Since September 11th and Huntington’s theory on the clash of civilizations, religions have increasingly been debated in society within a negative and violent framework. A recent Ipsos (2017) study shows that 49 per cent of people questioned in 23 countries across the globe believe that religion does more harm than it does good in the world. Religion is considered as leading to exclusion.

In some regions it has become increasingly difficult to bear witness to faith, and religious freedom is limited. This also affects the quality of interreligious dialogue. At almost all levels, there is a lack of proper and profound knowledge about the ‘other’, together with a lack of sharing of different religious experiences. Yet, paradoxically, the peaceful dialogue between religions has never been so intense. Almost daily, religions make statements about their peaceful intentions and how violence is against their nature and goals.

Unfortunately, the general public only rarely notices this, compared to the attention that is given to the negative narrative. There is no way back from the religious plurality of societies that exist across the globe: yet, if religions do not engage further in this dialogue with each other and with society, we could face a long period of conflict, rather than peaceful cohabitation. In short, in times of divisiveness, rather than contributing to the problem, religions need to be part of the solution.

Porticus strives to contribute to a society in which communities live in social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, and seeks to promote human dignity, social justice and sustainability. A society in which spiritual transformation of ones’ own faith, as well as the establishment of spiritual connections between all religions, occurs through interreligious dialogue. This is a society in which all people of good will cooperate positively together towards the common good, and in which communities engage in religious and societal dialogue in order to find pragmatic ways of living peacefully together across religious differences.
Groups within society often have **little knowledge and understanding of each other** and can be religiously illiterate, including about their own faith. Evidence points towards **polarisation, misinformation, stereotypes, and prejudice**.

Groups who are living in the same neighbourhoods are often **living in segregation**. There are underutilised opportunities for common activities (e.g. sports, music, volunteering) to **bring people together**. In addition, there is untapped **potential for cooperation and collaboration** between groups to address social and environmental issues, at a local as well as policy level. **Stakeholders lack the capacity required to effectively engage in dialogue**.

Most interreligious dialogue activities struggle to engage and **attract 'difficult-to-reach' groups**. As such there is untapped potential to include a much wider audience. Harder-to-reach groups include: youth, women, minority religious groups, agnostics, and non-believers. **Theological inconsistency of the broken unity among Christians**. The lack of unity among Christians is against the message of Jesus and his call to be united rather than divided. This requires ecumenical dialogue. There is a substantial **lack of knowledge about effective interreligious dialogue activities** – and a need to conduct rigorous evaluations to fill the knowledge gap. In some countries, engaging in interreligious dialogue can be **risky** as it can go against interests and viewpoints of powerful groups.

**Our Social Change Goal**

The long term social change goals this portfolio is aiming for are firstly to foster social cohesion in the context of interreligious dialogue – which implies the development of peaceful coexistence of faith and non-faith groups, the freedom to live one's faith, the promotion of religious diversity in society, and the positive cooperation between the different groups. The second goal is the spiritual transformation that comes about through dialogue; meaning that one's own faith is deepened and transformed by dialogue and by establishing spiritual connections between religions, without giving up one's own identity.

**Our Systemic Change Objectives**

**The first systemic change objective is that the interreligious dialogue system adopts effective dialogue activities at all levels (from grass-roots to grass-tops) to improve the quality of relationships between religious groups.**

Practically, this systemic change can become visible in:

- Religious leadership that is open to and engages in effective dialogue activities.
- Community and grass-roots partners that are open to and engage in effective dialogue activities.
- Religious leadership and community and grass-roots partners that initiate and develop effective dialogue activities.
- Increased knowledge and positive appreciation, and decreased misunderstandings and prejudices amongst religious groups.

**The second systemic change objective is that the interreligious dialogue system adopts effective dialogue activities to improve the quality of relationships between religious groups and secular organisations and institutions (e.g. Government at local, regional and national levels; school, hospitals, other agencies and business; media).**

The relationship with non-religious groups is potentially very diverse, and to further define the scope, systemic change in this field can become visible in:

- Platforms that are established in which religious and non-religious groups can effectively engage in dialogue.
- Religious groups that are able to effectively communicate to and with secular organisations and institutions to communicate their vision of the role of religion in society (support for religious diversity).
- Secular institutions which are better informed of the role of religious groups within society.
- Secular institutions that adopt policies and practices that support the expression of religious diversity in society.
- An increase in positive appreciation of religious freedom religious diversity, and a decrease in prejudices and misunderstandings between religious and non-religious groups.
Achieving the systemic change objectives will require a comprehensive approach in terms of actions and activities.

**Outcome A: Implementation of effective dialogue activities across religions and with wider societal actors.**
- Activity 1: The continued implementation of successful activities.
- Activity 2: The modification of existing/or introduction of new activities based on evidence.
- Activity 3: The scaling up of successful activities.

**Outcome B: Developing and disseminating academic knowledge, to train leaders and spread objective information.**
- Activity 1: Disseminating academic and objective information to a broader public.

**Outcome C: Reaching and including difficult-to-reach groups, to include groups who are less willing to participate: e.g. conservatives, anti-religious and extremists or underrepresented groups: e.g. youth, secular groups and women.**
- Activity 1: Research on the drivers of unwillingness or inability to participate in the dialogue, and methodologies to include them.
- Activity 2: Outreach campaigns to attract the attention of hard-to-reach groups.
- Activity 3: Conduct ‘common cause’ – activities with a positive side-effect on relationships and dialogue.

**Outcome D: Enhance the capacity of stakeholders to engage in dialogue (i.e. interreligious dialogue organisations, religious leaders and institutions, government, academia, media, civil society, etc).**
- Activity 1: Capacity building – training in dialogue methodologies, communicative skills, fundraising, and monitoring and evaluation, capacitating religions to participate in dialogue, etc.
- Activity 2: Connecting partners and networks, creating a sector of ‘interreligious dialogue’ that fosters mutual learning.

**Outcome E: Testing and development of effective IRD activities, by experimenting with new activities and formats and by measuring impact.**
- Activity 1: Development of new dialogue activities and formats, e.g. through funding pilots with evaluations.
- Activity 2: Impact measurement and evaluation of activities to assess effectiveness of new and existing dialogue activities. Impact measurement and evaluation can rely on a range of methodologies, depending on the purpose of the evaluation.
- Activity 3: Learning what works by reviewing of existing evidence about dialogue effectiveness through reviews of the existing literature.
Implementation

The Portfolio will focus on the Outcomes and Systemic Change Objectives, considering the Social Change Objectives as longer-term goals where the portfolio aspires to make a contribution to in the long run. The portfolio wishes to focus on testing, experimenting and learning about which dialogue methods are most effective in improving relationships between groups who have mutual misunderstandings and prejudices.

Grants and programmes will in the first years give preference to:

- Experimentation with and evaluation of EIRD methodologies at leadership and community level. Research shows a clear knowledge gap related to effectiveness of interreligious dialogue. This is a crucial step to make in order to ensure that only the most effective methodologies are scaled. Porticus would change the interreligious dialogue field, should knowledge about how to measure interreligious dialogue impact and understanding of the positive effects of interreligious dialogue be created.

- Supporting facilitators and advocates of dialogue methodologies, as this is the group with the biggest potential for scaling. They know the field the best and can help best practices to grow and involve more people.

- Dissemination of theological and academic knowledge, as research shows that a lot of knowledge about religions already exists, but is not effectively shared with groups who have prejudices about each other. Spreading of objective information is key to decrease prejudices and to increase mutual understanding.

- Engagement with the media, as they hugely influence public opinion and are currently reporting very negatively about religions in general and Islam more specifically. By facilitating more objective media reports about religion, general perception could gradually change.

Why Porticus?

With Pope Francis’ call for interreligious dialogue and his engagements in dialogue with many ecumenical, religious and societal leaders, there is a renewed momentum to engage in dialogue. However, there are a limited number of foundations fostering ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Through its regional offices, Porticus can count on a strong network of academic experts and grass-roots organisations to build on, and can play a role in testing interreligious dialogue methodologies and measuring impact on the improvement of relationships between religious groups, but also within broader society.