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*Giving Peace a Chance: Workshops for Interfaith Harmony*  
**Pakistan**

### **Background & Reason:**

Sindh, being a province of Southern Pakistan, has always been the hub of religious diversity and tolerance. For a long time, Sindh remained immune to the growing extremism in Pakistan. However, in the last few years, there have been increasing numbers of extremist events including forceful conversions of Hindu girls to Islam, burnings of Hindu temples, false accusations of blasphemy on Christian families, which has led to the self-exile of the persecuted minority groups to other countries. One of the main reasons for this religious extremism is the emergence of madrassahs (Islamic religious schools) in increasing numbers in Sindh. The sermons and lectures inside these madrassahs emphasize the differences among people on the basis of religion. This leads young teens to develop hatred towards one another and hold enmity against the rest of the world.

I want to address this rising extremism in the city of Umerkot in the Sindh province of Pakistan. Although a largely Hindu-populated city in the Sindh region, Umerkot has seen a tremendous rise in religious extremism towards the Hindu community. The neighborhoods are segregating. There are separate schools for Hindu and Muslim children. The things children see and learn have taken a toll on them so much so that the Muslim children and Hindu children play in different groups, in different areas. A sense of false pride, ethnocentrism, and intolerance towards other religions is being instilled in them through fabricated historical lies. An example of this is 10 year old Asad who I saw this past summer. The first time I met him, I saw him playing with his friends Raj, Kamlesh, and Abdullah. Last year when I asked about his friends, he said: "I am not friends with Kamlesh and Raj anymore. They are Hindus...they are bad people. Allah will send me to Hell if I play with them." Little 11 year old Sabeeha's response to not being friends with her Hindu friend Neha anymore was: "She does not say Salaam. She is a Hindu. Allah didn't like her so He made her a Hindu. The only people Allah loves are Muslims. If I play with Neha, Allah will stop liking me." These responses left me absolutely astounded, but I realized that their words are a result of what they see and learn. It is the indoctrination of the idea that Muslims are better than Hindus and Christians that has led to intolerance, bigotry, and extremism. Hatred is easily spread and these children are falling victim to it every day. With this project, I want to give them a chance to learn love, peace, and interfaith harmony.

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The project is comprised of three parts.

#### **PART ONE:**

Design booklets consisting of the passages from the Koran, Bible, and Geeta emphasizing peace and love for all. These booklets will be used during the workshops and will have poems of secular minds and progressive writers of Sindh such as Amar Jalil, Noor-ul-Huda Shah and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. The books will also have a section for activities, including case studies and scenarios that spark discussion and critical-thinking. There will be a selection of 70 middle school children between the ages of 11-14 from Muslim and Hindu schools in April-May through surveys. The students will be divided into two groups of 35 and

the sessions will be divided into morning and evening classes. There will be workshop sessions four days a week conducted by Kapil Dev, a Human Rights Activist; Zulfiqar Ali, a peace fellow; Farwa Khaled, an artist in theatre; and myself. After every session, there will be a case study analysis followed by discussions led by the trainer. The students will also be engaged in fun but meaningful activities such as creative skits and writing.

**Outcomes:**

- Children will develop critical skills and see the similarities in religions and cultures. The sessions will teach them to think for themselves and value people beyond the differences of religions.
- Being exposed to more than one story will open their minds and stop them from internalizing the single story of hatred and discrimination.

**PART TWO:**

A two day conference including the administrators of Muslim and Hindu Schools, parents, influential members of civil society of Umerkot including the Naazim (Mayor) of the city, social activists, and journalists to address the situation of growing prejudice and hatred that is detrimental to the peace of the city. The idea behind engaging the parents is for them to see that education does not only happen inside classrooms, that children learn at and from home just as much as they do in schools. Creating an atmosphere where they can apply the things learned at school will help them engage with the world more confidently.

**Outcomes:**

- The involvement of civil society and journalists will create an external pressure on finding solutions through peaceful negotiation.
- It will help propagate the message of peace, and interfaith harmony among different stakeholders of the society.

**PART THREE:**

Organizing a Festival for Peace, in which several local and indigenous artists will perform. The Festival for Peace intention is to celebrate local artists and a more tolerant Umerkot. The festival will allow the citizens of Umerkot, particularly youth, to showcase their talents by performing skits, reading poems, playing music, and dancing to the local songs. This open act of representation will be a way to educate the masses about ideals of peace and co-existence and reinforce attitudes about non-violence. Arts and entertainment serve the purpose of bringing people together around cultural commonalities. Moreover, given the city's recent history, the festival will be a source of joy, entertainment, and cultural and national pride. In addition, the festival will provide an opportunity to leverage outside partners for the funding of future projects.

**Outcomes:**

- It will revive the Sufi spirit among people. Rekindling the spirit of an old, diverse, and tolerant Sindhi culture.
- It will leave the doors for future Sufi programs open for the people of that town.

**Conclusion**

Through this project I hope to create a ripple effect. These 70 children will be the ambassadors of peace in their communities. This direct investment into preparing these future leaders will be sustainable as they will lead the way forward. Moreover, engaging the local CSOs and district government to open its doors for future peace-building projects. This project can also be replicated in other parts of Sindh. This timely intervention will be beneficial in addressing the problems that are going to aggravate in the future. This project will create a disruption so that this town could never normalize extremism like the rest of the country.