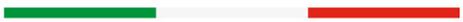


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RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND THE SDGs: A VIEW FROM ROME

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

The international community has begun to recognise religion's positive role in supporting sustainable development and fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, and has increasingly sought to partner with religious communities to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda. This Policy Brief presents a more nuanced understanding of what religious actors can bring to the table as partners in development: capitalizing on Rome as a hub of political-religious dynamism, and expanding the policy conversation on religious engagement and the SDGs.

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RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND THE SDGs: A VIEW FROM ROME

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy Context

The international community has begun to recognise religion's positive role in supporting sustainable development and fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, and has increasingly sought to partner with religious communities to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda. Several foreign and international development ministries like USAID, FCDO (former DFID), BMZ, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), the EU DG International Partnerships (former EuropeAid) have launched pilot projects and funding streams to implement development interventions engaging the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance. While this shift has been helpful, we need to think more strategically about how religious engagement can contribute to better policy to fulfil the wider SDGs agenda, from climate action (SDG13) to quality education (SDG4), from global health (SDG3) to gender equality (SDG5), from building peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG16) to developing new responsible consumption models (SDG12).

The Policy Brief suggests moving beyond a narrow instrumentalist view of religion, to a fuller conception of religious agency in local,



national and world affairs. Religious engagement in foreign and development cooperation policy has the practical capacity to deliver where other forms of engagement fail (for example with civil society or business). More importantly, it can stretch the political imagination and create new practical innovations with which to respond to global policy challenges. This more strategic form of government-religious partnerships can serve as corrective to the limited efficacy of previous compartmentalized and instrumentalist approaches, and a productive way forward in itself. We offer this Policy Brief, which draws on a policy dialogue in Rome on the topic, for the consideration foreign and international development policymakers, and other government officials, as a contribution to the policy debate on how to best achieve the SDGs together.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The world is not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030.** Our current global context is one of emergency. No group can counter these challenges alone, and we do not have the luxury to leave out religion: we need states, international organisations, religious communities, and global civil society to join hands in pursuit of our common objectives.
- **Religion is a crucial partner to achieve the SDGs,** irreplaceable in grassroots delivery and encouraging behavioural change. Religious communities are locally rooted, frontline service providers who stay when others leave; they are globally networked and connected, highlighting crises that are overlooked; religious actors enjoy trust, reach and relationships denied to many governments and NGOs, and are uniquely able to respond to psychological and spiritual needs.
- **To achieve the SDGs, radical solutions are needed, including change to our global economic structures and development models.** Here, religion provides stimulating, complementary paradigms, such as Integral Human Development. Human beings are not just economic units, but people in culture,

family, and community, who possess a sacred human dignity. Development must advance human progress and flourishing, which requires all life to flourish and realising the interconnection of all things. Resonant concepts within religion should be incorporated in pursuit of the SDGs, which must be connected to religious language, indicators, and existing social action by religious actors, to encourage synergy and awareness.

- **Rome has emerged as a hub of transnational network of religious connections.** It hosts the Holy See which holds significant capabilities, actively participates in the global multilateral framework, and is led by one of the most influential global leaders. The connection between religious headquarters in Rome and those at the grassroots globally allows Rome to serve as a focal point for governments to engage religious organisations acting across the world in the spirit of the SDGs agenda.
- **Governments and IOs should embrace strategic religious engagement and partnerships for producing better policy** to fulfil the SDGs: involving regular exchanges with religious actors, across multiple issues, at early stages in designing initiatives and agendas. We need a practical outlook, focussing on what we can concretely achieve together in pursuit of the common good, instead of overstressing differences and falling into inaction. Within foreign affairs and international development departments, structures need to be created to institutionalise religious engagement and retain institutional knowledge.
- **We need a range of broad, inclusive partnerships,** bringing everyone to the table in the spirit of the SDGs agenda. Religious actors work successfully with other civil society activists and on multi-sectoral initiatives. Actors that are both religious *and* secular can serve as useful translators and mediators between each side of the spectrum. In cases of serious disagreements on values and social doctrines, we should consider different forms of partnership and transparent, mature dialogue.



- **Interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be powerful policy tools**, especially in building peaceful and inclusive societies. Joining forces towards shared goals builds bridges across divides and provides encounters that humanise members of different communities. This helps also to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief and combat intolerance and discrimination on the ground. Pluralistic, interreligious identities and communities are also emerging on the ground, where those involved find their original religious identities strengthened. Funding streams should be created to implement interreligious engagement strategies on the ground, which mobilize multi-religious collaboration to build inclusive and peaceful societies (SDG16) and in relation to other SDGs.
- **Religious actors also face challenges** and must not let fear of political involvement prevent them from being courageous and prophetic in calling out injustice, corruption, and inequality. They must practice what they preach: any perceived hypocrisy will leave interventions doomed to failure. Religious organisations must also look outwards: increasing their awareness and willingness to co-operate with those working on the same challenges; avoiding any Eurocentricity; acknowledging female religious contributions; and looking beyond Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, to acknowledge work and wisdom from multiple traditions.
- **Governments need to engage the new forms of global and local religious leaders' social and political activism** in order to amplify the impact of multi-stakeholder approaches to achieving the SDGs. We need a more post-secular network of networks including multiple types of religious connections, including both inter-religious and intra-religious. Here, a network such as PaRD can connect governments and religious actors across the world, by providing a space to build synergies and share best practices.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Changing the Policy Conversation on Religion and Sustainable Development

1. **The world is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.** Progress for development has been reversed, and every country is behind on relevant goals for meeting the SDGs. Nor is this lack of progress simply due to the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Two billion people live in conflict-affected areas, there are currently over 89 million refugees, and world hunger is increasing. Global warming continues apace, and within the lifetime of our youngest generation, parts of our world will be uninhabitable. We need to reflect upon the best course of action, and act urgently, recognising our current global context as a genuine emergency.
2. **When taking on the urgent, complex challenges we face, we do not have the luxury to leave out religion:** a crucial component of the social and political fabrics of societies worldwide, or, simply put, the largest group from civil society. Across the world, religion has always been present tackling social problems and providing key services on the ground; religious actors have proven their ability time and time again to mobilise and support key development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian goals. As one diplomat noted, 'If there's an issue almost anywhere that we are trying to address, there's usually some involvement of religious, or an NGO supported by the church'. Many people's identity is wrapped up in religion, and their attitudes and behaviours are affected by religious views and practices. We cannot achieve the SDGs without acknowledging that, especially given the importance of behavioural and attitudinal change to achieve these goals.
3. **The international development project, as it emerged after WWII, was based on the modernisation thesis and rooted in secular foundations:** assuming all societies would move from a traditional to a modern stage of development and inevitably



secularise. In other words, religion as a key ingredient of traditional society was seen as an obstacle to modernisation and development. Yet in recent years, the international community has begun to recognise the positive role religion can play, and increasingly sought to partner with religious actors of various kinds to achieve the SDGs. Multiple international organisations, development ministries and agencies have launched pilot projects and funding streams to engage with faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance; we have also seen the creation of global platforms such as the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) that aim to link together religious actors and policymakers.

4. However, **we need to move beyond seeing religion only as an instrument to deliver services and strategies decided upon by governments and secular international organisations.** Religious traditions can play a vital transformative role to this policy debate, providing the paradigm shift needed to achieve the SDGs. We need to explore new partnerships to enable a fuller conception of religious agency, facilitating mutual learning and incorporating resonant religious concepts such as integral ecology and integral human development to development initiatives. This more strategic form of religious engagement not only increases capacity to deliver, but can potentially improve the knowledge base for foreign policy, stretch the political imagination, and create new practical innovations with which to respond to global policy challenges.
5. In the words of an African proverb, quoted by a religious leader at our Dialogue: **'when spiders unite their webs, they catch a lion'**. One group cannot address these challenges alone; but when states, international organisations, religious communities, and global civil society join hand in pursuit of common objectives, we achieve better results by acting together. In this context, a group of religious actors, policymakers, diplomats, practitioners and experts met to find ways to unite our webs across the world: exploring

lessons learned from existing development programming and partnerships, what partnership approaches and strategies are needed, and how religious leaders, communities and organisations can build strategies for sustainable peace and development.

6. The setting for this dialogue was Rome, and the choice of location reflected **Rome's growing status as hub of transnational religious communities**, a topic of conversation during the dialogue. Various diplomatic representatives to the Holy See stressed its unique global role. The Holy See is not only a religious organisation but also a state, member of the family of nations, observer at the UN, and a member of UN agencies. It retains significant capacities and human resources, and is led by one of the most recognisable global leaders. It is part of a global conversation on the challenges we face, as highlighted in the SDGs.
7. **The Holy See also serves as focal point to engage the Catholic church and bodies acting across the world.** The shifting demographics of global Catholicism have seen it become increasingly a religion of the global South, and religious groups in Rome represent many at the grassroots: working with those facing poverty and food insecurity, working with women to encourage female empowerment, working in refugee camps and supporting internally displaced persons. The contribution of religious sisters was emphasised, including their frontline service provision, standing with people through civil war, and the work of organisations such as Talitha Kum tackling human trafficking. Diplomats stressed that their posting in Rome allows religious engagement beyond the Catholic church. Rome is becoming a hub for meeting a diverse range of religious actors from across the world, bringing in multiple perspectives that add significantly to the work of diplomatic and development actors.



Religion as Asset and Partner in Sustainable Development: Opportunities and Challenges

8. **Religion is politically ambivalent: it can be part of the problem and the solution to global challenges**, from climate change to growing intolerance, sectarian conflict and human rights violations. When facing global challenges and working towards the SDGs, religion and religious actors have unique qualities that make their contribution irreplaceable. Although there remain perpetual calls for further evidence on religion's contribution to development, humanitarian and peacebuilding interventions, experts present noted that there is a substantial evidence base to this effect, and attention should be redirected to discussing how to deal with the evidence we have.
9. **Religions are both global and local.** In Pope Francis's words, religious actors often 'smell of sheep': they are rooted in their local communities, and spend time with people, encountering and listening to their problems and needs. Yet they are also part of global networks, sharing information and support across continents, and often have reach into higher echelons of political power, both domestically and internationally. Religion remains a ubiquitous presence around the world, meaning that religious organisations remain the largest civil society players.
10. **Religion's local rootedness mean that religious communities are present working on the ground in many contexts** where state presence has disappeared due to violence, corruption, or inefficiency. Policymakers noted that in such cases, crucial services such as education and health can often only be supported by working through religious communities that staff these services. Religious entities are also often the first ones delivering aid in the case of humanitarian crises. And in many conflict scenarios, religious actors stay when international organisations and NGOs leave.

11. **Religion's global presence and networks mean they are inclusive of the problems faced across the world** and can share knowledge and draw attention to dire situations that are overlooked. Participants highlighted the unprecedented drought being experienced in the Horn of Africa, and civil war that had been raging for several years in Cameroon, both which have received limited attention from global media. One religious leader working in a civil war context noted how religious actors can be caught between both sides, recounting their hospitals being attacked by both belligerents as they had provided healthcare for all. Yet in this context, because of the transnational nature of the religious actor involved, news of this attack had spread globally and attracted international condemnation by the next day.
12. **Religion's unique gift is its ability to respond to people's basic psychological and spiritual needs.** It has an ability to touch the hearts of people and speak at the level of conscience and ethics, in a way that is inaccessible to most politicians. Religions contribute to a person's development as both an individual and member of society, and in doing so embody the values of respect for human dignity, mutual responsibility, generosity, and care for the most vulnerable.
13. This provides **religious actors with unique relationships, and often means they enjoy more trust than government agencies.** Religion serves as a powerful driver of collective action, often holding a cultural affinity that is key for the success of interventions, leaving religious actors well-placed to promote outreach and dialogue. The trust held by religious actors often extends past their own communities: they can also enjoy a certain level of trust and respect from political leaders, the wider population, and religious leaders from other traditions. They have significant soft power, and are skilled advocates for global policy priorities, articulating these with a moral force that avoids any charge of national self-interest. Their moral input gives them an ability to persuade political leaders; an ability other national leaders lack. In many conflict scenarios,



they serve as effective mediators; they are uniquely able to speak to the bitterness guiding what people have done and to encourage reconciliation for the sake of their communities and countries.

14. Religion has a particular contribution to make to challenges surrounding bad governance, corruption, and injustice, where it can speak with a clear moral voice. As an Islamic representative suggested **several SDGs cannot be achieved without addressing religious and cultural norms**: for instance, challenges surrounding girl's education cannot be meaningfully addressed without conversations surrounding age of marriage, number of children, and polygamy. Here, states have limited legitimacy, whereas religious actors as trusted individuals and institutions have a central role to play.
15. **Several examples were given of effective recent work carried out by religious actors, including effective partnerships with government actors.** Several participants noted the vital role played by religious organisations during the pandemic in staffing vaccination services and providing religiously based resources to encourage vaccine take-up and tackle disinformation. In the run up to COP26, the Holy See worked with the UK and Italy to craft a joint appeal from faith leaders, calling on political attendees to be ambitious and remember their obligation to the planet. This was supported by year-long online conversations between leaders as they drafted an appeal, resulting in 30 religious leaders coming together to sign a ground-breaking document.
16. Participants also noted challenges facing religious actors. **Religious leaders often force themselves to the margins, fearing involvement in politics, preventing them from talking about justice, corruption, and inequality.** Yet we cannot have human flourishing if human beings continue to suffer from marginalisation and huge relative inequality. Many members of religious communities also oppose certain SDGs, such as rejecting the existence of a climate crisis. Religious leaders therefore need to be courageous and prophetic, and see it as part of their role to speak

out against injustice, inequality and threats to human life, moving forward with their eyes, ears and hearts open.

17. In doing so, we all must practice what we preach. **Coherence is vital for interventions to be successful, and any hypocrisy will leave messaging doomed to failure.** Religious leaders and actors are also human beings and will get caught up in human failings. We therefore need to have humility, avoid turning a blind eye to our own problems, and begin by seeking behavioural change in ourselves. For the moral voice of religious organisations to remain strong, they must strongly address their own failings, and create mechanisms for internal policing and reform on issues such as corruption.
18. This **coherence is also vital for the international community, not only religious organisations, and the perception of double standards has harmed its normative voice.** Many grassroots communities have remained sceptical or dismissive of the SDGs – as well as other global agendas and diplomatic endeavours – because they do not see consistency, solidarity, and integrity in the actions of the international community. We need agreement on core values, and consistent application regardless of the actors involved.
19. **Religious organisations must also beware falling into an insular outlook.** They can be self-centred and self-referential: unaware of those working on common challenges – even within the same religious tradition – and unwilling to work together. Participants cited groups launching similar initiatives on climate change, admitting they had little knowledge of their efforts and had not sought co-operation with them. The importance of contributions from women religious was also highlighted, as was the tendency to overlook their work and focus on male religious leadership. Further, there was recognition of Eurocentricity within religious organisations despite their global reach, which prevents them fully understanding the challenges faced elsewhere and restricts the resonance of messages from the centre. There were concerns about agendas written in the West to be implemented in the East and South, and of expecting 'FBOs' that fit the Western model. Finally,



participants noted tendency to ignore contributions from outside Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Praise for the impact of *Laudato Si'* and of the Document of Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb was therefore tempered: participants called for declarations all religious traditions are party to, and for exploring the wisdom in documents from other religious traditions.

Religious Social Doctrines & the SDGs: Expanding the Dialogue

20. Religion's contribution to achieving the SDGs is varied, including an irreplaceable role in service provision, and unique ability to induce the behavioural change required for many goals. Yet religion's contribution to the SDGs goes beyond achieving goals set by international organisations: **religions provide a distinct, stimulating, complementary paradigm to the SDGs**, that can stretch the political imagination and create new practical innovations to respond to global policy challenges.
21. Religions prioritise human dignity and care for the most vulnerable, and see the world as sacred ground that is entrusted to us. When seeking solutions to global challenges, this means **religions can provide an extra depth and radicality, and be more open than governments and international organisations to the structural problems that need to be overcome to achieve the SDGs**. Participants were clear that the SDGs could not be achieved by simply tweaking existing methods: our economic system is based on discarding people, and much of humanity cannot participate in their economic systems, nor within their nations as they are not citizens. We face stark and growing economic inequality, not just between the global North and global South but within region, countries, and locales, and we lack theoretical alternatives. African countries have been devastated by Covid-19 and its socioeconomic impact, and yet received comparatively limited amounts of international support and assistance compared to those provided for problems faced in European countries. The global challenges we face are in no small part due to unjust socioeconomic structures, and we

cannot meet these challenges without addressing these structures and the question of justice.

22. Perhaps **religion's most important contribution to the SDGs relates to religion's integral, comprehensive nature, and the parallels to the comprehensive nature of the SDGs.** Religion teaches and practices in a way that addresses every dimension of human life, and it is uniquely able to understand the spiritual, which to many is the integral aspect of life on earth. Both religion and the SDGs call for social action that spans all aspects of human life, society and co-existence, and recognise that we live in an interconnected world. Indeed, the SDGs in many ways parallel the existing social action of religious communities: they were described by one participant as 'the theology of the Second Vatican Council in action' and by a religious sister as 'just what we've been doing for decades!' This also highlights that religious communities are not always aware of the SDGs, and the international and development community need further outreach: to identify areas of overlap, and to explore indicators and language for these goals that translates across to the religious world.
23. Within Catholic social teaching, **the conceptual framework of Integral Human Development (IHD) has emerged as particularly resonant approach for achieving the SDGs.** Within an IHD approach, a human being is not just 'homo economicus', not just a consumer and producer. Rather, a human being is a person in culture, family, community, and one with a sacred human dignity. Under IHD, development goes further than economic growth, and centres on advancing human progress and flourishing. IHD also takes us beyond simply 'development' and 'human': it emphasises the interconnection of all things, and that human flourishing is only possible if all life can flourish, making the imminent, drastic loss of biodiversity a central issue for all. This focus on interconnection is vital for the SDGs, and for the success of individual interventions: participants noted disastrous examples such as excessive tree-planting that left areas without water.



24. **Values and conceptual frameworks from other religions also have much to offer the development community.** A Muslim religious leader noted that great scholars within Islam spoke of how every human being could aim to live and act with intention to perfection, to the wholeness of virtues, and universality in every moment and deed. Concepts such as this stress universality, linking the macro and micro, and underscore the importance of the individual human element to international development agendas. The spiritual dimension religions speak to is also central for development: it plays a key role to individual wellbeing; and provides the ethics and value systems underpinning responsible social action, sustainable consumption of resources, and the solidarity and integrity needed to achieve the SDGs. For those living in insecure circumstances, religions also provide important psychological resilience against crime and mental illness, by teaching that dignity and worth is not linked to material circumstances, and that we cannot control the contexts we live in, but can still control our response.
25. **The SDGs must be connected with these values and pursued in a way that makes them representative and practical:** on the basis that a human person is holistic, a member of a family, culture, and language; and treat human dignity as the basis for development work across the board. Religious organisations must take it as their mission to draw on their spiritual strengths to help humanity and lead it to solidarity and peace; in the language of religious participants, they must focus on the primacy of love to humanise our world. We need to find, highlight, and appreciate the common values held within and across religious traditions.
26. Whilst this contribution of religion was widely acknowledged, participants noted that **religion is still often seen as part of the problem, with policymakers often uneasy about religion's political role, in ways that could temper calls for moral intervention.** Similarly, restricting religion's role to one of moral persuasiveness, or calling for sweeping solutions, presents a

dilemma: religious groups with experience speaking within policy world fear they sound irrelevant when focussing on expansive moral arguments. However, other participants noted that there can be no cohesive action of religious organisations without a normative element; and that younger generations see normativity and calls for radical action as vital, ensuring that religions will continue to stay important and relevant in this domain.

Strengthening Religious Engagement & Partnerships for Better Policy to Fulfil the SDGs

27. **Religion is now understood as a potentially important partner for achievement of the SDGs.** Governments have supported platforms like PaRD to help different stakeholders worked together, and state representatives at panel sessions insisted that FBOs have become natural partners of states and international organisations in the field of development co-operation. Participants noted more government funding for religious engagement than had previously been available.
28. **However, participants noted that religious engagement remains unsatisfactory.** There is a lack of resources not only for faith-based civil society initiatives, but even for government departments on religious engagement or Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). Religious engagement has often become too personal within government's departments, a question of personal leadership and enthusiasm that has not been sufficiently institutionalised. Participants characterised religious engagement as a stop-start phenomenon within states and international organizations: progress is made under a brief period of individual leadership, only for the structure to disappear once that individual leaves. Concerns were raised around instrumentalization, noting that politicians have exploited religious actors for political gain, and demonstrated favouritism towards particular religious groups, including funding those who are not credible in their communities. However, it was also acknowledged that instrumentalization works both ways, and that religious leaders have at times taken advantage



of opportunities to extend their influences and resources.

29. Some participants called for more nuanced understanding of **'religion' and 'secular', critiqued for creating an artificial binary and unnecessary suspicion between two sides**. These terms portray people as either deeply immersed and bound together by religious practices, or having no use for religion whatsoever. Yet many people find themselves in the middle of this spectrum, considering themselves both religious and secular; or work for organisation that are officially secular, but have primarily religious and religiously inspired staff. We should engage all groups across the spectrum, while considering speakers in the middle who could be translators, mediators, and able to move between both sides.
30. As an alternative model for religious engagement, we should embrace calls for strategic, postsecular partnerships, ones that offer a fuller concept of agency on the part of religious actors. Policymakers are increasingly keen to hear how to include religious actors in policymaking, enhancing collaboration with them as active players and partner. **Religious voices need to be included at earlier stages, with more regular exchanges between governmental bodies and religious leaders and civil society organisations** on issues where co-operation can lead to better results. Here, governments need to realise that religious actors can speak to issues across the SDGs, rather than only humanitarian provision or religious issues such as FoRB. There is also a growing proliferation of networks to facilitate these exchanges. Networks such as PaRD allow governments instant access to religious actors and provide civil society organisations a space to build synergies, avoid duplications, and share information, best practices, and lessons learned.
31. **Partnerships are not only about funding, but also about respect:** respecting each other's values, and entering into a mutual exchange and sharing of knowledge to enable governments, international bodies, civil society and religious organisations to work together in pursuit of the common good. We need to overcome the mutual

mistrust between religious communities and governments: religious actors do not want to be used and then put back on the shelf when the political priorities change, and governments do not want to be seen as always having a hidden agenda.

32. **Religious literacy for governments and international organisations remains a challenge**, and the sensitivities on dealing with religion remain pronounced. Some participants noted parallels with incorporating gender to development programming, with people often struggling to move beyond their individual beliefs on religion; others noted a continued skill deficit, with governments remaining unclear and uncomfortable on how to work with religious actors. Diplomats and international development officials need to be exposed to religious communities, representatives, and experts in this field, to allow them to understand the religious perspective on the SDGs. Several governments have, however, funded and developed training courses around religious literacy; and returning to the theme on Rome, Ambassadors to the Holy See have often become some of the foremost sources of religious engagement and FoRB expertise within their own ministries of foreign affairs and international development.
33. There is also a parallel challenge of policy literacy for religious actors. Whilst often excellent practitioners, **many religious actors are not well-prepared to engage in policy dialogues with international organisations and states**, and we may need to develop the capacity of religious actors in policy thinking and language to enable fruitful engagement with policymakers. Some policymakers have – however unfairly – suggested religious actors have good connections but are not up to date on the latest thinking in international development. In other cases, solutions proposed by religious actors have been so long-term as to be seen as impractical ('we need to start with kindergarten to tackle corruption'). As noted by a participant, donors and international organizations 'won't give money to organizations, just because they are religious': whilst removing barriers is important, religious actors



need to go beyond calling for more funding and clearly make their case, being thoughtful and methodical in setting out the central issues and solutions.

34. Many participants called for a practical outlook. The focus should be on **what we can concretely do together, being as constructive as possible and building bridges**. If we overstress differences, we may fall into inaction, and should not let perfection become the enemy of the good. Those working with ministries of foreign affairs noted that diplomats are under serious time pressure and need to be equipped with arguments showing the potential of co-operation between states, international organisations, and faith-based organisations: here, academia can play an important role. This pragmatic approach was extended to projects themselves, where small steps are still important: participants cited an ongoing project on recognising women's rights within civil law that may lead to a significant advancement, even if not fully compliant with the highest international standards on women's rights. Calls were made for the international community and religious actors to make pragmatic compromises to reach consensuses on priorities, enabling us to be effective.
35. **Roles for religious actors in partnerships and delivering interventions are varied**. Religious leaders have been educators, long before we had schools or universities, and still serve as important role models. They have a vital role in preventing religious intolerance towards minorities and facilitating dialogue between people with different beliefs, and in spreading societal peace, given that societies are often extremely attached to their own culture, customs, and context. Some cited an important division of roles between religious and policy actors, suggesting religious actors should be responsible primarily for giving moral direction and enlightening hearts and minds, leaving policymakers to implement principles that religious actors proclaim. Here, it was emphasised that whilst capacity building and policy literacy for religious actors could be useful, religious *leaders* should also be left to their own

role, or we risk a confusion of identities: religious leaders do not want to substitute policymakers, policy advisers, and politicians, and we should not assume that theologians make excellent anti-propaganda hate speech advocates. Furthermore, the limit of prophetic acts by religious organisations was also noted: while they are powerful and meaningful, they are often very small-scale, and may not always have a major practical impact.

36. A major theme throughout the policy dialogue was the importance of interreligious approaches. **Our differences and different experiences give us a source of richness, and an opportunity to revolutionise, change ideas, and move forward.** We need inter-religious collaboration, tackling global challenges in a multilateral, broad, inclusive sense, and exploring synergies with other religions. Encounters are central, allowing us (in the religious language used by some participants) to humanise and love the Other without seeking to change them, and find common values whilst retaining their richness and diversity. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration also widen the vistas of religious leaders, avoiding them getting caught up in human failings, and instead returning to the heart of what religions – and the SDGs – are about: helping us become more caring, compassionate, loving, and supporting. Interfaith dialogue has proved a successful tool on ensuring peace and respect for human dignity, and was seen as a key antidote to religious hatred. Diplomats and governmental representatives showed enthusiasm for supporting and working with the global interreligious landscape and for embedding interreligious dialogue and collaboration within foreign policy.
37. Here, **religious organisations acknowledged again the challenge of remaining insular, and failing to communicate and link together.** Some religious organisations have shown hesitancy for providing resources or support for initiatives which they do not lead themselves. There is also a challenge of intra-religious awareness for global religious organisations: the Catholic church may be the world's largest NGO for education, health, and higher education,



yet different aspects of this network do not always communicate and work together. We live in an era of 'filter bubbles', giving us customised information, and religious organisations need to overcome these and reach out more broadly: reflecting upon the ethical basis of their action, and linking with other religions.

38. **Several powerful examples of interfaith collaboration were offered, several which were outside of explicitly interfaith initiatives and institutions.** One Muslim religious leader had attended a Catholic school that ensured he was able to practice his religion; he noted the importance of faith schools including children from other religions, enabling them to develop friendships across religious communities from an early age. A Catholic sister recounted building a health centre and training civilians to deliver health services in a village with an exclusively Muslim population, who chose to name the hospital after St. Francis as he was 'a friend of the Muslims'. A representative from Catholic religious movement – based on healing exclusivity at their roots through techniques based on love as a daily practice – also discussed the unexpected experience of having Muslim members, including families with young children and workers, joining their community while retaining their original religious affiliation. They often remark that membership of this movement 'makes them better Muslims'; showing how these interfaith encounters are leading to emergence of new interreligious identities and communities, which nevertheless help to retain and strengthen their original religious identities.
39. Participants emphasised the **importance of including inter-religious co-operation and collaboration, as well as inter-religious dialogue.** In many cases, joining forces towards a shared goal has proven more effective than dialogue in building relationships across divides. Yet these initiatives do not need to be considered either-or: dialogue often allows people to come together, to then find ways to implement practical, collaborative solutions.
40. Partnerships must also reach out beyond religious actors and

governments. Religion has a vital role to play in achieving the SDGs, but only as a segment: **we need to bring all partners to the table to identify the new approaches and actions needed, including religious leaders, indigenous communities, women, youth, scientists, governmental bodies**; we should also be aware of who we exclude when pursuing religious engagement, given for instance the extensive contribution of women religious within Christianity. We need whole of society approaches with everyone around the table, allowing us to meet the needs of local communities, ensure local ownership of approaches, and build and maintain trust and legitimacy of approaches. Civil society is full of energy and resources, and religious organisations should not focus on the identity of those they work with. One participant remarked about a key grassroots partner providing housing, jobs and training to refugees, 'the man doing this, is he religious? I don't know, I didn't ask.' Other participants also emphasised the importance of cross-sector collaboration surrounding communal violence and vandalism: religious actors were able to denounce violence and vandalism, law enforcement provide effective protect and identify perpetrators, and judicial institutions take appropriate action, sometimes leading to reconciliation between the perpetrator and religious leader at the end. Multilateral, multi-stakeholder approaches are needed that emphasise inclusive methods of engagement, avoiding nurturing suspicion between 'secular' and 'religious' identities; this suspicion remains within human rights advocacy, where religion can still be seen as an impediment to achieving human rights. Participants working in this field emphasised the importance of local knowledge and of finding religious language and concepts – and those that are locally and culturally resonant – to articulate human rights. Here, religious actors play a central role: a more pluralistic approach to the language of human rights allows religious actors to find interpretations within their own sacred texts; contextual theology approaches further allows them to interpret their theological base on the context within which they live and work.



41. **A controversial topic surrounding partnership has been where government or donor support and assistance are made conditional on the values held by religious actors.** Participants stressed that we should respect the sovereignty and autonomy of religions within their domain, particularly regarding questions of theology, and that governments should avoid picking sides and advocating 'religiously moderate' stances. Aid and development conditionality were seen by some participants as particularly counter-productive: people will not give up their religious values because of money, using development support to pressure religious institutions will not lead to social change, and different parts of the world are at very different stages of conversations surrounding issues such as sexual equality. Others however emphasised that LGBTQ+ groups are also an important part of many religious communities, and that inclusion must extend to these groups as well. Here, it was suggested that government actors need to reconsider how they approach religious communities – building relationships and trust, before exploring areas where values may clash – and that a deeper, more mature, and open conversation is needed. Participants also proposed exploring different partnership methods in cases where there are disagreements on social doctrine; otherwise, partnerships will only develop among those with identical goals and approaches, when we need to reach much broader constituencies to achieve the SDGs.

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