



**The Kofi Annan United Nations General Assembly  
Faith Briefings**



**SEPTEMBER 21, 2018**

*DISCLAIMER:*

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## **Foreword**

*[There is a] need for humanitarian actors ... to deepen their understanding of religious traditions across faiths and become more 'faith literate'...We need to be more inclusive and consult national faith actors already at the planning stage, to harness the full potential of the strengths they bring to complement our own approach.*

**Mr. Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General, 2017 -**

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The United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, also referred to as the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion, was formed in 2010 under the aegis of the UNDG (UN Development Group). The creation of the Task Force was co-stewarded by the then Principals of UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, and UNIFEM, together with the focal points on religion in WHO, UNDESA, UNEP, and the World Bank. Today, the UN Task Force has grown in membership to 15 UN system entities representing the three pillars of the work of the United Nations: peace and security, sustainable development and human rights.

UNFPA began systematically convening faith-based NGO (FBO) partners and religious leaders, at country, regional and global levels in 2008, when it hosted the first “[Global Forum on Strengthening Partnerships with Faith-Based Actors](#)”, in October, in Istanbul, Turkey. Since then, UNFPA has convened sister UN entities, Member States, and a diverse range of faith-based NGOs (FBO) and religious leaders, at least 6 times per year.

Almost exactly ten years after the Global Forum in Istanbul, UNFPA, as Chair of the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion now with a Database of over 500 FBO partners, and as a means of honoring what had become a UN system-wide tradition of consultations with FBOs, launched the ***Kofi Annan UNGA Faith Briefings***.

What made these UNGA Faith Briefings particularly noteworthy is the following:

1. They were convened at the behest of the FBO partners themselves - in the April 2018 Strategic Planning Retreat, which brought together 17 UN system entities with 45 FBO partners.
2. The Briefings were convened by – and simultaneously with - the newly launched Faith Advisory Council – itself a body of the CEOs of the top 40 common UN faith-based and faith-inspired partner organisations.
3. They convened a large number of FBO Chief Executives who took it upon themselves to come at their own expense, to brief UN Member States, in a show of explicit support for and solidarity with the United Nations system, and with all human rights.

The Kofi Annan Faith Briefings were possible precisely because the UN system entities, through the UN Interagency Task Force, have systematically convened and consulted with faith-based partners over a decade. The level of trust built over the years is challenging to quantify. The relationship building which has taken place since 2008 has resulted in increased partnerships between the FBOs themselves, and between the FBOs and the United Nations. While we will struggle to accurately evaluate and assess these partnerships and the deliverables thereof, one thing is for sure: there is no going back from commitments to partnerships between the United Nations and diverse faith-based civil society actors, as a key driver of building peaceful, just and inclusive societies -- where no one is left behind.

UNFPA is deeply grateful to all those who endeavored to participate in the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings and enrich each other and the wider international community,

In particular, UNFPA wishes to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of Ms. Omayma El Ella, who volunteered to serve as Rapporteur of the Kofi Annan Briefings, and is the author of this report. Gratitude is also owed to Ms. Thin Thin Win, a professional veteran of UNFPA for ensuring all participants and logistics were well looked after, as well as to Ms. Arisha Khan, of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, for her support and assistance.

UNFPA's Intern, Ms Kelsey Anderson, also served to provide some copy edits to this report.

## Introduction

*“Faith-based organizations and religious actors...possess a culturally-based comparative advantage... and as such are most effective when they emphasize the common humanity of all parties while refusing to identify with any single party” ...*

**Mr. Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, 1997-2006**

Amidst the talk of the weakening of multilateralism in this age of disrupting political shifts across the world, and the worrying effects of climate change, the role of the United Nations has never been more important or its relevancy more testing to maintain. The UN institution remains unparalleled in the world as an inter-governmental organisation that has the clout and legitimacy to lead on international conventions and interventions that respond to pressing human needs. A kaleidoscope of actors, however, continue to question the *raison d'être* of multilateral institutions, and claim that the work of these structures has left them behind and worse off, while seeking only to serve a global elite. The late former secretary General Kofi Annan rightly said in 2000 that *“if we are to capture the promises of globalisation while managing its adverse effects, we must learn to govern better, and must learn how better to govern together”*. Despite the progress lead by the UN on numerous development goals and its continuing work on SDGs, the UN needs to establish and strengthen its leadership on the merits of multilateralism, and ensure its engagement with grassroots communities and actors whom include people of faith and religion.

The UN's role as an influencer, convener, coordinator, and developer is especially pertinent in its relationship with faith-based actors across the world. The UN has been instrumental in demonstrating the importance of engaging with faith-based organizations (FBOs), and the work of Kofi Annan and Azza Karam was key in creating the space at the UN in the form of the interagency faith-based taskforce. Faith-based actors have proven to be critical brokers in a variety of socio-economic and political contexts. The World Health Organization published a study showing that 30-40% of basic healthcare provision in the world was delivered by faith-based actors, and IMA World Health report

showed that almost 75% of basic healthcare was provided by FBOs in conflict and humanitarian disaster areas. FBOs have often been the only organizations allowed access in certain conflict areas and are usually deeply embedded within the communities they serve. In an era of declining faith in governmental institutions and state actors, FBOs hold legitimacy and influence in many communities as they are seen to be representing and serving “the people”. Their role therefore needs to be leveraged and recognized, and in a manner that is not instrumentalising, but mutually affirming and inclusive. This goal of “serving the people” resonates strongly with the mission of the UN. Kofi Annan affirmed the need for increased multi-stakeholder engagement; *“The international public domain must be opened further to the participation of the many actors whose contributions are essential to managing the path of globalization”*.

The 5 core responsibilities outlined in the UN's Agenda for Humanity are all, in some form or another, promoted by a variety of FBOs who, in most cases, are the key actors involved with upholding these. The Agenda for Humanity outlines the following:

- 1) Global leadership to prevent and end conflict;
- 2) Upholding the norms that safeguard humanity;
- 3) Leaving no one behind;
- 4) Changing people's lives- from delivering aid to ending need; and
- 5) Investing in humanity

The question of how we drive ahead with these goals while considering our partnerships and engagement with FBOs remains a topic that needs careful understanding and action. It was in light of this question, amidst the backdrop of the 73rd United Nations General Assembly, that UNFPA in its capacity as coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, launched the first United Nations General Assembly Faith Briefings – the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings. In honour of the valiant efforts and wisdom of the late former Secretary General Kofi Annan, who was being widely honored during this same period, and his belief in the importance of faith-based inclusion in achieving the goals of multilateralism. These briefings are intended to provide a dedicated space each year, during the time of the United Nations General Assembly, to capitalize on the unique gathering of organizations well-versed in the intersections of religious affairs with sustainable

development, human rights, and peace and security, to inform, and be informed by UN system engagements and deliberations. These briefings themselves serve to systematically highlight the importance of strategic and innovative partnerships.

### **The Briefings**

The objectives of the panel discussions were to affirm the importance of knowledge share and solidarity across the UN systems and its faith-based partners, and to engage in serious discussions on the role and relevance of the UN in its engagement with the faith-based landscape, and what that means for the future of that engagement in its shared mission to address human needs and promote global cooperation. The Following questions were posed:

1. Is the United Nations relevant to all people? How have we either honoured, or failed, global leadership and shared responsibilities for peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies?
2. How can we make the United Nations system more relevant, and what does that mean to an FBO?
3. How can we all add value to ongoing efforts by governments, other civil society entities towards realizing more "equitable and sustainable societies"?
4. What are the current strengths and weaknesses of UN-FBO partnerships which both contribute to and prevent the realisation of 'peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies'?

The invitees included:

- UN agencies including UNHCR, UNFPA, UN Women
- International faith-based organisations, involved in humanitarian response, development, and peace-building
- Bilateral donors/governments including the African Union and Finnish government
- Faith Leaders and government ambassadors
- Academic Researchers and Research bodies like the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Sustainable Development

Strong themes emerged throughout the discussions of the day on the nexus of religion, conflict, and multilateralism, and numerous dynamics were expounded upon about the relationship between the United Nations and faith-based actors, as well as the relationship between FBOs and the communities they serve. It was apparent throughout the deliberations of

the day, that FBOs shared a very strong commitment and moral drive to realize the 2030 development agenda and champion multilateral cooperation. Their roles as social mobilizers, service providers, and behavioral change-makers remains invaluable in this mission. Discussants all felt that it was crucial to maintain and develop further mutual and respectful partnerships with the UN, states, and other actors.

*Key themes that cropped up at the meeting included:*

- *The instrumentalization of religious identity by both states and religious groups themselves, and the risks that poses*
- *The importance of faith leadership as a voice of morality, and the need to be self-reflective and self-critical to do that faithfully*
- *The affirmation of the crucial work FBOs do as both peacemakers and service providers in relief and development*
- *The affirmation of the vital role of the UN as a leader, convener, and coordinator, and the importance of FBOs engaging with that system*
- *The importance of data and evidence gathering on the work that FBOs do, and amplifying and learning from the many useful stories that exist.*

### **Session 1: 'Is the United Nations Relevant to All People? How have we either honored, or failed, global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Peaceful, Equitable and Sustainable Societies?'**

*Speakers:*

- Mr. Adama Dieng, United Nations Secretary General's Special Advisor on Prevention of Genocide
- Ambassador Dr. Adonia Ayebare, Permanent Rep. Mission of Uganda to the UN
- Mr. Faisal Bin Muammar, Secretary General, KAICIID
- Ambassador Mussie Heilu, URI Representative to the African Union
- Ms. Tarja Kantola, Chair (Finn Church Aid) and Co-Chair, UN Faith Based Advisory Council

Azza Karam opened the launch reminding the participants that it was through the vision and stewardship of Kofi Annan that the set-up of the inter-agency task force came to be, whose mission is to convene faith-based organisations and UN agencies to learn from one another, and build relationships to help achieve the universal mandate of the UN. Eight years since its launch, the task-force has grown to encompass over 500 organisations around the world, and was the catalyst for many of

the partnerships we see today between FBOs and UN agencies. In a secularising environment like that of the UN, Kofi Annan had the wisdom to understand that that FBOs formed an integral part of humanitarian, development, and social cohesion responses, and thus their inclusion within conversations and initiatives within the UN was vital.

Adama Dieng reminded the participants of the importance of what Kofi Annan did in authorising the creation of this agency, in that it helped “educate members of the government” in breaking down the doors of “secular scepticism”. Whilst we still need to maintain the principles of secularism that the UN embodies and remember that member states follow these principles, we cannot forget that most nation states across the world represent religious communities – nearly 80%. To ignore or not acknowledge this fact would be to ignore civil society itself and the very nature of these communities. That is not to say that FBOs should be viewed from the lens of instrumentalisation, but through the lens of sincere and good-faith cooperation to realise shared values. It was suggested that the UN could use more “spirituality” in the sense of the humanizing qualities spirituality of all kinds embodies, and that perhaps more crises could have been averted if that spirituality was more ingrained in the structures of the UN.

The Declaration of Human Rights, as secular-focused as it is presented, poses no tensions with the frameworks of all world religions, nor do the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The advancement of peace, reduction of poverty, leaving no one behind and so on, are goals shared by all faiths and those of none. That cooperation is needed now more than ever, and *laïcité positive* (“positive secularism”), should be embraced. Senegal is a wonderful example of this; a country ruled by a Muslim, married to a Catholic, and where inter-faith marriages are the norm. Confrontations based on religion are rare and that is because the government there recognises the importance of treating all faiths equally within a secular context, and recognising they are part and parcel of society. We have seen a new wave of member states increasingly recognising the importance of working with FBOs, but caution must be exercised to ensure that these organisations represent various facets of civil society and remember that the UN is ultimately ‘for the people’. Dieng shared an anecdote of a visit he had to Iraq, where he went to Erbil and Baghdad and met with the leader of the Yazidis, who relayed to him that ISIS were not only attacking the Yazidis, but other Muslims who did not conform and accept their form

of Islam. This was an important reminder to never homogenize any one group, and that engagement with locals at the grassroots level is crucial if you want to promote a culture of inter-faith and inter-ethnic harmony.

Ambassador Philip Ochen Odida reaffirmed these sentiments, but noted that there was no antagonism in Uganda between the government and FBOS. In Uganda where 70% of the country is Christian, 20% Muslim and 10% Animist, FBOs are intricately woven within the fabric of society. They deliver the majority of critical education and health programmes, and the Ugandan government has numerous partnerships with these organisations. The government has been particularly supportive of realising the SDGs and instructing the UN country team to engage with FBOs, marking an important shift toward increased coordination and cooperation. The UN country team has done excellent work in pushing for reforms in how it operates and building networks with local actors.

Finland too has been one of the leading member states in pushing for more FBO engagement, and a crucial donor within this field. Tarja Katola of Finn Church Aid stressed the need the UN has for countries like Finland who are comfortable and ready to engage with FBOs, despite the relative secularism and lack of religiosity within the Finnish nation itself. Mediation has been a focal point of their work in this area, and their track record within peace-building efforts within Somalia have grounded them in that work further. Finland has emerged as one of the few states willing to lead on mediation and peacebuilding efforts with religious actors.

Other countries like Saudi Arabia and Austria have also picked up the mantle of interreligious dialogue and cooperation, and demonstrated how religion increasingly serves as a broker between nations for this very purpose. KAICIID began around 8 years ago, and the expectation was that they would fail in their mission of bridging the gap between policy makers and religious leaders. Their standing today is stronger than ever, with two countries on board as well as key religious leaders. Their work in setting up similar platforms such as the interreligious platform in Nigeria is evidence of the reality that faith entities must be engaged within the pursuit of peace. The key message of their *raison d’être* is to “convert people to dialogue, not religion. Secular societies believe in the principles of free-speech and dialogue, and so dialogue with people of faith should not be viewed as a contradiction. There are psychological barriers that still exist with FBOs about working with the UN and

vice versa, but these must be overcome as there is so much to learn from one another to solve problems together.

The African Union (AU) has been another great example of institutional and faith-based partnerships, and their policy makers have been working with FBOs for some time. The AU has insisted on consultations with FBOs as part of its wider strategy on implementing the SDGs. Ambassador Mussie Heliu emphasised that the objectives of the UN cannot be achieved by one institution only, no matter how large, and a variety of partners need to be engaged that include grassroots organisations and civil society. He cautioned against the ‘politicisation of religion’ and ‘religionisation of politics’. There is always the danger of FBOs being co-opted by the state, and we do have to be diligent about managing that risk and allowing for the integrity of these groups to be preserved as that is essential to their legitimacy with their constituents. The crucial point is that none of our shared objectives will be achieved if we continue to sideline civil society and FBOs, and he remarked that it is encouraging that 17 UN agencies are already working with FBOs, and that needs to be expanded to the rest of the UN infrastructure.

*Main takeaways:*

- *Faith communities are here to stay, and change will not come from only engaging with government leaders at the top and state institutions, it must be with the grassroots and civil society as well*
- *State and UN engagement with FBOs is already happening in several countries, with UN country teams changing the way they operate so that they are working directly with FBOs*
- *UN agencies, governments, and FBOs need to think carefully about how they engage with one another so that the integrity of all the actors remains intact and they are not used to further agendas that are detrimental to our shared mission.*

**Session 2. Making the United Nations system "more relevant" and what does that mean to an FBO? {Moderator: Mr. Al-Muflih, Jordan Hashemite Charity Organisation/JHCO}**

*Interventions from:*

- Ms. Sadhviji Bhagawathi Saraswathi, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance
- Rev. Christo Greyling, World Vision

- Prof. Andrea Bartoli, Community of Sant Egidio.
- Ms. Alison Kelly, ACT Alliance
- Ms. Debra Boudreaux, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation
- Dr. Naser Haghmagad, Islamic Relief Worldwide/IRW
- Ambassador Kai Sauer, Mission of Finland to the UN

Mr. Ayman al-Muflih began this session with sharing a success story whereby UNHCR managed to collect around seven million US dollars of Zakat funds, predominantly from Lebanese and Jordanian nationals, to help Syrian refugees. This was unprecedented for a UN agency, and demonstrated innovative progress in how the UN is addressing the dearth of humanitarian financing, and how religious giving can help fill that gap. Zakat is a religious obligation practiced by many Muslims, a fundamental act of faith, and the UN is slowly acquiring first-hand experience around mobilizing the resourcefulness through such “acts of faith”.

The work of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) aptly illustrates how “acts of faith” can have profound effects in society. Secretary General of the Alliance Sadhviji Saraswathi shared the outlook of her own Hindu religious group, which views the fulfillment of the SDGs as an obligation and act of faith, and the death of any person due to illness related to poor hygiene, as akin to throwing a hand grenade at them. GIWA was launched by UNICEF, and that meant that the alliance benefitted from 73 years of knowledge and skills of the UN. GIWA carried out its work on a grand level and on the ground level. In relation to the former, it includes convening faith leaders sharing an interfaith platform to discuss cleanliness, defecation, and hygiene. The statements and rhetoric at this level has a trickle-down effect on their communities. Faith leaders declaring that “sanitation is mediation” has had a significant impact on religious communities and GIWA have seen the difference. Moreover, the impact on the poorest and most marginalized of society has been most encouraging, as it is the lower castes that commonly deal with the handling of defecation more than any other group in India. These statements by faith leaders serve to elevate them and remind communities that good hygiene is the duty and right of all. Menstrual hygiene, a topic that has been taboo in many countries, has also been addressed by faith leaders. Women are increasingly sharing these platforms that have been male dominated for so long, helping reduce the stigma



around these issues. The groundwork of GIWA is largely grassroots engagement, through educational and awareness raising WASH programmes in a variety of faith communities.

These “good stories” have a home at the UN, and should be the space where we share them, as rightly stated by Andrea Bartoli. The story that GIWA shared on crumbling oppressive caste structures is one that should be shared and celebrated, especially amongst member states who should be taking more heed of these examples. Yet religious groups also need to take heed of these stories and inculcate a tradition of reflection and progress. Rwanda was a predominantly Catholic country, yet it was the Muslim population that saved the most people from Catholic-on-Catholic violence. LGBTQ communities are safer within UN spaces than they are in their own home countries. It’s not enough for us to say that we are united as a group; faith groups also need to take the lead in uniting others and being reflective of their own roles in creating and perpetuating issues and tensions and how they can dismantle them. History is not just made by people with lofty titles, and it is often the invisible humble masses who do the hardest work behind the scenes, a reality exemplified time and time again by faith communities across the globe. The UN needs to think harder about how it can enable an environment where critical self-reflection on all sides is encouraged and good stories are amplified.

Other FBOs pushed home that when collaboration with the UN works it works well. World Vision has partnered with the UN in the areas of child protection, and the wealth of knowledge and convening power that the UN has makes it a useful partner in a variety of contexts. Christo Greyling at World Vision went on to stress that it is important for their organisation that the UN becomes more relevant with the communities they work with on a local level, and they have put SDG 16 (*‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’*) in action across their organization to help realize this, reaffirming and walking the talk of SDG implementation in both ethos and practice. They have also helped the UN when it comes to faith literacy through strategic knowledge exchanges, and this is work that should continue on all levels and at all agencies at the UN. These knowledge exchanges are also activities that need to be shared both ways, and most education about the role and purpose of the UN with faith communities should start by explaining the shared moral grounding before going into its

functions which can often come off as too heavy and complex. People are more likely to engage with you if they feel you share similar values and are not just there to impose a technocratic worldview.

The ACT alliance, as a coalition of mainly Protestant and Orthodox Christian FBOs, has led the work on exposing its members to the UN, who have felt that the institution can be inaccessible and remote, and getting them to see a different side to it. This is a prevailing perception amongst many grassroots and local organizations, and the UN needs to do more to change that perception and become more inclusive. Focusing on shared agendas is the reason why the ACT Alliance have been able to make breakthroughs and increase its membership to include organizations that previously seemed impossible to reach out to, and that is largely thanks to the UN and its push to strengthen and increase its engagement with FBOs. That being said, the process and journey is still a long one, and collaboration and partnership still has much to be improved upon across the board.

Islamic Relief (IR) directly answered how the UN could be more relevant, echoing the importance of its mission but how it is failing in some respects by its continuous pattern of being reactive instead of proactive. The UN often waits until a crisis has happened to reach out to potential partners, instead of doing the mapping and planning work in advance. An example with IR was with Boko Haram in Nigeria, where IR were asked to come in by the UN as there was a real fear of an imminent famine and they were struggling to find Muslim FBOs to work in Boko Haram controlled areas. The UN asked them too late, however, and its list of local FBO partners is also demonstrably limited if IR was the only Muslim organization it could reach out to. The UN bore witness to the importance of engaging with faith leaders in the case of the Ebola crisis in west Africa where religious sentiments against burning bodies was high, and it was only through FBOs who did faith-sensitive outreach, like IR, and convinced religious leaders that the burning of bodies was not religiously incompatible that shifts started to happen. The UN is catching on to the importance of this engagement, but it needs to go further and faster, and improve its mapping work. “If the UN wants to stay relevant, it needs to be more proactive; if you leave people behind you are no longer relevant”.

Faith literacy, and the sharing of research and data to demonstrate the impact of FBOs in addressing humanitarian needs to the UN, cropped up again and again throughout the day. Deborah, who leads a grassroots Buddhist Foundation, pointed out that the

UN must see the value of faith-based work through the evidence, and implored the participants to share that data and those case studies, as well as toolkits for partnerships. This data gathering and sharing however is not for the purposes of merely proving a point about the value added of FBOs, but should feed into creating a culture of solidarity and best-practice learning from one another.

Finnish Ambassador Kai Sauer championed Finland's role and leadership on mediation and preventative diplomacy as a long term foreign policy objective of the state. Finland has recognized the prominent role of religions in mediation and peacebuilding work, and with the support of Finnish Church Aid has over the years developed the confidence to engage much more deeply with religious groups in these spaces. An inclusive mandate characterizes their approach, and so they also engage closely with NGOs and civil society groups. He upheld the SG's comments on the need to prioritize preventing conflict instead of dealing with the effect of its aftermath as we are wont to do. Finland is proud to be co-chair alongside Turkey of a 57 member-state group at the UN, addressing precisely this issue. A challenge he posed to the participants was how to ensure the inclusion of women and youth in the mediation field, as that needs to be strengthened. Both mediation and preventative diplomacy need more partners and champions, particularly considering the state of current geo-politics.

*Main takeaways:*

- *The UN holds a wealth of knowledge, skills, and convening power that has proven invaluable to its faith-based partners and continues to this day*
- *Knowledge-share needs to go both ways, faith literacy at the UN is important but so is literacy on the UN and multilateralism with local communities where the institution is still perceived as remote and inaccessible.*
- *There are many stories to be shared of the successes of FBOs and UN-FBO partnerships, and the UN continues to serve as the ideal space for these stories to be shared directly with member states and agencies, and to be amplified.*
- *The UN needs to continue to expand and update its list of local faith-based stakeholders and partners (over 500 to date);*
- *The UN and faith-based actors alike should continue to create a culture of critical self-*

*reflection and invigoration of narratives of leadership based on service.*

- *For all of the above, the UN needs to be better resourced by member states who see value in multi-faith collaboration with the UN - particularly as current levels of financial support to the UN system as a whole, can be undermined.*

**Session 3. Adding value to ongoing efforts by governments and other civil society entities toward realizing more "equitable and sustainable societies".** {Moderator: Ms. Paloma Escudero, UNICEF, Director of Communications}

*Interventions from:*

- Dr. Mohammed El-Sanoussi, Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers
- Rev. Victor Kazanjian, United Religions Initiative
- Rev. Dennis Frado, Lutheran World Federation/LWF
- Mr. Gopal Patel, Bhunmi Project
- Dr. Mustafa Ali, Arrigatou

This session looked at how FBOs and civil society was addressing the specific goal of realizing "equitable and sustainable societies", in conjunction with both governments, non-state actors, and UN entities. Dr. Mohammad El Sannusi invoked Ban Ki Moon as another wise ally alongside Kofi Annan who recognized the importance of working with FBOs, and the birth of the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (NRTP) can be traced back to him. It was with the support of the UN and the Finnish government that the organization came to fruition, and proved that there was an appetite for faith-based stakeholder collaboration to realize the 2030 goals. The creation of the network also confirmed that collaboration based on good-faith and a shared vision to achieve peace bolsters the legitimacy and credibility of the endeavor that encourages others to come to the table. The interfaith platform in the Central African Republic demonstrated this, as did the network's work in Kenya on countering violent extremism. Bodies like the NRTP show that when movements, faith leaders, the UN, and civil society come together, the road to solving problems can be made smoother and shorter.

The UN inspired the birth of another entity, the United Religions Initiative (URI), on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its inception in San Francisco. A group of 75 individuals from a variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds – which included indigenous groups – came together to create an

interfaith network to strengthen interfaith dialogue and coordinated action. The principle of “equity” is important to note here, as though the network tries to be as inclusive as possible, there are blind spots and some people are still not ‘at the table’. Reverend Victor Kazanjian reminded the audience that “if you aren’t included in the beginning, you’re not really included’, and we all as bridge makers need to do more to look around and ask ourselves who isn’t at the table, who doesn’t have access, and whose voices are we not involving. These voices can contain those that may not have been traditionally seen as part of faith, such as humanists. This is important, as our work should always affirm our joint humanity and fight against dehumanization which can happen inadvertently when certain groups are rendered ‘invisible” from the conversations. The work of promoting equity involves a lot of “rehumanizing” and confronting the dehumanization that faith groups can also be guilty of perpetuating. Environmental sustainability goes hand in hand with this. URI is determined to continue to champion inclusivity, and they have also focused on centering the concept of biodiversity in their advocacy by promoting the idea that diversity is the essence of life and arguing that biodiversity in nature is a mirror of our own human societies and is essential to our survival as a species.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has taken a similar approach of self-reflection and ‘walking the talk’ in its mission. A rights-based approach to their work, coupled with strong local church networks, has gone far in positively changing harmful behavioral mindsets in relation to issues such as gender justice. Projects have been initiated based on LWF adopting policies that reflect their own transformation, such as a gender justice policy. For instance, in one project the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (a member Church) added a provision to the constitution for its Ecclesiastical Court to ensure that gender equality is observed when dealing with family issues including inheritance. Previously, equal recognition was not accorded to women spouses and children. Now, in cases of separation or divorce, responsibility for the family and its affairs will be shared equally by the spouses. When it comes to inheritance, each spouse will be entitled to an equal share of the family’s inheritance. As well as mainstreaming policies into the organization that reflect the goals of the SDGS, LWF works closely with local groups to promote equitable treatment and sustainable practices. The launch of one project *Waking the Giant* is centered around ecumenical work that gives churches and local faith communities ownership of these principles. Over the next three years, the initiative will include development of a

self-assessment methodology and toolbox for churches to relate their ongoing work to Agenda 2030. They will also facilitate the creation of learning spaces for exchanges of experience and peer-to-peer learning on SDGs implementation.

Within the UN system The LWF has been collaborating formally with the UNHCR and host governments for more than 50 years. In addition to shadow reporting with treaty bodies, they will continue to advocate utilizing the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review mechanism and use other platforms, such as UNHCR consultations, to advocate for the rights of refugees at the global level. On Climate Justice, In the contexts of mitigation and adaptation, their focus is on the themes of justice-based approaches to transition and loss and damage by convening conversations between local faith communities, actors in the economic, business and technological sectors, and civil and state actors in the public sphere. Local climate-related advocacy and education by member churches include planting trees, advocating for land rights, promoting solar power, youth-led climate projects, and national projects that focus on ecological sustainability. These active endeavors demonstrate the commitment LWF has to practicing what they preach, and showing how FBOs can lead the way in transforming the power dynamics that continue to perpetuate harmful and oppressive structures.

Another organization that has managed to deliver on some impressive transformational changes, is the Bhumi Project, an international organization advocating for climate change policies and sustainable behavior. Mr. Gopal Patel spoke of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Oslo last year where there was a pledge to work with faith communities across the world to protect rainforests. This work has entailed engaging with prominent faith leaders on a global level, as well as grassroots faith leaders and activists to create hubs of action. These hubs now exist in Colombia, Peru, The DRC, Indonesia, and Brazil. Persuading faith leaders to advocate for the use of renewable energy resources are part and parcel of these hubs, and the *Shine* campaign is currently attempting to mobilize funds from faith communities to support renewable energy project. Another initiative *Faith Invest* is bringing together a range of stakeholders that include the Church of Sweden, World Council of Churches, and the Ikea Foundation amongst others, to invest in funding the fulfillment of the SDGs through faith community mobilization.

Public advocacy plays a crucial role in all these endeavors, and leading by example. That's why they have also launched a *living the change* campaign that encourages groups and leaders to make public pledges in reducing their carbon foot print through changes in their diet, transportation, and energy consumption. These activities have successfully managed to lead to some significant commitments from faith entities, including getting some FBOs to sign up to policies that promote environmental sustainability, encouraging Muslim Trusts to pledge to construct eco-friendly mosques, and even getting a Rabbi to go vegan.

Ms. Rebecca Rios-Kohn from Arrigatou spoke of the importance of having vision in inspiring others to achieve these shared goals. June Grant, the former head of UNICEF, was such a person. Those ideas and visions can best come back when you create an enabling environment for people to come together in a safe space and share ideas, as Arrigatou has been doing through their convening of inter-faith events to discuss the needs and rights of children. Their thematic priority has been on violence against children, and one of their partners is World Vision. Their role is not solely to convene, but to ensure that this discourse is translated on a grassroots level as well.

Participants raised the question of how do we bridge the gap between formal and informal structures? There are many "informal" spaces that exist below the radar where grassroots mediation, conflict resolution, and ideas are being discussed but we still struggle to develop a mechanism where they engage with institutions and formal spaces. How can we examine these structures politically and religiously? Another important point raised was on the topic of ethical leadership. Religion has been traditionally seen as the vestige and advocate of morality and ethics, yet we aren't seeing enough faith leadership tackling the lack of ethics and morality in political decision-making head on or in general in a variety of contexts around the world.

*Main Takeaways:*

- *There are numerous examples of successful UN-FBO partnerships, and the UN continues to add value as a standard setter and convener/connector of peoples and organisations.*
- *Religions continue to impact on behavioral change, and FBOs form an important vehicle through which to inspire and guide such transformations. Their value in this regard cannot be understated.*

- *Practicing what you preach is essential in persuading others, and is a key mark of leadership. Advocacy is most effective when those you are reaching out to believe in the integrity of both the message and the messenger.*
- *The UN and FBOs alike need to be more self-reflective and critical when it comes to the question of who they claim to represent, and who gets to "sit at the table".*

**Session 4. Identifying the current strengths and weaknesses of UN-FBO partnerships which both contribute to, and prevent the realization of "peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies".**

*Interventions from:*

- Ambassador Alvaro Albacete, KAICIID
- Rev. Mark Fowler, Tanenbaum
- Ms. Jean Duff, JLI/LFC
- Rev. Douglas Leonard, World Council of Churches/WCC
- Mr. James Standish, Adventist Development and Relief Agency/ADRA

The discussion continued regarding the benefits and drawbacks of engaging with the UN and faith-based actors. Ambassador Alvaro Albacete was frank about the creation of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) as the result of a negotiation between a variety of stakeholders who all hold different interests, but all shared a belief in the sacredness of humanity and life itself. Their mission to further interreligious dialogue and build peace, was committed to in three areas of work. The first, to work at the intersection of reconciliation, preventing violence, and furthering understanding and cohesion; the second, to focus on furthering development and assisting refugees, and the third, research and policy, with the help of UNESCO, to define a common language and vision that can be shared by all stakeholders, religious and not, in the endeavor to further interreligious dialogue and peace. Even though there are three member states involved in the initiative, the ideal is to expand this number to include more states. The Interfaith Forum of the African Union established three years ago with the help of KAICIID demonstrates both the commitment to interfaith action and dialogue and its challenges. The Forum has representation from all the major and majority faiths of the continent, yet minority faith representation is still lacking. KAICIID faces the same challenge and they are determined to include more traditional and minority faith leaders in their

work. The challenge of mixing politics and faith remains a minefield. Instrumentalisation and politicization can happen on both ends, and there is always the risk of the integrity and legitimacy of the states and faith leaders being manipulated for dubious purposes.

Reverend Douglas Leonard of the World Council of Churches (WCC) echoed the dangers of manipulation and added that many terrorist groups wouldn't have come to existence if it weren't for the lack of spaces for individuals to freely speak their minds and address issues of justice. The UN and member states have enabled the instrumentalisation of religion, and it needs to think carefully about how it can ensure greater access to the secretariat by marginalized peoples. *Intra-faith* based engagement has its challenges as well. The WCC has representation from mainly Protestant and Orthodox churches, but Pentecostals, Catholics, and Evangelicals are missing from the council. Muslim organizations also don't represent all groups, including different schools of thoughts within their own traditions.

In relation to the UN, the work of WCC in Zaatari Camp in Jordan would have been in chaos if it wasn't for the coordinating capabilities of the UN; 140 organizations each providing a service to 180,000 people would be difficult for any entity to coordinate, but the UN successfully did. In this, the UN's global role as a coordinator speaks for itself. The value that The WCC is adding mirrors that of the UN to an extent. It is currently convening a process of reconciliation in post-conflict Iraq with a variety of faith leaders. Their role there is only to serve and not direct, bringing these leaders together and facilitating the smoothest possible way to discuss in peace. Neither the UN nor member nations could not carry out this work as they do not hold the credibility and trust of the Iraqi people like their religious leaders do. In the context of Iraq (as in the context of so many countries in the world) it could only be a large faith-based organization with a track record of facilitating peacebuilding processes and with experience in political interventions that could do this kind of reconciliation work. Furthermore, there is a suspicion among religious groups and faith-based organizations that the UN and member states are not as interested in the ethical positions or prophetic witness that faith groups offer, but are interested instead solely in their utility and ability to fund and mobilize massive relief and development efforts.

Tanenbaum have been doing similar work in peacebuilding and conflict resolution for 20 years, and both recognize and award peacebuilders. Reverend Mark Fowler emphasized the three

elements of their peacebuilding work which involve identifying, recognizing, and studying the work of religiously motivated peace activists working in active conflict zones. The organization has compiled 23 cases studies of the peacemakers they have identified, and have a comprehensive criterion that must be met before they award them. These are:

1. Religious motivation: Their peacekeeping work must be fueled by their religious or spiritual beliefs
2. Armed conflict: They work or have worked in an area of armed conflict
3. At Risk: Their lives and/or liberty have been at risk as they pursued peace
4. Locally based: They are closely connected to the conflict situation at the local level. Most awardees are indigenous to the communities they serve, but some have left their original homes and spent many years embedded in a new environment.
5. Relatively unknown: Despite their impact, the peacemakers (should not) have received significant international attention or support at the time of their selection.

Rev. Mark shared the view that the weakness of FBOs is that they often reinvent the wheel, and are not as nimble as they should be in responding to issues of the day. Critical self-reflection is also in demand. He noted that "we need to be honest with ourselves on the topic of equitable, sustainable, and peaceful societies, and acknowledge how *non-sustainable, peaceful, and equitable* our societies are in the west." The UN has played its part in recognizing this, but there is still a false discourse that exists where these issues are only played out in active conflict zones or weak nation states. We too in the 'developed' world are dealing with massive inequalities and injustices, and if we are to address this endeavor seriously, we need to take a holistic approach that includes all states and societies.

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) has been a partner of several UN entities for many years, and has ECOSOC accreditation for two decades. In their view too, FBOs and the UN share the same goals. There are false dichotomies that are reiterated at times that suggest fundamental differences in the goals of FBOs and the UN, and we need to get better at 'doing' faith literacy to overcome these assumptions that ultimately hinder our shared work and vision. ADRA's culture has always been one to include indigenous people in their own relief and development service, and the organization has always embedded itself in the communities they serve because they see this work as

a marathon, not a sprint, and the service being delivered is not done 'to' people, but is owned by the people.

Evidence for both the importance of faith-based partnerships, and the impact that faith communities have in delivering on the SDGs, and other development and relief services has been in continuous demand from the UN. Ms. Jean Duff, who heads the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFLC), spoke of the role of the UN in creating this learning-based platform. In 2011, a series of conversations were taking place within the humanitarian and development sector on how to break through secular prejudices against engagement with FBOs in pursuit of the development goals. The answer was to improve the variety and scope of evidence that justified this engagement, and thus JLI was born. The online platform seeks to systematize the collection of stories and evidence and promote knowledge share on the impact that faith entities have in relation to societal well-being and wider development goals. The cooperation of academics, FBOs, and the UN has resulted in a plethora of quality data-sets of the impact that faith communities have in the area of relief, development, gender justice, and peacebuilding. The platform has been especially strengthened by the endorsement of the UN Interagency Task Force, and they look to the UN for standard setting in measurements and standard indicators. Two significant UN collaborations have also resulted from the appetite for evidence: one with UNHCR in Geneva collaborating with JLI's refugee learning hub, and one with UNICEF as they scale up their Faith for Global Change Initiative. Ms. Duff stressed the importance as well of bringing to light the abuses of faith if we want to be consistent in our calls for transparency, accountability, and empowering the marginalized.

The Head of the International Partnerships for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) Mr. Ulrich Nitschke, reflected on the journey of the creation of this international partnership. He referenced the UN Task Force's Donor-UN-FBO (DUF) roundtables as the forum which first convened the tripartite and then loosely formed Network of Religion and Development Peers.

Mr. Nitschke narrated the support of the German government, through the GIZ Sector Programme on Religion and Values, in significantly co-sponsoring one of the outcomes of the first DUF – a World Bank and JLIFLC co-organised conference on Religion and Development, which took place in Washington DC.

Post the World Bank Conference and the second UN-DUF follow-up meeting in New York (in the summer of 2015), with support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), through its implementing entity GIZ, successfully launched PaRD in 2016, in Berlin.

Reflecting on “the learning curve” and the “impressive growth process”, Mr. Nitschke noted that today, PaRD has over 90 members (FBOs, multilaterals and 8 governments), which are convened twice yearly by a GIZ-based secretariat, for joint advocacy around SDGs 3,5 and 16.

### **Concluding Narratives and the way forward**

Ms. Lopa Banerjee, UN Women's Director of the Civil Society Division, shared some concluding comments, providing constructive action steps and reminding the discussants that homogenous gatherings do not create change, dynamism and movement. “The time for action and leadership is now”, Ms. Banerjee noted, while pointing out that the UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) will continue to serve as the main theatre of engagement with the United Nations at the national levels, and that stronger UNDAFs are important for the UN's own reform processes. All the work that has built up to these reforms, including the child rights convention, the Beijing conference, and the 5-year review of the SDGs, are all entry points in which to engage with these reforms, and demonstrate leadership in committing to tackling global issues.

Moving forward, she urged that the UN charter should be the guiding document that reminds all that we share the same values and vision. Questions which should be uppermost on the mind of all partners, she noted, included: “how are we ensuring that our mission to achieve equitable and sustainable societies doesn't leave anyone behind? And how can we credibly address the threat to multilateralism that doesn't just rest on promoting its inherent good and essential value, but goes further in reimagining what it could look like in the present?”

Ms. Banerjee reiterated the advice of the UN Interagency Task Force for FBOs going forward, identifying specific entry points in dealing with the UN partners. These include more systematic

engagement with the UN's Functional Commissions<sup>1</sup>, given the latter set the normative standards, and monitor them. At the country level, engagement with the UN country teams and the Resident Coordinator office, which, as of January 2019, will be directly reporting to the UN's senior-most Executive Offices in New York.

*Main takeaways:*

- *Evidence for the impact of faith-based work has significantly increased, and there are more spaces and mediums that consolidate and disseminate that research than there were before. FBOs need to ensure that they collect evidence of stories and share them within these mediums. Analyzing how this research can affect behavioral changes in donors, communities, and other actors needs to be investigated further.*
- *FBOs working in the area of conflict resolution and peacebuilding are recognizing the importance of inclusivity, and are working towards increasing more diverse membership of both their organizations and the spaces they convene.*
- *The United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion maintains a role as a catalyst in convening multiple stakeholder platforms involving FBOs. The Task Force is also serving as an advisor to many of these platforms, as well as to other multilateral entities and to FBOs themselves.*

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://research.un.org/en/docs/ecosoc/functionalcommissions>

- *The creation of a **common narrative** of a shared humanity based upon the dignity of all, and anchored in international law...*
- *The diversity of faith-based and faith inspired civil society actors, many of whom are rooted in the work of social service provision, humanitarian relief, and advocacy for justice and dignity for all, can and do **uphold the multilateral spirit** ...*
- *A **new discourse (narrative and praxis) of leadership** is emerging, through integrating the lessons of decades of inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue, which are firmly anchored within joint partnerships around service to each and all members of humanity...*
- ***UN Donor Governments and Member States are key** to all efforts to realise the above with their support of and for the United Nations.*

A shared vision of what the partnerships between the United Nations and faith-based/ faith-inspired organisations, can serve to realize ...