



## **World Council of Churches' submission for UN New Agenda for Peace**

### **Introduction**

Formed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the perspectives and priorities of the World Council of Churches (WCC) were marked from the outset by moral abhorrence at the suffering resulting from and atrocities perpetrated in that conflict. In response, the WCC committed itself to working for the development of international law, to promoting multilateral international cooperation, and to a holistic approach to seeking a sustainable global peace founded on justice and human rights.

At the 11th Assembly of the WCC, held in Karlsruhe, Germany, on 31 August-8 September 2022, delegates from the WCC's over 350 member churches in more than 120 countries, representing a total global constituency of approximately 580 million people, reflected on a current context in which all of those commitments and values are threatened and undermined. The prevailing 'polycrisis' of climate change, conflict, forced displacement, pandemic, rampant inequality, economic instability and political fragmentation was recognized by the Assembly as demanding a holistic approach and intensified international cooperation more than ever before.

Among other relevant policy positions<sup>1</sup>, the Karlsruhe Assembly:

- rejected the polarization and division of the human community and declared WCC's commitment to stay together as an ecumenical fellowship, and to grapple with the threats and challenges to peace, justice, human security and environmental sustainability through dialogue, encounter, the pursuit of mutual understanding, and cooperation, rather than through exclusion and confrontation;
- reasserted the ecumenical movement's rejection and denunciation of war as contrary to the will of God;
- reiterated calls for a global ceasefire, as an urgent moral imperative, in all armed conflicts around the world, and for parties to such conflicts to engage and persist in dialogue and negotiations until just and sustainable peace can be achieved, and to abstain from war;
- appealed for much greater financial and practical support by the international community for peace-building and peace-making rather than for division and military confrontation, and underlined the important role of women and youth as peacemakers;
- called for greatly increased investment by governments and other actors in the foundations of true human security and global stability, including for urgent action for climate justice and to avert the threat of catastrophic climate change, for a just transition to renewable energy,

---

<sup>1</sup> Expressed especially in the Assembly statement "[The Things That Make For Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity](#)", September 2022

- for the elimination of extreme poverty, for sustainable development, and for measures to control rampant inequality, including through tax justice and reparations; and
- encouraged renewed efforts to reform and improve the effectiveness of UN and other intergovernmental instruments for promoting peace and human security.

Accordingly, the WCC welcomes the opportunity to make this submission for the ‘New Agenda for Peace’, proposed by the UN Secretary-General in his report “[Our Common Agenda](#)”.

## **Submission**

The WCC strongly affirms the urgency of the Secretary-General’s call for concerted collective efforts to respond effectively to multiple converging global challenges, or risk significant systemic breakdown and perpetual crisis.

We concur with many of the main directions proposed for promoting peace and preventing conflicts, including with regard to:

- Reducing strategic risks (nuclear weapons, cyberwarfare, autonomous weapons);
- Strengthening international foresight;
- Investing in prevention and peacebuilding;
- Supporting regional prevention; and
- Putting women and girls at the centre of security policy.

Further, we underline the intersectionality of many proposals in other areas, and their critical importance for sustainable peace, including especially:

- Urgent and effective action to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies;
- A renewed social contract anchored in human rights;
- Universal social protection, including health care and basic income security;
- Removing barriers to young people’s participation in politics and society;
- Ensuring that policy and budget decisions take into account their impact on future generations;
- Eradicating violence against women and girls;
- Promoting women’s economic inclusion;
- Legal identity for all, ending statelessness, and protection of internally displaced persons, refugees and migrants;
- Ending the ‘infodemic’, ‘fake news’ and ‘the war against science’;
- Tackling corruption and illicit financial flows
- Reforming the international tax system;
- Promoting regulation of artificial intelligence; and
- Stronger global health security and preparedness.

Among the many issues that must be encompassed in the New Agenda for Peace, we wish to place special emphasis on the following:

### **Nuclear disarmament**

Though the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought the threat of nuclear conflagration back more prominently into the public discourse and consciousness, the threat had always persisted. Despite paying lip service to their obligations under Article VI of the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) (NPT), nuclear-weapon states have consistently resisted progress towards the

“general and complete disarmament” that the NPT envisages. Moreover, international efforts to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons have been fatally undermined by the obvious hypocrisy of such efforts being led by members of the same club of recalcitrant nuclear-weapon states.

It is legally and ethically anomalous that unlike chemical weapons, biological weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, nuclear weapons – the most indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction ever created by human beings – are not prohibited in a comprehensive and universal manner. The [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) seeks to fill this gap in the international disarmament regime, by establishing a new normative principle in international law for the comprehensive elimination of nuclear weapons, prohibiting the development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use and threat of use of such weapons, as well as assistance and encouragement to the prohibited activities, in line with the commitment expressed under article VI of the NPT. Rather than on the narrow military/security basis of previous nuclear disarmament negotiations, the TPNW is founded upon recognition of the appalling humanitarian and ecological consequences of nuclear warfare. Nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-umbrella states that seek to undermine and obstruct the TPNW do so at the peril of the entire globe.

Moreover, non-proliferation efforts within the framework of a multilateral commitment to the comprehensive elimination of nuclear weapons will carry greater political weight and credibility than such efforts by nuclear-weapon states while seeking to retain their own arsenals and the political leverage they bring.

Therefore, the WCC expects the New Agenda for Peace strongly to profile the TPNW as the hitherto missing link in the nuclear disarmament regime, and to build upon the new normative principles it has introduced for the stigmatization of nuclear weapons (regardless of who possesses them) and for accelerating progress towards the elimination of this most morally egregious category of weapons.

#### Other disarmament challenges

The WCC is greatly disturbed by the efforts by some States and private companies to develop autonomous weapons systems – so-called ‘killer robots’ – capable of being deployed and engaging in theatres of armed conflict without meaningful human control. The concern we have for the regulation of artificial intelligence in general is greatly amplified with regard to applications of AI in armed conflict. The moral and legal issues are so self-evident that they hardly require belabouring here. However, the WCC expects that the New Agenda for Peace will be clear and categorical in its opposition to autonomous weapons systems, and in its support for a pre-emptive ban on such weapons.

Likewise, the New Agenda for Peace should include a stronger renewed focus on controlling and reversing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which bring so much death and suffering in so many societies in both South and North, in some cases to the point of destabilizing entire nations. The WCC has been a strong advocate for the [Arms Trade Treaty](#) (ATT) and its implementation. We believe that in this period of escalating militarization, confrontation and social fragmentation, there must be even stricter oversight and control of the manufacture of and trade in small arms and light weapons, nationally and internationally, to prevent the spread of such weapons becoming even more of a threat to peace and social stability.

## Supporting national capacities for prevention, peacebuilding and resilience: The role of religious leaders and interfaith peacebuilding

The WCC strongly affirms the need for the New Agenda for Peace to promote increased support for national capacities for prevention, peacebuilding and resilience, and investment in national-level infrastructure for peace. Within this context, we particularly wish to highlight the importance of engaging religious leaders and faith-based actors. In many societies, especially - but not only - in the Global South, religious leaders, communities and institutions constitute the foundations of societal resilience, remaining even when governmental and other forms of authority fail or are absent.

Moreover, the years since the 1992 UN [Agenda for Peace](#) was published have been tragically and indelibly marked by the phenomenon of religiously-inspired extremism, and violence and conflict based on religious identity. In far too many, and seemingly an increasing number of contexts around the world, people and communities are targeted and attacked, often with deadly violence, on the basis of their religious identity. In situations where religious discrimination is reflected in official or practical access to citizenship rights, the risks of such violence are greatly elevated. In such contexts, interfaith cooperation to prevent and confront violence, and to promote inclusion, equal citizenship, and fundamental human rights for all is of vital importance. WCC and its member churches work with interfaith partners in many conflict-affected and conflict-risk situations around the world for these purposes.

Given the current and historical context in which the New Agenda for Peace is being formulated, in which religious discrimination and hatred has been a key driver of conflict but in which religion also remains such an important source of societal resilience, we expect that appropriate recognition and prominence will be given to the importance of engaging with faith-based and interfaith peacemakers at the national level in the construction of sustainable peace.

### Sanctions/economic warfare

Though sanctions are generally and understandably seen as preferable to measures for the restoration of international peace and security that entail the use of armed force, in WCC's experience this presumption warrants much closer examination and reconsideration. In practice, sanctions – whether unilateral or mandated by the UN Security Council – often produce humanitarian suffering and other consequences at least as severe, and generally more widespread, than the use of armed force. In terms of their humanitarian impacts, such measures can often be considered as tantamount to warfare by economic means. This is particularly true in the case of comprehensive 'maximum pressure' sanctions regimes. The imposition of such measures can also poison the political environment for negotiations and other initiatives for peace (including civil society initiatives), creating major obstacles to the resolution of conflict.

Moreover, according to our observations, sanctions and related measures are generally unsuccessful in achieving their stated aims. Therefore, we recommend that the New Agenda for Peace include a commitment to a thorough 'cost-benefit' analysis of the current utilization of sanctions and related measures, weighing their success (or lack thereof) in achieving their legitimate political/security aims against their negative humanitarian, human rights and political impacts.

WCC recently partnered with the World Evangelical Alliance, Caritas Internationalis, ACT Alliance and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva) to undertake

research on the negative impacts of sanctions on humanitarian and social service activities from the specific perspective of churches and church-related organizations. The report is available [here](#).

### Mental health/psychosocial support and trauma-healing

To avoid repetition and inter-generational transmission of cycles of violence and instability, mental health, psycho-social support and trauma-healing is often the missing link. It is also generally the most underfunded component of any crisis response. In our view, the New Agenda for Peace must seek to raise the profile of and the support provided to this essential contribution to peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies, not only in the context of preventing conflict but also for addressing many other aspects of the current 'polycrisis', and with a special priority for children and young people.

Especially in contexts where professional mental health services are inadequate to the scale of the need, local religious leaders and faith communities are often by default the primary providers – or potential providers – of psycho-social care and support. Again in the context of investing in local/national resilience, we recommend engagement with and capacity-building for local religious leaders and communities to enable them to provide better and more effective care in this domain, in order to help rebuild lives, and to break the cycle of violence and instability.

### The resource extraction-conflict nexus

Resource extractive activities such as drilling for oil and gas, mining, and logging, not only impose heavy ecological costs, but have often been linked to increased incidence, frequency and duration of armed violence, particularly in contexts marked by high levels of socio-economic inequality and where local communities have been largely excluded from decision-making processes. In addition, the militarization of resource-rich lands with a view to exerting state or corporate control over resources has often led to violence and grave violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, farmers and fisher-folk, and threats against environmental defenders including religious leaders who have spoken out against such activities.

We believe that the effective management of a society's natural resources – not least ensuring equitable sharing of benefits and just allocation of burdens – must be a priority not only for the sustainable development agenda but also for the New Agenda of Peace. In this regard, policies that promote equitable wealth distribution, public investment and dignified employment must be given due importance.

Moreover, we observe that continued development of new fossil fuel extraction and related infrastructure constitutes – in the context of the accelerating climate emergency – a kind of weapon of mass destruction (so-called 'carbon bombs') imperiling the entire living planet. The New Agenda for Peace should name, stigmatize and denounce this kind of environmental violence and destruction.

### Racial justice

The commitment to racial justice, the elimination of xenophobia and of related intolerance has been widely discussed, affirmed and reiterated in various UN forums. However, these threats to our shared humanity remain firmly entrenched in most societies across the world. The persistence of racism, xenophobia and related discrimination remains a major threat to peace in many societies, the salience of which is increasing in some contexts. Accordingly, the New Agenda for Peace must help raise the profile and resources allocated to the UN racial justice mechanisms and amplify calls for inclusive and sustainable communities, free from such discrimination.

The intersection of racism and climate, health, food and social injustice must be lifted up in the New Agenda for Peace. because in our view sustainable peace will be impossible to achieve if some groups of people continue to be disproportionately burdened by the “polycrisis” of today according to their race, ethnicity, colour or place of origin.

### **Conclusion**

The WCC welcomes the convergences and intersectionalities recognized in the framing of the New Agenda for Peace. Indeed, in a world beset by such a constellation of converging crises, a traditional silo-ed approach to addressing peace and security could not pretend to be fit for the purpose.

Moreover, the increasing gulf between global humanitarian needs (driven by the growing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, as well as by conflict) and the resources committed to meeting those needs, obliges the international community to finally move beyond rhetoric to action to address the upstream root causes in order to prevent such crises rather than perpetually failing to meet the critical humanitarian needs they produce.

Respectfully submitted

Peter Prove  
Director, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs  
World Council of Churches

Geneva, 6 April 2023