

Task Force on Religion and Development and the Multi-Faith Advisory Council

Isys Onodera Israel
July 15, 2019



On July 15, the 2019 UN Task Force on Religion and Development and the Multi-Faith Advisory Council (CA) co-hosted the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings in New York, a day long conference that takes place every year during the UN High Level Political Forum. The day is named after Kofi Annan, the late and former UN Secretary-General who hosted the Millennium Peace Summit in 2000, the largest gathering of religious leaders in the United Nations since it was founded in 1945. In the same spirit, the purpose of this day is to provide a regular space to build strategic partnerships between different faith leaders and groups and the UN and its member states in order to engender multilateral support towards the realization of human rights, sustainable development and peace and security.

The event this year focused on the theme, "Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality - the role of multi-faith collaboration with the UN" and included keynote speeches from high-level experts as well as four panel discussions. The panels discussed issues focused on multi-faith collaboration, intergenerational dialogue, the rights of children from a multi-religious perspective, and climate change and its impact.

On behalf of the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, H.E. Mr. Miguel Ángel Moratinos made his opening remarks as Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the UN Alliance of Civilizations. In his speech he celebrated the legacy of the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who had an important role in establishing the UN Alliance of Civilizations, which has become an instrument used to overcome prejudices and strengthen dialogue and mutual respect between parties in order to move towards the realization of peaceful and inclusive societies. He stated, "the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies and the emphasis on a global partnership for sustainable development are the common thread that weaves through every activity and project undertaken under the pillars of the Alliance of Civilization, namely, youth, migration, media and education. [The Alliance] will also permeate a fifth focus area that I have introduced in my capacity as High Representative in order to promote the role of women as peace mediators in conflicts with an intercultural and interreligious component."

Following the keynote address, the first panel discussed the "Role of multi-faith for Sustainable Development," where the speakers addressed the following questions: "How do Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) partner with UN?" "How do these partnerships address issues of women's empowerment, children's rights, youth, employment?" "What are some challenges to partnerships?" "And what are some success stories of overcoming and consolidating partnerships in spite of the challenges?" The panelists spoke on the importance of faith to advance the SDG's and the role of women in faith based activity. As stated by Ms. Dana Buzducea from World Vision, those involved in some kind of faith are predominantly female, and for that reason women are a key element in building social integration. Reverend Carlos Tamez, from ACT Alliance added that, because of the significant role that faith based organizations play in society, those organizations are important partners for the UN in finding effective mechanisms to advance social development. Mr. James Patton, from the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), emphasized the relevance of religious peacebuilders and the need to train and build the capacity of religious people to increase their participation and role in the peacebuilding process.

He added to this by emphasizing that religion is not the cause of conflict and the urgent need to remove this idea.

The second panel was entitled, "Intergenerational Gender Dialogue: Realizing equality now, leaving no one behind." During this panel the speakers gave their thoughts based on the following questions: "How can intergenerational alliances be strengthened to advocate against discriminatory laws and practices that stand in the way of gender equality?" "How can young women's leadership be strengthened to break stereotypes that promote discrimination?" "How can young men and boys and young women and girls be integrated into different alliance structures to promote new ideas of equality and solidarity?" The panelists explored the relevance of women of faith in creating an agenda of transformation away from discriminatory laws and practices. There was also an important discussion on how to integrate young leaders in the efforts to remove stereotypes that encourage discrimination and it was concluded that promoting dialogue between women and young girls is essential and would add to the legitimacy of new ideas on gender equality.

In the third panel speakers discussed the multi-religious perspectives on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As part of the conversation, the panelists spoke about good practices taken by religious leaders to protect children's rights and their review of the CRC since its adoption by the UN General Assembly in 1989. It was discussed that because of the power faith leaders have in their communities, which creates a feeling of trust between those leaders and their followers, engaging these leaders to encourage partnerships can produce policies and measurements that can prevent acts of misconduct involving children and adolescents.

The final panel was on the role of multi-faith partnership in combating climate change and its impact, and the discussion was guided by the following questions: "What are some challenges of multi-faith and UN collaboration in this area and what are some success stories?" "What are some of the partnership efforts in this area which also tie in concerns about peace and inclusive societies? educational dynamics? reducing inequalities?" The panelists discussed the role of faith in the climate issue, and called attention to the fact that it is crucial for all leaders to come together at all levels. To combat climate change, it is essential to promote dialogue between different groups, including youth, faith leaders and local representatives. Mr. Gropal Patel from Green Faith expressed the need for governments and institutions to reshape their policies and move from fossil fuel based economies to renewable ones. Ms. Karena Gore added that the faith community should be engaged as well, because today we have a new scenario different from when the UN was created in 1945. Ms. Gore also addressed that, due to the fact that faith leaders have legitimacy in their communities, these people can contribute by promoting environmental consciousness that can be reflected on all levels of society and transcend religious divides.

The relevance of religious actors in the international arena has increased and many faith based organizations are engaging more and more with the issue of sustainable development and in humanitarian initiatives. In this way the event served as a forum for exchanging information and celebrating and consulting with these FBOs in order to strengthen partnership and multilateralism. Religious organizations are able to develop strong connections on the local level, contribute to data, facilitate the engagement of the grassroots, and also create a space for the youth and build an intergenerational dialogue. Therefore, religion is not what causes conflict, but is a part of the solution and the contribution of faith communities is essential if we want to achieve sustainable development.