

The Relevance of Interreligious Dialogue to Sustainable Development

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New York, USA - “Both UPF and the UN Alliance of Civilizations share the belief that the promotion of intercultural and interfaith dialogue is the path for people and nations to live in peace and security,” stated H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, at the opening of a consultation on the Relevance of Interreligious and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue to the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. He also stated that “All the 17 goals can only be achieved by leaping over the things that divide us to embrace our common and shared cultural heritage.”

Dr. Thomas Walsh, president of the Universal Peace Federation, which organized the March 27, 2015 consultation at the UN headquarters in New York, offered premises for dialogue, including recognition that religious ideas and beliefs play decisive roles in individuals, families and societies; religion provides many valuable social benefits; and although religion can have a dark side, it is largely a force for good. He called upon the UN to enlist religions as partners in the effort to fulfill the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda.



The consultation consisted of three sessions and was opened by quotations from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, read by Dr. Tageldin Hamad, secretary general of UPF and moderator of the first session.

In the first session, the consultation's co-sponsors offered insights into their understanding of the relevance of religions and faith-based organizations to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed for adoption by the UN this September, building on the Millennium Development Goals that UN adopted in the year 2000.



The permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, focused his remarks on the theme in connection with the first and 16th Sustainable Development Goals. He emphasized the eradication of extreme poverty, the first of the 17 goals. “Though primarily inspired by a spiritual and moral mission, religions and faith-based organizations care for the flourishing of the entire human person.” He added: “I believe that fostering the action of religious bodies and the fruitful cooperation among religions is essential to forming and consolidating peaceful, just, accountable and inclusive societies, without which the sustainable development goals cannot be achieved.”



The permanent observer of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation to the United Nations, H.E. Mr. Ufuk Gokcen, expressed appreciation for Pope Francis's moral leadership on the issue of poverty alleviation and said he envisions a role for faith-based organizations in the implementation of all the goals. He called attention to the increasing gap between developed and developing countries, the plight of people living under terror and occupation, and the concerns of refugees and internally displaced people.

In the second session, an expert panel offered insights into the proposed Sustainable Development Goals. The first three speakers offered academic perspectives and raised concerns about what indicators will be adopted to measure progress on these goals, particularly that of addressing corruption.



Dr. Slavomir Redo, senior program advisor for the Academic Council on the United Nations System, Vienna Office, delivered the main address of the panel of experts, offering a stimulating, scholarly analysis of the relevance of interreligious dialogue for the Post-2015 SDGs. He focused in particular on poverty eradication and the moral value of equity, advocated by virtually all religious traditions. He underscored the point that religions throughout the world can be allies and partners with the United Nations and governments in the global effort to fulfill the Post 2015 Development Agenda. Dr. Redo illustrated his point by listing the proposed SDGs and showing the relevance of interreligious dialogue to each.

Dr. Michael Platzer, liaison officer at the UN headquarters in Vienna for the Academic Council on the United Nations, noted the focus of some religious communities on preserving the status quo rather than pursuing social justice. He commented that the Golden Rule of “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you” is found in many religions.

Dr. Rick Clugston, co-director of the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, reported that he has been working for more than 20 years with religious NGOs at the UN to raise awareness of sustainable development issues and is challenging them to offer input into ways progress toward the goals can be measured. He noted that similar messages of religious leaders have already been expressed, but now they are being articulated in the UN context.

Opportunity was then given to peace activists to express their concerns. Mr. Eli Epstein, co-founder of the Children of Abraham, said he grew up as a child of Holocaust survivors who distrusted people outside their community, and then described how his life has been enriched through developing friendships with people of diverse faiths. He urged participants: “Do not ignore the spiritual side which is at the heart of all human beings.”

Mrs. Sally Kader, president of the US Federation for Middle East Peace, focused on education, stating that “Most people do not know the truth about each other’s religion” and that “ignorance creates fear, fear creates hate, and hate makes war.” Rev. Deborah Moldow, UN representative of the World Peace Prayer Society, said that developing the kind of caring that is necessary to create a culture of peace goes beyond the capacity of governments and is the province of religions. She also spoke about the urgency of being “spiritually awakened,” working together and making a difference regarding environmental issues.

The moderator of session two, Mr. Francesco Candelari, project management specialist for youth and development for the UN Alliance of Civilizations, noted the frequent use by speakers of the words justice, equity, and dignity and their emphasis on a “sense of care that involves humanity as a whole.”



Dr. Azza Karam, senior culture advisor at the United Nations Population Fund, was unable to be present but was cited by several participants as playing a key role as coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Faith-Based Engagement which in recent years has been drawing on the positive role of religion and interreligious dialogue to address critical issues faced by the UN.



An interactive session offered an opportunity for the diverse audience to offer their insights. Speakers called attention to the tragedies suffered by Afghans and Nigerians, the special concerns of orphans, and the holistic views of indigenous populations about sustainable development. One youth activist urged participants to go beyond dialogue among religious people and seek to engage the secularism that pervades many organizations. More than just dialogue will be required for advancing these goals. Moderator Dr. Yvonne Lodico, head of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research in New York, also a co-sponsor of the consultation, concluded by emphasizing the value of bringing religious insights into the discussion.

H.E. Mr. Nassir Al-Nasser closed the consultation by expressing his conviction that “We have different cultures and different faiths, but we are one family.” Sustainable development “can only be achieved if people, communities and nations work together across cultures and religions.” He concluded by saying, “We are here gathered in the shared belief that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are achievable and require our commitment to nurture interreligious and inter-civilizational dialogue and cooperation among all segments of society.”