialogue participation, and social cohesion in the Netherlands. The purpose of the study was to determine whether religious engagement contributes to social trust in a highly secular and diverse society. The study used a large-scale quantitative survey design involving more than 5,000 respondents across Dutch municipalities. Data were analyzed using regression modeling to assess the relationship between interfaith participation and social trust indicators. The findings showed a weak but positive association between interfaith dialogue participation and generalized trust. However, the effect varied depending on education level and urban versus rural residence. Individuals with higher education showed stronger cohesion outcomes from dialogue participation. The study also found that secular individuals were less likely to participate in interfaith programs. Despite this, participation improved attitudes toward religious minorities. The study concluded that interfaith dialogue has potential to enhance bridging social capital. It recommended expanding inclusive interfaith platforms in urban areas. It also suggested integrating dialogue into civic education programs. Policy implications emphasized the need for institutional support. The study used secondary survey datasets from Dutch social cohesion monitors.

Van Assche (2023) investigated how perceived religious diversity and segregation influence social cohesion in Dutch society. The purpose was to examine whether structured interfaith interaction reduces social withdrawal and distrust. The study used multilevel modeling on longitudinal survey data from Dutch neighborhoods. A sample of over 3,000 respondents was analyzed. The methodology combined perception-based surveys with neighborhood-level demographic data. Findings showed that higher perceived diversity alone reduced cohesion unless accompanied by structured interaction. However, interfaith dialogue programs significantly reduced perceived threat between groups. The study also found that repeated exposure to intergroup dialogue improved trust consistency over time. Communities with active interfaith initiatives reported higher civic cooperation. The authors noted that segregation without dialogue increases polarization. They recommended increasing structured interfaith programs in mixed neighborhoods. They also suggested policy-driven community engagement frameworks. The study emphasized the importance of repeated rather than one-off interactions. It concluded that interfaith dialogue is a stabilizing factor in diverse Dutch communities.

Visser (2024) conducted a systematic review of interfaith dialogue initiatives across Europe, including the Netherlands. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of dialogue programs on social cohesion outcomes. The methodology involved qualitative synthesis of 40 peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2023. The review applied thematic analysis to identify common outcomes. Findings indicated that interfaith programs consistently improved empathy and mutual understanding. However, the strength of impact depended on program duration and depth of engagement. Short-term dialogue events showed limited long-term cohesion effects. Long-term structured programs produced stronger trust and collaboration outcomes. The study also found that youth-focused programs were more effective in reducing prejudice. It

recommended shifting from symbolic dialogue events to continuous engagement models. It emphasized integrating interfaith dialogue into school curricula. The authors recommended standardized evaluation frameworks for programs. They also suggested EU-level funding for sustained interfaith initiatives. The study concluded that program design quality determines cohesion outcomes.

Dukes and Musterd (2021) examined interfaith dialogue programs in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The purpose was to assess how urban interfaith initiatives influence neighborhood-level cohesion. The study used a mixed-methods design combining interviews, surveys, and observational data. A sample of 600 residents and 25 community leaders participated. Findings showed that interfaith dialogue improved neighborhood cooperation and reduced perceived religious tension. Residents involved in dialogue programs reported higher trust in neighbors. The study also found that informal dialogue spaces were more effective than formal institutional meetings. However, participation rates remained uneven across demographic groups. Younger participants were more engaged than older residents. The study highlighted that socioeconomic inequality affected participation levels. It recommended decentralizing interfaith programs to community centers. It also suggested increasing funding for grassroots initiatives. The authors emphasized culturally sensitive facilitation of dialogue sessions. They concluded that local-level interfaith engagement strengthens urban cohesion significantly.

Verkuyten (2023) studied how identity-framing in interfaith dialogue influences cohesion in European societies, including the Netherlands. The purpose was to test whether inclusive identity narratives improve intergroup relations. The methodology used experimental survey designs with randomized group assignments. Over 2,000 participants were exposed to different dialogue framing conditions. Findings revealed that common identity framing significantly reduced religious bias. Participants exposed to inclusive narratives showed higher willingness to cooperate across religious groups. The study also found that exclusive identity framing increased polarization. Interfaith dialogue was most effective when emphasizing shared national identity. The results showed stronger cohesion effects among younger respondents. The authors recommended integrating identity-framing techniques into interfaith programs. They also suggested training facilitators in inclusive communication strategies. The study highlighted the psychological mechanisms behind cohesion formation. It concluded that identity design is crucial in dialogue effectiveness. The research emphasized scalable policy applications in multicultural societies.

Ziller and Spörlein (2020) analyzed how cross-religious social networks influence social trust in the Netherlands. The purpose was to examine whether intergroup connections improve cohesion. The study used social network analysis and survey data from Dutch households. A sample of 4,000 respondents was included in the dataset. Findings indicated that individuals with diverse religious networks exhibited higher social trust. Interfaith interaction was strongly associated with reduced prejudice. The study also found that network closure within single religious groups reduced cohesion. However, bridging ties across religions improved civic participation. The authors emphasized that structural integration is key to cohesion. They recommended policies promoting mixed-community networks. They also suggested supporting interfaith volunteering programs. The study found stronger effects in urban than rural areas. It concluded that network diversity is a

critical predictor of cohesion. The research highlighted the importance of bridging social capital in multicultural societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps

The reviewed studies collectively show that interfaith dialogue is positively associated with social cohesion, but the conceptual understanding remains incomplete. Versantvoort (2023) and MDPI (2025) focus mainly on general social trust outcomes, without clearly disaggregating the specific dimensions of social cohesion such as trust, collaboration, and conflict reduction as separate constructs. Van Assche (2023) emphasize perceived diversity and segregation, but do not fully explain how different dimensions of dialogue participation (attendance, frequency, depth) interact to produce cohesion outcomes. Similarly, Visser (2024) highlight program effectiveness but do not develop a clear causal model linking dialogue mechanisms to cohesion formation processes. Verkuyten (2023) focus heavily on identity framing, leaving a gap in understanding how identity processes integrate with structural participation in dialogue programs. Overall, there is limited conceptual integration between participation intensity and measurable cohesion outcomes, creating a fragmented theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

Contextual Research Gaps

Contextually, most studies treat interfaith dialogue as a broad intervention without distinguishing between types, formats, and institutional settings of programs. Dukes and Musterd (2021) highlight differences between informal and formal dialogue spaces, but do not fully examine how these variations influence long-term cohesion sustainability. Versantvoort (2023) identifies education and secularism as moderating factors but does not deeply explore how institutional design of dialogue programs shapes participation outcomes. Van Assche (2023) emphasize structured interaction but do not evaluate program quality, facilitator roles, or dialogue depth. Visser (2024) further note that short-term programs are ineffective, yet they do not identify which specific program components drive success. Across studies, there is also limited focus on religious diversity management strategies within program design, leaving a contextual gap in understanding operational effectiveness.

Geographical Research Gaps

Geographically, most empirical evidence is concentrated in urban Dutch contexts or aggregated national datasets, leaving important regional disparities underexplored. Versantvoort (2023) uses national survey data but does not provide localized analysis of interfaith dialogue effectiveness across different Dutch provinces. Dukes and Musterd (2021) focus only on Amsterdam and

Rotterdam, meaning rural and semi-urban areas remain underrepresented. Van Assche et al. (2023) acknowledge urban–rural differences but do not systematically compare cohesion outcomes across these settings. Additionally, MDPI (2025) relies on national longitudinal data, which masks micro-level community variations in interfaith engagement. There is also limited comparative analysis between the Netherlands and other similarly diverse European contexts, which restricts cross-national understanding. Therefore, a clear geographical gap exists in understanding how interfaith dialogue operates differently across urban, suburban, and rural multi-religious communities in the Netherlands.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, interfaith dialogue programs play a significant role in strengthening social cohesion within multi-religious communities in the Netherlands by fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual understanding among diverse religious groups. The reviewed literature consistently shows that structured interfaith engagement contributes positively to bridging social capital, although the magnitude of impact varies depending on factors such as participation intensity, program design, and socio-demographic characteristics. Evidence from Dutch studies indicates that sustained and meaningful dialogue rather than occasional or symbolic interaction produces stronger outcomes in reducing prejudice and enhancing civic cooperation. However, the effectiveness of these programs is moderated by challenges such as uneven participation between secular and religious groups, urban–rural disparities, and varying levels of institutional support. Overall, while interfaith dialogue is not a standalone solution to social fragmentation, it remains a vital policy and community tool for promoting inclusive identities and long-term social cohesion in the Netherlands' increasingly diverse society.

Recommendations

Theory

Interfaith dialogue research should strengthen Intergroup Contact Theory by specifying how different dimensions of participation (attendance, frequency, and depth of engagement) independently and jointly influence social cohesion outcomes such as trust and reduced prejudice. Future studies should integrate Social Capital Theory by distinguishing between bonding and bridging social capital created through interfaith programs, particularly in secular societies like the Netherlands. Additionally, Social Identity Theory should be expanded to explain how interfaith dialogue transforms rigid religious identities into inclusive superordinate identities that support national cohesion. Researchers are encouraged to develop a comprehensive integrated model that links participation intensity, identity transformation, and trust-building mechanisms. This will improve explanatory power and reduce fragmentation in existing theoretical approaches.

Practice

Interfaith dialogue program designers should prioritize sustained and structured engagement rather than one-off events, as repeated interaction produces stronger trust outcomes. Facilitators should be trained to promote deep dialogue practices, including storytelling, conflict mediation, and shared problem-solving, to move beyond superficial discussions. Programs should also intentionally increase participation among secular and low-engagement groups, who are often

underrepresented in dialogue activities. Community-based interfaith platforms should be localized in both urban and rural Dutch settings to ensure inclusive participation and reduce geographical imbalance. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation systems should be strengthened to measure real changes in trust, cooperation, and intergroup relations over time.

Policy

Policy frameworks in the Netherlands should formally integrate interfaith dialogue into national cohesion and integration strategies, recognizing it as a preventive tool against religious polarization. Government and local authorities should provide sustainable funding mechanisms to support long-term interfaith initiatives rather than short-term projects. Policies should also encourage institutional partnerships between schools, religious institutions, and civil society organizations to embed dialogue into everyday civic life. Special attention should be given to addressing urban–rural disparities by ensuring equitable distribution of interfaith programs across regions. Finally, policymakers should develop standardized national indicators for social cohesion that explicitly include interfaith participation as a measurable determinant of societal harmony.

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