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Inter-religious engagement for Zero Hunger

Summary Report from events at the World Food Programme, 12-13 June 2016

Partnerships for Zero Hunger

In early 2016, WFP's leadership decided to seek enhanced partnership with religious actors. This investment was motivated by the realization that in today's world of unprecedented need and inadequate solutions, ending hunger is possible only through meaningful collaboration between governments, religious leaders, faith-inspired organizations, global food agencies and other stakeholders. To launch its initiative, WFP invited His Holiness Pope Francis to address its Annual Executive Board meeting. This historic event inspired the organization and its staff to meet a range of challenges posed by global trends and to continue their mission to reach the most marginal people in the most marginal places, guided by the ultimate goal of ending hunger.

In addition to the Papal visit – which lent a remarkable spiritual support to WFP's religious partnership initiative – WFP invited a group of religious scholars and leaders to a series of meetings. The purpose was to determine the level of interest amongst religious actors in engaging with WFP, and to discuss how best to join forces to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030 - as stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In support of the discussion, WFP also asked a range of religious leaders to share their perspectives in advance. The unique set of statements submitted not only provided a rich set of ideas and concerns; they also inspired the dialogue as well as the ensuing commitment to joint action. This summary report seeks to provide an impression of the different viewpoints and issues raised in the course of the 12-13 June meetings.

The principle of complementarity underpinned the conversation. Faith leaders and organizations have deep roots in communities and intimate knowledge of local needs and vulnerabilities. WFP, for its part, has the expertise and the capacity to work at scale. Each year WFP reaches 80 million people affected by conflict, disasters, climate change and chronic hunger. By working together, WFP and religious actors have the potential to broaden their collective reach and amplify public support for the common goal of a world without hunger.

Inter-religious panel discussion with the WFP Membership

"This is a historic day," observed Joshua DuBois, the moderator of the dialogue and CEO of Values Partnerships. Noting that it was the first time WFP had gathered faith-based partners in this way, he suggested that faith communities had several qualities which could advance Zero Hunger, among them moral imagination, practical capacity and prophetic advocacy.

Introducing the discussion, WFP's Executive Director Ertharin Cousin paid tribute to the concrete actions of faith-inspired organizations especially in many remote and difficult environments, which made them natural partners for WFP. She highlighted the need for a serious conversation on engaging local faith-based groups and stressed WFP's commitment to extend its strong operational partnerships with faith actors on the ground to more strategic engagement at global level.

Dr. Azza Karam, chair of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Faith-Based Organization partners, outlined the ongoing UN-wide efforts to engage faith actors, stressing that religious organizations are incontestably the world's oldest social service providers and often the first responders in emergencies. Growing attention internationally to the roles of faith actors was evident at the World Humanitarian Summit- which produced a Charter for religious based humanitarian action - and through the recent establishment of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD).

Mohamed Ashmawey, former CEO of Islamic Relief Worldwide, and Kevin Jenkins, CEO of World Vision International, both argued that faith-inspired groups had been underutilized by the international community as partners in humanitarian and development assistance. Indeed, a goal as ambitious as Zero Hunger would be unattainable without them. "We need to engage them and see where they fit in best, where they can be most helpful," Kevin Jenkins noted, while also cautioning that faith communities were not the silver bullet in the fight against hunger. Mohamed Ashmawey underlined that: "When crisis hits, it's always the church, the synagogue, the mosque that people go to for help".

The powerful advocacy role of faith institutions was highlighted by David Beckmann, President of Bread for the World and the Alliance to End Hunger. He also stressed the need for learning, both in the UN and among religious actors. "It really seems feasible to finally end hunger by 2030. But it requires all of us to change: religious communities, governments, WFP – all of us," he said.

The combined innovative and moral leadership of faith communities was stressed by Dr. Gunisha Kaur, Director of the Global Health Initiative at the Weill Cornell Medical College. She observed that only by breaking with current, normal approaches can we hope to achieve the goal of Zero Hunger. "By embarking on a multi-dimensional approach in which faith-based groups would play their part to the full, the world could double the potential impact of efforts to achieve Zero Hunger," she said.

Several speakers stressed the common sense of urgency and voiced their moral indignation given the availability of ample resources and knowledge to address hunger. Swami Agnivesh, social activist and board member of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, called hunger a structural form of violence and sounded the call for urgent action.

Many panelists also reinforced the call made by Pope Francis in his address to the WFP Executive Board the same day for denormalizing and debureaucratizing poverty, hunger and the suffering of others. "In some cases, hunger is used as a weapon of war," Pope Francis said, and added: "we are fully aware of this, yet we allow our conscience to become anesthetized. We become desensitized." Pope Francis also highlighted the paradox that while there is enough food for everyone, not everyone can eat: "We need to be reminded that food discarded is, in a certain sense, stolen from the table of poor and the starving."

Representatives of Germany, Argentina, Venezuela, and the European Commission all commended WFP for reaching out to the religious communities and offered their support to WFP's future inter-religious engagement. WFP's Executive Director, Ertharin Cousin, closed the session by outlining potential next steps in the inter-religious engagement for Zero Hunger, including:

- I. **Partnerships:** WFP will establish an Advisory Council on Ending Hunger in consultation with sister agencies and other interested stakeholders. The 30th anniversary Prayer for Peace at Assisi in September 2016, organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, offers an ideal occasion for advancing this commitment.
WFP will join the Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) and ensure linkages between PaRD, the new advisory council and other international partnerships. WFP will also participate in the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on FBO partners to learn and share experience with faith partners with other agencies.
- II. **Advocacy:** The revamped International Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition will include faith communities as a key stakeholder group. WFP, sister agencies and interested faith-inspired organizations will work together to prepare a side event on Zero Hunger during the 2016 UN General Assembly. Practical areas of focus in inter-religious advocacy include food waste, nutrition and capacity strengthening of first responders.
- III. **Country-level engagement:** WFP's regional bureaus and country offices will build stronger partnerships with faith institutions, with CARITAS and Islamic Relief Worldwide prominent examples. WFP will ensure that faith institutions are considered and engaged in Country Strategic Reviews.

Seminar with special guests and WFP's leadership

The seminar was chaired by Ertharin Cousin, WFP Executive Director, and moderated by Katherine Marshall, Georgetown University and consultant to WFP. The following key themes emerged from the discussion:

The challenge of reaching Zero Hunger:

- Zero Hunger is achievable but requires new partnerships, resources, and advocacy to reach the different communities that suffer from hunger especially those that are left behind.
- Zero Hunger requires fundamental change, by religious communities and by WFP, to focus on tangible results that reflect local knowledge and sensitivity to community values. It requires prayer and action towards a clearly understood common purpose.
- The Zero Hunger challenge has many dimensions including knowledge about nutritional requirements, understanding of market mechanisms, land distribution, and financial and human resources.
- The Sustainable Development Goals represent a universal agenda and offer a vision for the future. Governments, civil society, private sector and others, including faith inspired organizations, have critical roles to play.
- We cannot wait until the 2030 deadline to see results. Let's work for Zero Hunger here and now.

The unique role of local faith-inspired organizations:

- Working with local charities present different challenges from working with international faith-inspired organizations. The main challenge is building capacity and effective working relationships with the multitude of local actors that have community knowledge and access to those most in need.

- WFP needs to continue to tailor its capacity strengthening approach to local context and needs.

WFP's partnerships with faith-inspired organizations

- Why should we partner? We have shared objectives and resources to end hunger. We must work together to fill the gaps, always observing the humanitarian principles.
- Where should we partner? We need to focus on reaching those furthest behind first.
- How should we partner? Build on the diverse experiences at country-level. WFP has technical expertise and reach, while faith-inspired organizations have access and valuable information.
- Faith-inspired organizations should be engaged in Country Strategic Reviews facilitated by WFP. WFP country offices should engage with local religious and inter-religious groups.
- Country-level and global level inter-religious engagement is not mutually exclusive.
- There is a wealth of knowledge within the UN system and beyond on how to work with faith-inspired organizations that WFP can draw on. Mutual learning and cooperation is essential.
- WFP's enhanced engagement with faith-inspired organizations must be founded on a comprehensive mapping and review of current partnerships with these actors.

Advocacy for Zero Hunger

- We must drive a different conversation among the political leaders of the world.
- The faith community is ready to give voice to the hungry and engage in advocacy.
- Faith-inspired organisations and UN agencies will engage the UN General Assembly as a platform to advocate Zero Hunger.
- Religious communities can be united towards tangible goals under a neutral convener such as WFP.
- The revamped International Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition will be a platform for communication with all partners, including faith partners.
- We should look back at this meeting and say: "this is where we changed the conversation about Zero Hunger."

Food waste

- There is enough food available to feed twice as many people as there are on the planet.
- We need to address the roots of the problem: notably how food is shared among people.
- The entire faith community could unite around a call for Zero Waste.

Annexes

- 1. Statements from religious leaders**
- 2. List of participants**