

The role of interreligious engagement (dialogue and collaboration) in sustaining peace and combatting intolerance and discriminations based on religion: Mapping international initiatives and best practices

Concept Note¹

Engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be crucial policy tools to combat intolerance and discriminations and to strengthen peace building. In the last few years, a new impetus of research and policy has finally been pointing to the positive role that religious leader can play in promoting peace, inclusive societies and sustainable development (see for example Appleby 2015, [World Bank 2015](#), [FoRB & Foreign Policy Initiative](#)). This has led to the creation of new international initiatives and global platform of religious engagement to promote peaceful and inclusive societies in the spirit of SDG 16 like: [The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development \(PaRD\)](#), to harness the positive impact of religion in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance; and the UN led “Fez Process” for religious leaders to prevent incitement to violence (see the recently published [Plan of Action](#)). In general, a more focused consideration of the role of religion in development has started to trickle down throughout the UN system ([UN IATF-FBOs 2016](#)) in the acknowledgment that engaging religious leaders and communities “can promote sustainable development and more effective humanitarian assistance.” ([U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement](#)).

Engaging religious leaders and communities can also help to advance pluralism and human rights, including the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Therefore in combatting intolerance and discriminations based on religion, religious actors are not be seen by policy makers only as either the victims or the perpetrators of violations. They can and must be seen as responsible partners in building a long-term solution to religious intolerance and discriminations and in fostering equality of rights and appreciation for religious pluralism. The important initiatives of the Rabat Plan of Action and the Beirut declaration have been institutionalised in the [UN ‘Faiths for Rights’](#) initiative launched in March 2017. Ultimately, if it is true that all religions are minorities somewhere, it is then not unconceivable to think of majority religions in a particular country as key stake-holders in protecting the freedoms of minority religions with regard to the state.

Beyond PaRD other valuable transnational policy and diplomatic networks have been created focussing on the impact of religion in international politics and on international religious freedom such as the Transatlantic Policy Networks on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD) and the International Contact Group on FoRB (ICGFoRB). There is need for representatives of these networks and initiatives to engaged more in coordination, cooperation or sharing of best practices. This is even more necessary given that despite greater recent recognition that religious actors play a significant role in the development and stability of contemporary societies, there is evidence that religious and interreligious actors are rarely welcome at the leading global policy tables ([WFDD, 2017](#)).

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The new policy strategy of religious engagement aiming at innovative government-religious partnerships requires a new set of skills, capacity and mindset for both governments and religions. There is a need for a new dialogue and mutual learning between secular and religious institutions in the acknowledgement and respect of their different domains, responsibilities and missions but in the realization that collaboration is crucial for the common good. **Continuing this important policy conversation, this policy dialogue will specifically focus on interreligious engagement (dialogue and collaboration) as policy tool. The aim of the policy dialogue is to map and discuss some of the most prominent international initiatives and best practices of the new strategic orientation of using interreligious dialogue and collaboration to sustain peace and combat intolerance and discriminations based on religion.**

This dialogue would build on the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs-ISPI initiative on religions and international relations by gathering together not only scholars of religions and international relations, but also diplomats, policymakers, civil society actors working in the area of religion, as well as religious representatives, movements and associations active particularly in inter-religious dialogue.² It is an exercise carried also in the spirit of the 2018 Italian chairmanship of OSCE in the belief that the challenge of lasting peace and sustainable development cannot be addressed “only from a security point of view but also through the fight against intolerance and discrimination, promoting pluralism, inclusion and inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, which are the foundations of peace and security”.³ It will thematise the opportunity to work further on research and policy documents to concretely flesh out the potential and practical implementation of interreligious dialogue and collaboration as policy tool to sustain peace and combat intolerance and discriminations.

The Policy Dialogue will feature the three following sessions:

1. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration in peace-building
2. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration in combat intolerance and discriminations based on religion and promoting FoRB
3. Interreligious dialogue and collaborations in promoting sustainable development and humanitarian assistance

² For a reflection on this initiative, see Petito, F. and S. Thomas, ‘Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge: Italy as a Special Case of Religious Engagement in Foreign Policy’, *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 40-51 & Ferrara, P. and F. Petito, ‘An Italian Foreign Policy of Religious Engagement: Challenges and Prospects’, *The International Spectator*, 51 no. 1 (2016), 28-43. For last year dialogue on ‘Religious engagement and the refugees crisis’, see [here](#) and F. Petito, M. Collier and M. Mancinelli “[Humanitarian corridors: Safe and Legal Path to Europe](#)”, Policy Brief, University of Sussex in partnership with the Community of Sant’Egidio, Autumn 2017, 1-4.

³ Angelino Alfano Italy’s Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, speech to the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, 11 January 2018.