

# Partners for Change: Religions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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## The Role of Religion in Sustainable Development and Peace

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Honourable Minister, Excellencies, religious leaders, ladies and gentlemen, sisters and brothers, friends,

This is a moment of hope. The theme and the initiative behind this event are meant to give hope to those who need that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) will be pursued with commitment and all available resources. The success of this conference depends on whether they discover reasons to believe that can happen.

The role of religion should be one that gives hope. This potential to give hope (sometimes against hope or general optimism) should be a prime criterion for the sound critique of religion. Let me come back to this thesis at the end of my presentation.

### **The Critical Role of Religion**

First of all, I thank you for this invitation to speak at the opening of this important and timely conference. My remarks will be based primarily on the experience and perspectives of the World Council of Churches (WCC), an ecumenical fellowship of churches founded in 1948 that today brings together 345 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in over 120 countries. I do not presume to speak for other churches or church-related organizations, let alone the billions of believers from other religious traditions and spiritualities. But our long experience of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and cooperation encourages me to think that many of my remarks will resonate with partners across the world of faith.

Let me express my thanks to you, Mr Minister, to the German government, and to all the partners in the new International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) launched earlier today. This initiative speaks eloquently of a *new recognition and appreciation by governments, bilateral donors, multilateral organizations and the entire international development community of the critical role of religion and religious actors in human and sustainable development, in humanitarian response, and in the search for peace*

in our conflict-torn world. Your address, Mr Minister, comprehensively advances all the arguments in favour of this partnership. It is not necessary for me to repeat them; however, there is something more to be said, as I agree with what you said. I hope that a partnership founded on these compelling grounds will:

- Share these insights with a growing circle of governmental and intergovernmental actors;
- Promote coordination across governmental agencies and departments so that religious engagement is systematic, consistent and meaningful;
- Ensure that the views and values of faith groups are taken seriously in the decision making and implementation, and that the temptation is resisted to instrumentalize them to accomplish policy goals; and
- Address legal and constitutional constraints inhibiting engagement with religious actors.

Since its most recent Assembly – in Busan, South Korea, in 2013 – the member churches of the WCC have understood themselves as being collectively engaged in a *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. This entails an ecumenical commitment by WCC member churches to moving and acting together in the vision and in the spirit of justice and peace – and in a spirit of partnership with all people of good will. Indeed, the need for forms of engagement and collaboration that bring all relevant actors together to address situations of conflict, poverty, environmental and social crisis, oppression and injustice has been powerfully evident throughout my recent visits to churches and partners in many parts of the world. Let me mention some of the countries I have visited recently, or where we are following closely the churches contributions for justice and peace: Colombia, Israel and Palestine, Syria and Iraq, Ukraine, Nigeria, Burundi, South Sudan, North and South Korea, Egypt, Cyprus.

These days we are also working closely with the churches and their related organizations to address the refugee situation in Europe. This has led to travels including visits to Germany, Greece, Italy, and Hungary, where the commitments and challenges for the churches are seen in quite different ways.

In confronting the current *crisis of compassion* affecting Europe and the international community's response to people fleeing from conflicts and oppression in Syria and elsewhere, we sought cooperation with the UN and other partners through a High-Level Conference convened in January this year. The affirmative response to that initiative from UNICEF, UNHCR, UNFPA and from the German government (represented by Federal Minister of the Interior Dr Thomas de Maizière) was a clear example of the growing interest we have seen in recent years among governmental, intergovernmental and civil society partners in a more active and constructive relationship with religious leaders, faith communities and faith-based organizations (FBOs). The gathering you have convened today offers the welcome prospect of a *consolidated platform for sharing information and best practice from the growing array of such relationships and forms of cooperation, and for*

*promoting a systemic approach to the role of religion in humanitarian response, development, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.*

### **What Religious Communities Can Contribute**

Another emblematic example of the new outreach and interest in engagement was the message presented by Dr David Nabarro, the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to a meeting of senior leaders of the ACT (Action by Churches Together) Alliance, Anglican Alliance, Caritas Internationalis and Lutheran World Federation, convened by the WCC on 8 February. Dr Nabarro emphasized **seven characteristic roles** of religious communities and faith-based development and humanitarian organizations which he considered distinctive and significant in advancing the Sustainable Development Agenda:

- Promoting the inclusion of different groups;
- Offering peaceful channels for conflict resolution;
- Upholding the human rights of the most vulnerable;
- Reminding political leaders of their duty to enable all people to realize their rights;
- Helping ensure that investment takes place in communities, with people at the local level making those investments with their own resources;
- Mobilizing people everywhere, especially young people;
- Sharing expertise on how to deliver services to those who are hardest to reach.

I am grateful to Dr Nabarro for his very generous and positive assessment of the contributions of religious actors to the realization of the 2030 Agenda. However, you, Mr Minister, have quite properly recognized a *more complex reality*, in which religious actors often fail to fulfil these aspirations, and sometimes do the opposite.

We have to admit, religion's role is both positive and negative. There are, in addition to the many positive dimensions of religion for development, other, negative effects that should be addressed particularly from within the communities and leaders of religions and in interfaith dialogues. I find it very relevant to say that religion can only overcome being part of the problem if we understand that we ourselves are part of the problem. The mutual accountability to one another as partners must include first of all accountability to those whom the efforts and initiatives are basically called to serve. Here I believe that there is a common standard for many in "the preferential option for the poor". This hermeneutical principle was developed by liberation theology, and later adopted by the ecumenical movement and particularly the WCC as a criterion for advocacy and service. (We also see that the World Bank uses this terminology now.)

## **A New Engagement: Part of the Solution**

In this context, I wish to underline the historical significance of this new engagement with religion, and of this conference. A literature review undertaken by DanChurchAid noted that as recently as 2000 the sociologist Kurt Allan ver Beek – after comprehensive research in development literature – concluded that “religion seems to be a *development taboo*”. Neither development academics nor development practitioners took an interest in the role of religion in development. On the contrary, they seemed consciously to avoid the subject – from a secular perception that religion was at best irrelevant for societal development and at worst was an obstacle to the advancement of social development and human rights.

Today, thankfully, religion is no longer a ‘taboo’ in political science and development literature. There has been a noticeable *discourse change*. The earlier understanding that “religion will gradually disappear when economic growth and modernization/globalization spread” now gives way to a growing recognition that religion plays an important – even a central - role in peoples’ lives, attitudes and practices, and therefore also in development. Religion informs peoples’ understanding of what constitutes a “good life”, their hope, their self-esteem and belief in their own dignity and rights, their inspiration for asserting their dignity and rights, and their resilience in times of crisis. Therefore, religion must be considered in development and humanitarian response.

It was 40 years ago that social scientist Peter L. Berger propagated the *secularization theory*. Today he has changed his opinion, recognizing that in most parts of the world religions are flourishing. In the past, Central and Western Europe seemed to be the model for a secular future. Today it is clear that they are an exception. Accepting that his secularization theory was wrong, Professor Berger – like many others – began to see that in practically all parts of the world religion is very much alive, and that it is not limited to the function of coping with moments of uncertainty and crisis in one’s private life, but remains a key factor shaping life in community.

Religions orient the lives and important decisions of many families and communities on a strong base of values. With their holistic world views, religions continue to challenge the development of economic and political sub-systems that dominate societies and undermine and fragment life in community. At their best, religious communities and religious leaders have raised their voices in the context of economic injustice and rampant inequality, the misuse of political power, the ugly face of racism or of violence against women and children. The WCC has been calling for respect for human rights, the rule of law as well as respect for international law. These are all essential for our vision of a just peace, a shalom, salam, that includes development and hope.

## Levels of Cooperation

Religious pluralism and multi-religious societies have become – self-evidently – an ever more significant reality in the context of globalization, migration and massive flows of refugees. Yet with a shared commitment to the flourishing of communities and nature, religious leaders are able to cooperate across faith boundaries to demonstrate care for creation, justice, reconciliation and peace. At the WCC, we have experienced this again and again in our inter-religious relationships, in such instances as these:

- *interfaith cooperation at COP 21 in Paris – a common witness of religious leaders addressing climate change;*
- *hope for young people in Egypt in cooperation with Al Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church;*
- *action against violence and for reconciliation of communities in Nigeria;*
- *interfaith coalitions for gender justice.*

In our experience, practical cooperation on the basis of shared values, concerns and goals is the best hermeneutical tool towards common understanding and mutual recognition – they are capacities so urgently needed in the face of religiously-inspired violence and justification of terrorism based on exclusion and denial of the dignity of the other. And there is still a vast unexplored terrain for such cooperation in addressing shared human development concerns.

In the leading development policy approach today – the Rights Based Approach (RBA) – development practitioners aim for change at different levels – at the levels of policies, of practices and of beliefs, values and ideas. Some may fear that engagement with religion and religious actors could undermine the rights based approach. On the contrary, a fuller understanding of religion’s role will help complete the picture. Hitherto, development actors have generally engaged mostly with the two top levels (policies and practices) and avoided engaging with the foundational level of “beliefs, values and ideas”, even if this is probably the most important level for sustainable change.

An example is the promotion of more equal gender relationships between women and men (SDG 5) – or, in our terminology, a *Just Community of Women and Men*. Good policies and recognized practices may bring us a long way. But only when men begin to see themselves differently and women internalize their equality and claim their God-given dignity is the change sustainable. And the primary source of *social capital* to drive – or obstruct – this change is very often in the communities of faith and the precepts they teach.

Whether in the context of advancing gender equality, of promoting human rights and inclusion, or of addressing extremist violence, the fact that the role of religion may be ambiguous simply serves to underline that *religion is never irrelevant for development*, if the change we desire is to be sustainable.

## Global Goals, Local Communities

The shift in discourse towards greater recognition of religion's role in development processes coincides with the shift from technical, limited Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the *holistic, integrated and universal agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). The convergence of these two trends hold great potential, yet they also challenge us as churches, faith communities and FBOs to find our proper means and methods of engagement with this framework.

In this regard, let me be clear: Churches and other religious communities are not engaged in humanitarian response and development because of the SDGs (or the MDGs), but because of their fundamental faith commitments to respecting human dignity, to serving the community, to protecting creation, and to witnessing to the divine. The faith that is our fundamental point of reference is expressed and brought into action in many ways: in confidence and trust in God, in the content of doctrine, in the teaching of the tradition, in a commitment to serve and share, in embodying a community of faith and practice, in common witness in words and deeds.

As communities of faith, our relevance to this discourse goes far beyond the common recognition that FBOs “run high quality clinics and schools and are present in the remotest corners”. Local religious authorities and institutions are fully part of their communities. They are, in almost all development contexts, the *key sources of social capital for sustainable change, transformation and hope*. The contributions to promoting the 2030 Agenda made by agencies – whether intergovernmental, governmental, international NGOs or FBOs for that matter – may be, and undoubtedly will be, very valuable. But if the social capital of local religious authorities and institutions is not engaged, I fear that sustainable change and transformation will elude us.

Speaking for the WCC, its member churches, and our ecumenical partner organizations – and I am sure for many other partners from other faith traditions – we welcome the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its holistic approach to framing the challenges we collectively face and the goals and indicators to guide our responses. We welcome, among others, the inclusion of SDG 16 to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. We are grateful for Dr Nabarro's identification of climate change, women's equality and rights, resolution of protracted crises, human rights for all and “leaving no one behind” as “golden threads” in this agenda. We are open to joining in collective efforts for these purposes, especially through *national and local action*.

One recent example of that openness: Last week in Zimbabwe some 110 representatives of the highest church leadership, deans, pastors, youth network representatives and prominent actors from development FBOs came together with government representatives and a mix of civil society organizations, media and academia to subscribe to the SDGs and

proactively define the role of churches and all FBOs' role in the realization of the SDGs in Zimbabwe.

And last month DanChurchAid/ACT Alliance published a 30 page "Annotated Bibliography on Religion and Development" for practitioners who seek guidance and tools to translate an academic awareness of religion's role into hands-on programme dialogue, planning and implementation in relation to the SDGs.

Together with our international ecumenical partners the ACT Alliance, Anglican Alliance, Caritas Internationalis and Lutheran World Federation, and with many other partners inspired by faith, we hope to be able to do much more to accompany and support local churches and faith communities in their engagement with the SDG framework.

### **Hope Is Indispensable**

Finally, and most importantly, let me stress that the characteristic message and contribution of religion must be hope. *Hope is a defining quality of faith.* From a specifically Christian perspective, the church's role in society must be based on a faith that has a prophetic, critical approach aimed at transformation and hope, not marked by fatalism, by indifference, devaluation or demonization of others, but by love. In our understanding, faith is intrinsically linked to and only properly understood under the criterion of love. Moreover, true hope is never only for me and my own community; it is anchored in a transformational event that has universal implications. Accordingly, I believe that if it is not a hope for all, it is not a real hope, and it is not a Christian hope. A necessary condition for hope is that it expresses itself in love for others, whoever and wherever they are.

I believe and affirm that with this narrative of *faith, hope and love* in our hearts and minds, the transformations envisaged in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – *for people, planet and prosperity* – are possible, and can be achieved through a "whole society engagement" fully inclusive of the religious reality.

I thank you for your attention.