



Islamic Relief USA  
WORKING TOGETHER FOR A BETTER WORLD.

World Vision

The Network for  
Religious and  
Traditional  
Peacemakers



JTS



Episcopal  
Relief & Development

Healing a hurting world



World Council of Churches

**ENGAGING WITH FAITH-BASED and FAITH-INSPIRED ORGANIZATIONS AND  
COMMUNITIES  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

---

**STRATEGIC LEARNING EXCHANGE/FAITH LITERACY SERIES**

**SPONSORS**

- United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development - with
    - Episcopal Relief and Development
    - George Mason University, Schar School of Government and Policy
    - Islamic Relief USA – (IR-USA)
    - Jewish Theological Seminary – Milstein Center (JTS)
    - King Abdulla Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)
    - Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers
    - Princeton University – Office of Religious Life
    - Union Theological Seminary (UJS)
    - World Council of Churches – (WCC)
    - World Vision (WV)
-

## **Overall Goal**

To develop the capacities of United Nations and partner faith-based entities to appreciate and enhance their programming, as well as the impact of delivery, through a realistic appraisal of religious dynamics in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## **Summary Overview**

In its seventh annual iteration, the United Nations Strategic Learning Exchange (SLE) to Develop Literacy Around Religion and Development expanded the collective literacy and understanding of UN system entities and some of their governmental counterparts, in their work with faith-based organizations (FBO) and religious actors. Convenings such as the SLE are a vital link to writing more informed and grassroots-savvy policy and programming by magnifying the positive outcomes of existing and new partnerships, avoiding the duplication of historic missteps and incorporating lessons learned and through strategic leveraging of available resources.

As is the case in certain countries where faith-based actors provide significant amounts of health and educational services, accomplishing the 2030 Agenda will – in many cases – be in direct proportion to the effectiveness of partnerships with this set of actors. This report is an effort to synthesize what this year's SLE identified as vital to creating better policy and approaches to collaborate with the faith-based sector, gleaned from the experience of historic partnerships. This year the partnership between UN agencies and FBO's was underscored by hosting it one day at the UN and a second day at an FBO.

Select **recommendations** include:

- Support UN agencies and other governmental entities in developing and implementing FBO-engagement strategies;
- Create spaces for learning across UN - FBO spaces to foster mutual knowledge about faith/religious dynamics and international development;
- Explore nexus of the human rights framework and FBO - UN and governmental partnerships (with particular attention to gender (and sexuality) equity and norms, religious freedom and protection of minorities).
- Increase religious literacy within UN agencies and governmental entities to support the above goals

## **Background**

There is growing recognition in the international development and humanitarian community that religions play a critical moral, social, and political role in human development. The collective resources they bring to the table (human, financial and spiritual) require study and honest appreciation from all working to serve these same communities. Many UN organizations are now partnering with faith-based or faith-inspired service-delivery non-governmental organizations, as well as local faith communities and religious leaders. However, these forms of

engagement and the challenges inherent in them demand attention. Moreover, the various means of outreach need to be collectively reviewed and considered.

The Strategic Learning Exchange brings together staff from across UN (and governmental) entities who have experience working with FBOs and/or religious communities in the course of their respective work at policy and programmatic levels to achieve the SDGs.

The purpose of the Strategic Learning Exchange is to explore the linkages between faith and the continuum of humanitarian to development and peace and security work, and to discuss the why and how of partnerships and collaboration between the UN system (including intergovernmental entities and governments) with faith-based organizations and local faith communities (including religious leaders), with a view to realizing the SDGs.

Several key faith-based organizational representatives and resource persons reflected on their experiences partnering with UN entities (including policy advisers, Program Officers), in service delivery, advocacy and capacity building. Participants were expected to bring their expertise on the linkages between religion and SDGs, including the issues of conflict and peace building, security, education, health (including HIV/AIDS and SRHR), gender equality, environment, and climate change.

## **Questions Framing the Objectives**

### ***1. What are the linkages between faith and the SDGs?***

Increased understanding of the linkages between religion and SDGs in contemporary contexts with a view to intergovernmental dynamics (including globalization, political change, conflict, peacebuilding, climate change, economic and financial contexts and impact on aid effectiveness, social inclusion, cultural diversity, etc.);

### ***2. How do these interlinkages manifest in practical development endeavors at the intergovernmental as well as at field-levels?***

Identification of respective case studies highlighting opportunities and challenges of working with religious communities and faith-based organizations in development and humanitarian work; Challenges and opportunities internal to the cultures of development and humanitarian organizations, e.g. religion as part of the challenges behind – as well as responses to – social inclusion dynamics, climate change, and diverse political and economic conflicts.

### ***3. What should be done to improve partnerships between the UN, faith-based organizations, and other civil society entities to secure delivery on the SDGs?***

Critical Assessment of challenges and existing (as well as future) partnership moments

## The Strategic Learning Exchange Methodology © UNIATF 2010

The main outcome is to enhance the 'how to' of outreach to and partnering with faith-based organizations. To which end, the SLE considers the conceptual and practical intersections between development work and religious issues, noting the specific challenges posed, the lessons learned and the best practices emerging from collaboration.

The SLE is therefore the space, which enables a shared compilation of the lessons learned from advocacy and service delivery work, at the program design, implementation and evaluation phases.

The structure of the SLE is heavily dependent on several key factors and features as follows:

1. **Convening the Diversity and the Depth – Participants cum Resource People:** A mix of participants who can reflect the governmental, intergovernmental and multilateral expertise selected according clear criteria (see below) is the tipping point of the SLE;
2. **Harvesting the Knowledge within:** The learning which takes place is based on a peer-to-peer modality. This is to harvest the experiences of the participants working within the institutions themselves. The participants are, therefore, effectively the resource people who learn from one another;
3. **Facilitating from Experience and with Knowledge - from Within:** Expert facilitation is provided by those who combine both the institutional know-how and long standing experience in working within the religion and development nexus, together with academic/scientific expertise. The facilitators themselves are therefore from the very same spaces, which are being convened, and they have both academic and practical expertise in dealing with the subject areas under discussion.
4. **Comparing Worldviews:** this focuses on giving equal voice and time to the different constituencies to share their own worldview, and their respective readings of the contemporary geopolitical dynamics, which forms the backdrop of all the discussions. Each constituency, in plenaries, presents these worldviews, and then a joint discussion is enabled.
5. **Bringing Actual Experiences and Learnings from the field:** The SLE insists, as one of the mandatory issues, that each participant bring a written case study, written according to a set template, which presents a specific partnership endeavor revolving around the religion and development theme. This is then discussed within smaller groups (arranged per either thematic/SDG areas, or types of interventions), in a café/market place format. The learning and recommendations from the diverse discussions are harvested at the end of the group discussions, in plenary.
6. **Walking the Talk of “Partnership” Through Co-Convening and Co-Facilitating:** While the entire purpose is to review, assess and recommend better partnerships between the intergovernmental and the faith-based actors, there is no better way to realise these partnerships than to co-convene and co-facilitate the actual SLEs. This is the lesson learned from comparing the 7 previous iterations, where the visibility of the successful management and delivery around the shared responsibilities of stewarding,

organizing and facilitating, itself demonstrates the values and objectives being discussed over the course of the SLE.

## Criteria for Participation

- *Been There & Done That*: Actual / demonstrable experiences of partnership: with and / or outreach to either UN and / or faith-based organizations;
- *Bona Fide Partners*: Faith-based representatives / participant(s) should be partners of UN Agencies with actual field experience and prepared to co-sponsor own participation;
- *Knowledge Hubs*: Thematic SDG areas coverage: Areas of expertise should cover diverse SDG areas / issues;
- *Can Do*: Preparedness to provide and to discuss written case studies (as per standard template).
- *Zen*: Regional, religious and gender balance.

## Excerpts from The Learning Conversation

Guided by Chatham House rules, participants brought their concerns, challenges, innovations, and successes to the table. Session facilitators drew from discussion points to identify both general and specific challenges that arise from working with FBOs.

The first round of presentations were dedicated to highlighting geopolitical trends and common challenges facing all policy makers and development practitioners and sharing respective viewpoints and interpretations on these. A key concern about engaging FBOs is the strong need to be sure that the “right” partners were convened, given the challenges of representation from among large, highly diverse and differently structured religious communities. The UN system is required to ensure that **human rights, and human rights-based approaches**, define outreach to civil society partners and define the parameters of collaboration. In practice, there are grey areas, which are interpreted and uniquely navigated by diverse religious groups and in each particular context. Instead of being seen as an obstruction to partnership, human rights frameworks demand more thorough engagement to understand how and where shared values exist.

Religious actors themselves point out the **linkages between human rights frameworks as derived from religious value systems** (e.g. the Ten Commandments). What the secular development agencies have recently codified within the 2030 Agenda is, in many ways, it was argued, the diplomatic and geopolitical version of various shared religious values: universal human dignity and environmental responsibility.

## SLE 2017 - Participant Profile

24 from UN System entities  
28 from Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs)  
4 from Universities (including two religious seminaries)

This triggered a debate regarding whether religious organizations and communities were held, or should be held, to a higher ethical standard than UN Member States who - in some instances - might be guilty of human rights abuses. It was noted that there would always be discussions around biases and potential “double standards” but what was critical was to **ensure opportunities and spaces for dialogue on diverse and context-based approaches.**

Further nuancing of the **selection of partners** was discussed, specifically noting the diversity within the FBO sector generally and within each religion specifically. A primary example cited was the necessity to understand the complex makeup and diverse voices within large international FBOs such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), which claims to represent 525 million people. However, the reality of that representation on the local level is highly contextual. UN system entities agencies should not expect to reach all 525 million people equally.

The FBOs present repeatedly highlighted **the experience of working with the UN on a transactional level.** While this was understood as necessary, there was a strong consensus among the faith-based representatives for **more transformative mutual partnerships.** This would entail long-term partnerships which do not rely or form solely in response to humanitarian crisis. These partnerships build networks and relationships in anticipation of needing to deploy during humanitarian emergencies.

UN agencies questioned and discussed **how the SDGs could be further embedded within faith communities and organizations.** It was agreed that if religious communities and FBOs are not mutual partners within the UN in the roll-out of the SDGs and related policy and implementation processes, then the likelihood of successful co-stewardship leading to strengthened results delivery, diminishes significantly. A **key challenge, and potential opportunity, was highlighted, of mutual and transformative partnerships potentially generated by working with groups whose frameworks may not entirely agree with those of UN agencies.**

The SLE group affirmed **the need for each UN entity to develop strategies, feasibility assessments, and policies, to guide ‘the how’ and ‘the when’ to engage with FBOs, while remaining cognizant of, and creating synergies with, their existing civil society policies.** As UN entities begin to value the breadth of faith-based networks, so too they begin to appreciate the diversity in the “faith communities.” Faith-based actors are considered ‘non-traditional’ constellations of actors (and potential partners), as is the case with the private and philanthropic sectors, each of which have distinct frameworks and types of actors.

The SLE practitioners also stressed that **religious leadership, and international FBOs, only make up a fraction of what is commonly referred to as “the faith community.”** Therefore, the advocacy by the FBOs, to the UN counterparts, was that UN outreach and policymaking should be deliberately inclusive of the diverse faith-based entities and representatives.

**Investing in learning about the landscapes of religion and religious actors**, it was noted, can strengthen and enhance both UN and FBO respective, and joint policy and programming. At the same time, the **FBOs cautioned against the tendency to “use” (instrumentalize) FBOs as the mere implementers and supply chain managers for UN priorities**. Instead, they argued that just as it was critical to ensure a balance of actors across religious communities, mechanisms of ensuring sustainability of the engagement and building on learnings, should be strived for.

Though frameworks may differ, the call from FBOs was that **engagement should take place on a level playing field**, built on the acknowledgement of the ‘equal worth’ of what the UN on the one hand, and the FBOs on the other, can bring to the SDG realization. Some FBOs also argued that the UN entities be deliberate in acknowledging that they are not simply convening FBOs to discuss religion through a secular civil society engagement prism, rather, that the ‘religious’ or faith element be duly recognized and acknowledged.

To that end, **policy should be “complementary – not compromising – of international law as well as religious frameworks, and strengthened by literacy about both the role of religion, and the nature of faith communities”**. In the same vein, the FBOs were keen to note that jointly hosted events and projects reflect not just standard civil society organization (CSO) projects, but also nuance the faith communities’ particular value- added and identities.

Another contentious issue discussed was **the perception - whether accurate or not - that religion is a barrier to gender equity**. As one UN representative said, “religion has everything to do with how women are accepted and live their lives.” This specific topic returns to the issue of bias and demands placed on FBOs vs. secular NGOs and member states: is the nexus of gender within peace and security programming equally prioritized - and at times made an obstacle - when working with NGOs that do not ascribe to the entire UN human rights framework. **Creating additional spaces for having “the difficult conversations” is needed**.

Media and narrative were also prevalent themes of discussion, particularly on how the forced migration crisis is being increasingly conflated by the media with narratives of violent extremism (VE). **FBOs enthusiastically highlighted the necessity of precise language in how refugees and others are humanized or dehumanized within policy, project requests, and the media**. For example, the United Kingdom’s faith-based engagement office is housed in the Security and Terrorism Bureau, thus raising questions as to the extent to which religion is engaged with in a holistic manner, and rooted in concerns for the ultimate beneficiaries of human development efforts.

The work often referred to as “countering (or preventing) violent extremism” has both religious and implementation ramifications. Whereas “preventing” is a relatively neutral or peacebuilding vernacular, “countering” or “combatting” implies military might as the solution and necessary instrument. When the phrase “violent extremism” is used, it is worth reflecting how broad or

specific the usage is: does it include gangs in Chicago, or just Islamist extremists in Syria? **If faith-based actors are to be involved and not just instrumentalised in the development process, then the language within policy must be further inclusive and respectful of the different realities and narratives.**

**Equally troubling was the concern that engagement with religious actors and FBOs could become a time-sensitive fad, which will cease to be sustained within the UN system.** This is particularly magnified when the entirety of engagement rests on individual personalities and personnel within the UN. This creates a situation where once an individual changes jobs or careers, or is reassigned elsewhere; the portfolio is de facto dropped. The challenge is how to institutionalize engagement beyond the tenure of individuals.

KAICIID presented their and gave a glimpse at the and Development) map. **KAICIID and PaRD** help development and peace interfaith map includes dialogue along with

*“It’s clear that a lot of work is already being done in engaging FBOs...we don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but to increase our learning and better advance our strategies for collaboration to achieve the SDGs.”*

Peace Mapping Project PaRD (Partners in Religion The **mapping tools** by identify partners in the building sectors. KAICIID’s both global interreligious thematic maps, and will

continue to update strategic national interreligious dialogue directories of key voices, promising practices, and analyses of practitioner and case study data.

It was also clear that **UN system agencies (e.g. the World Bank, UNFPA, UNWomen, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP), as well as USAID, have a long legacy, extending decades in the UN case, of engaging with faith-based service providers** (such as Church World Service, Catholic Charities, Islamic Relief, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee). FBOs were the first relief agencies and are often still the first responders at the local level. As one UN representative stated, “It’s clear that a lot of work is already being done in engaging FBOs. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but to increase our learning and advance our strategies for collaboration to achieve the SDGs.”

It was universally agreed that more practical learning opportunities such as the SLEs are needed to increase the dialogue, both between UN and governmental agencies on engagement strategies, and between FBOs and the UN.

### **Recommendations for Future Learning Formats**

The structure of the meeting was well received and is a proven model over the past 7 years. This year, the exchange was shortened from 3 days to 2, and this appeared to work well with the agendas of the diverse, normally office-bound, and multi-tasking practitioners.

**Specific structural recommendations include:**



- Devote more time to be focused on deeper, more specific conversations on issues such as interfaith dialogue, Human rights based framework challenges, and Gender equity.
  - Within this recommendation was the ask to consider focusing discussions on tangible outcomes, and not simple topline talking points. This was also countered by the difficulty of emerging with one concrete plan or joint deliverable, when the participants hailed from such diverse organizations.
- Include more participants from outside New York/DC area, particularly more from the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions.

### **Future meetings**

- Fall 2017: A follow-up conversation focused specifically on the nexus of Gender, Peace and Security and Religion is being planned with interested organizations. Led by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.
- Spring 2018: A reiteration of this SLE (potentially within a different national context pending resources), was supported by the core organizers and participants.

### **Case Studies & An On-Line Resource Site**

Individual Case studies were prepared by participants to present their experience with FBO/UN engagement. A total of 16 case studies were submitted, covering four areas of focus: Poverty, Humanitarian Relief and Service Provision, Gender Equity and Gender Based Violence, and Peace and Security. These were collected and organized into an online resource site, which included materials from previous SLEs. <https://sites.google.com/view/sle-religion/home>

### **Report Authors**

This report was prepared by **Cassandra Lawrence** *Al Amana International*, with support from the SLE rapporteurs, **Maya Wahrman** *Princeton University Office of Religious Life*, **Annalisa Jackson** *Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers*, **Brendan Byers** *USAID*, **Shaina Hirsch** and **Rabbi Michael Boino** *Jewish Theological Seminary*.

Special thanks are also owed to Rabbi Burton Visotzky for his coordination and comments.