The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development

The First Year: From Vision to Action
Religion and Sustainable Development

Eight out of ten people in the world affiliate with a religion. Beliefs, values and religious practices are a part of daily life around the world and therefore religious leaders and communities influence the thoughts and actions of billions of people. The wide acknowledgment of the sustained importance of religion in societies throughout the world has directed growing attention to the role of religion in public policy.

Most notably, religion is frequently made responsible for instability and violence. However, the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) estimates that only 14% of all conflicts in 2013 were significantly caused by religious factors. While religion at times is indeed a genuine driver of conflicts or may be misused for political reasons, aspects such as social injustice, economic disparity, and corruption remain to be the most significant drivers of conflicts.

In contrast, the positive role religious actors frequently play in directly assisting those suffering, resolving conflicts and building peace all too often remains to be a little-known fact. For example, religious organisations (ROs) are significant actors in supporting the 200.5 million people who were affected by wars and other emergencies worldwide in 2014. Within the field of humanitarian assistance, roughly 420 million USD were spent in 2013 by ROs in man-made emergencies and natural disasters across the globe.

Notably, their beneficiaries include many of the 65.3 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. For people affected by emergencies and living in harsh conditions religion provides a source of strength and resilience. In addition, religion does not only play a role for the affected people, but it also inspires the work of millions of volunteers and professionals around the globe.

ROs use these strengths not only in humanitarian assistance, but also in sustainable development. Most notably, ROs provide essential services in healthcare, education and basic social services throughout the world. For instance, the World Bank estimates that ROs and faith communities provide more than 50% of all health and education services in sub-Saharan Africa.

The preamble of ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 – emphasises that “as we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.” Therefore, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

The unique global and local networks fostered by religious actors reach into the most remote corners of the world. ROs have strong and long-lasting ties to local communities and often reach isolated populations, which cannot be accessed by other actors.

Development specifically calls for all involved actors to “revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. Members and partners of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) commit their dedication to build such a global partnership on religion and sustainable development, which aims to facilitate and leverage dialogue and cooperation between parties from all nationalities, cultures, and religions.

The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) aims to strengthen and leverage ongoing cooperation, as well as to facilitate new collaboration between religious and secular actors in international development. It brings together its members and partners from all over the world in order to harness the positive impact of religion in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance.

Membership of PaRD is open to all governmental and intergovernmental entities. Partners are civil society and non-governmental organisations such as religious organisations, secular NGOs, community initiatives, foundations, academic institutions and other relevant development organisations committed to the 2030 Agenda. PaRD recognises the crucial role cooperation between these groups of actors has played in sustainable development and emphasises the importance of sustaining and enhancing it to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, PaRD aims to further and institutionalise communication and coordination between secular and religious actors. PaRD uses synergies with existing networks and initiatives to contribute towards a more coherent and effective international agenda on religion and development.

Within PaRD, both religious and secular members and partners jointly emphasise the importance of their shared beliefs and the vital importance of the values behind them, which are capable of bringing about holistic change in the spirit of ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. Despite different motivations and backgrounds, partnerships between religious and secular actors rely on a strong mutual agreement that universal human rights and religious values, such as human dignity, go hand in hand. By enabling dialogue, PaRD furthers and strengthens such agreements in order to better harness the positive potential of religion in sustainable development.

The partnership offers access to a growing community of members and partners contributing their knowledge and insights to that end in various ways. Through active participation in PaRD, members and partners shape the discourse on religion and development on a global stage.
Partnership Principles

Members and partners are committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda and identify with the following guiding principles:

- Commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Human Rights standards
- Focus on the 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the SDGs
- Equality of all humans
- Leave no one behind – Inclusivity and diversity in regional, sectoral, religious and gender representation
- Agreement to reciprocity by not only benefitting from PaRD, but also contributing one’s own expertise
- Transparency in governance structure and decision making procedures
- Intellectual ownership – contributing members and partners remain owners of their publications and products
- Dedication to building bridges between existing knowledge of governments and civil society initiatives
- Non-profit status – programmes, products and publications developed and made accessible through PaRD have no commercial purpose and are available to all members and partners
- Self-reflexivity and regular critical review of work and outcomes
Members

6 King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), Vienna, Austria, http://www.kaicid.org/
7 Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Oslo, Norway, https://www.norad.no/
8 Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Stockholm, Sweden, http://www.sida.se/English/

Partners

18 ACT Alliance, Geneva, Switzerland, www.actalliance.org
19 Ahimsa Fund, Lyon, France, www.ahimsa-fund.com
20 Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Bath, UK, www.arworld.org
22 Bahá’í International Community, New York, USA, https://www.bic.org/
24 Buddhist Global Relief, Carmel, USA, https://buddhistglobalrelief.org/index.html
In order to build a global partnership in the spirit of SDG 17, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) organised the conference ‘Partners For Change – Religions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. On February 17th and 18th 2016 BMZ welcomed state representatives, religious actors, academics, and international development organisations from around the globe in Berlin. The conference set out to discuss and exemplify cooperation between secular and religious actors as a crucial avenue for sustainable development.

The main panel of the conference was titled ‘Religions and the 2030 Agenda’ and featured the Associate Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Eric G. Postel, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman, the Archbishop of Lahore Sebastian Francis Shaw, as well as long-standing former Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and former German Environment Minister, Prof. Klaus Töpfer.

In three broad thematic areas – People, Planet, and Peace – a range of workshops focused on finding practical approaches to integrate the positive potential of religion towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. In order to continue and institutionalise the dialogue sparked at the conference, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) was launched by Parliamentary State Secretary Thomas Silberhorn (BMZ) during the conference.

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Work (UNIATF) convened a high-level special session titled ‘Religious Engagement’ at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul on May 23rd 2016. Over 170 attendants came together and emphasised the important role religious actors play in the face of the current acute demand for humanitarian relief. Currently, more than 125 million people worldwide are affected by both man-made emergencies and natural disasters. Religious organisations are often the first to respond to their needs, assist them and alleviate their suffering. In the outcome document, the special session’s distinct panellists reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of compassion, humanity and impartiality, and pledged to prevent and resolve conflict as well as to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation. They concluded by agreeing to build on existing faith infrastructure in communities in order to contribute to sustainable solutions to humanitarian crises.

On this occasion, PaRD published a brochure titled ‘Religious Engagement in Humanitarian Crises – Good Practice Collection’. The publication exemplifies the positive impact of ROs in humanitarian assistance and their ability to assist their beneficiaries swiftly in emergencies across the globe. Notably, they enjoy several unique advantages, such as the ability to rapidly mobilise a large volunteer base, global networks deeply rooted in local communities, and an exceptionally high level of trust.

The event was co-organized by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (UNOGPRP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engagement Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Work (UNIATF), the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), the Governments of Italy, Norway and Spain, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Institute for Strategic Studies and Democracy (ISSD) Malta.

Speakers and panelists addressed how ROs work within the international community to find shared solutions to the global challenge of forced migration. An additional focus was put on human trafficking and accompanying human rights violations, as well as the ways in which they can aggravate forced migration. The event allowed for the exchange of ideas and best practices, while highlighting remaining challenges. In sum, it served to illustrate the role of religion in one of the most significant challenges to global policy in the past years and how religion may contribute to sustainable and durable solutions to it.

PaRD held its first ever annual meeting from October 16th to 19th 2016 in Abuja, Nigeria, formally bringing together members and partners for the first time. The members of PaRD officially welcomed the first fourteen partners to join the partnership, all of which are doing exceptional work in sustainable development.

Members and partners agreed to develop and implement joint activities in the following areas of common interest: Peace, Security and Religion, Gender Equality and Empowerment, as well as Health with a special focus on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. The attendants further agreed to work together on the cross-cutting issue of supporting Human Dignity and Universal Human Rights.

Panelists at the roundtable discussion on violence, extremism and religion included Dr. Azza Karam (UNFPA), Matthias Eder (KAICIID), Imrana Alhaji Buba (Youth Coalition Against Terrorism-YOCAT) and Nicholas Songora Odoll (Manyatta Youth Entertainment Cho-MAYE) with a keynote speech delivered by Professor Amr Abdalla, Senior Advisor on Policy and Research at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) Addis Ababa. Panelists discussed the necessity to look beyond common explanations for radicalisation and violent extremism, such as political or socioeconomic factors. While these factors cannot be neglected, they are not able to fully explain radicalisation and extremism in the name of religion. Instead, ideas and ideologies as well as cultural, historical and religious contexts are crucial for explaining violent extremism. Thus, the panelists agreed on the need to also involve religious actors in order to find lasting solutions to violence and extremism.
In consultation with partners, the members of PaRD have identified areas of common interest for their first annual programme. These areas of interest are focused on the SDGs and have been developed into the following three workstreams which are all interconnected by the cross-cutting issue of Human Dignity and Human Rights:

1. Peace, Security & Religion (SDG 16)
2. Gender Equality & Empowerment (SDG 5)
3. Health (SDG 3)

The first PaRD workstream focuses on the role of religion in the field of Peace and Security. Many conflicts throughout history have had a religious dimension, yet religious actors have been equally present in peacebuilding efforts, reconciliation and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. During conflict, religious leaders can positively draw on a shared worldview and evoke a common framework of beliefs and values to gain support for non-violent approaches to resolve conflicts and build social cohesion. Similarly, compassion and empathy sustain peace, while a sense of identity and emotional support increases individual and communal resilience in the face of adversity.

The second PaRD workstream – Gender Equality and Empowerment – focuses on including religious leaders and ROs in tackling gender injustice. Religious actors are in an excellent position to provide guidance towards gender equality by reaffirming and emphasising the core insight that every person has an intrinsic value and dignity regardless of gender.

The enormous outreach of religious and faith-based organisations to local communities represents a vital asset as part of a comprehensive and sustainable response to public health emergencies and basic service provision alike. Therefore, Workstream 3 – with a special focus on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) – concentrates on religious organisations as substantial partners in the delivery of healthcare and in fighting social stigma related to diseases such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS.

Just as the Sustainable Development Goals are interconnected in their theoretical and practical dimensions, all workstreams are bound together by the topic of Human Rights and Human Dignity. This cross-cutting issue is acknowledged to be a significant part of the work in all activities of PaRD.

Within each Workstream, PaRD members and partners have agreed to jointly implement activities in the following areas of cooperation:

1. Knowledge sharing and learning exchange
2. Networking and dialogue
3. Capacity building, and
4. Policy advice.

Accordingly, activities include, but are not limited to, conducting training on religious literacy, piloting projects with global partners, compiling and making existing literature accessible, as well as collaborating on policy briefs and discussion papers.