Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

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Religion as part of energizing the UN

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The World does not lack the resources to abolish poverty, it only lacks the right priorities.

(Juan Somavia)

In my region of the world, the Middle East, or the Arab world, remarkable acts of courage and bravery have taken place over the past year. I wish to acknowledge this reality. The United Nations came into being at a time of intense global changes, over 60 years ago. Since then, it has grown in size, importance, impact, meaning, and relevance. As a multilateral organization with national, regional, and international institutional outreach, the UN is unique.

As a multilateral organization which has massive human power – engaged within it as its own staff, affiliated to it in myriad capacities, undertaking peace-keeping operations in its name among many other forms – with mandates extending to each and every aspect of human and other lives and the development, rights, peace, and security thereof, the UN is an amazing entity.

As a multilateral organization which has succeeded in extending its influence and infrastructure to encompass a huge range of mechanisms, which serve almost 200 countries’ governments; which convenes, develops, deploys, plans and coordinates critical international conventions and interventions responding to human needs, the UN is unparalleled.

But the realities around the UN have changed: from a world in which nation-states made decisions to govern every aspect within their own boundaries and organized their own armies, to a world where non-state actors, various peoples, and a plethora of other multi-state bodies, proliferate. The geopolitical alliances, governance regimes, and direction of international development aid are all shifting. The very air we breathe
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and the environment around us, including plants and animals, are facing drastic changes in survival patterns.

One of the many changes becoming increasingly difficult to ignore for longstanding secular organizations, is the extent to which religion is surfacing as a critical broker of human and governmental existence. This appears, at first sight, to be in some ways contradictory to the secular ethos of the United Nations system and its human rights mandate. But that would be a shortsighted perspective. It must not be forgotten that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is itself predicated upon the very values common to every faith tradition, and as such, it is not an instrument without faith, but rather, a product of the world’s common faiths.

I believe that interfaith harmony lies at the very foundation of human development, which, in turn, is part and parcel of the prevention of conflicts, the resolution of conflicts, and the long-term sustainability of peace-building. It is therefore timely and necessary that at this juncture of our political, economic, and cultural interaction, we address the issue of religion and development in general, and the role of interfaith harmony in forging sustainable human development, in particular.

Having said that, I believe it is also very important to highlight that within the United Nations system, there is already a long-term institutional memory of outreach to faith communities around the world. But why should the UN reach out to faith communities? A study published by the World Health Organization in the early part of the Millennium provided an important reality check for many of those working in the field of health and development. According to this study, faith-based organizations (FBOs) provide an average of 30 to 40 percent of basic health care in the world. This figure is expected to be much higher in contexts where conflicts break out, such as in Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of Congo, where organizations such as IMA World Health indeed inform us that almost 75 per cent of the basic health care can end up being provided by FBOs.

We also know that religious communities are capable of unparalleled social mobilization. I refer not only to the convening capacities inherent in raising and utilizing legions of volunteers (which no other institution can boast worldwide), but they are also owners of the longest standing and most enduring mechanisms of raising financial resources. In times
where traditional ‘secular’ development is confronting its strongest set of resource challenges, these capabilities cannot be underestimated.

Given the realities of service provision, resource mobilization, and political presence, it becomes clear that being knowledgeable of the work of FBOs is necessary, if we are to take seriously the fundamental dimension of social development and social capital, particularly as we consider the imperatives of future development agendas. Thus, an informed and systematic outreach to key partners in the world of religion – which, it must be unequivocally stated, is bigger, wider and much more complicated than the world of secular international development put together – and where community service provision has already been a reality for centuries, is quintessential.

My organization, the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, has played an active role in convening and coordinating sister UN agencies, various offices and divisions within the United Nations system, to form an Inter-Agency Task Force on FBOs and the Millennium Development Goals (IATF-FBOs). This Task Force serves to share experiences of engaging FBOs in the various mandate areas, facilitate coordination amongst similarly oriented initiatives where possible, and support information sharing about and with FBO partners. In so doing, the Task Force acts as an internal capacity building and knowledge management mechanism within the United Nations system. UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNDESA, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, the ILO, and UNFPA are some of the major organizations with formal representation in this IATF, together with UN-Habitat, UNEP, and others.

The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on FBOs: Lessons learned

What, then, are some of the practical lessons we have learned through this work with, and about, faith-based organizations in particular, and religious communities in general?

We have learned that FBOs and ‘religion’ are not one and the same. I reiterate, the world of religion is vast and difficult for us to quantify and categorize into neatly distinct entities. Religion and faith do not lend themselves to the usual normative frameworks of development praxis. This means we must be learned, strategic, and delivery-oriented in how we determine, manage, and evaluate the partnerships.
We have learned that instead of inventing the wheel as per the new development fashion, the engagement with religious communities has to be sustained, built on existing knowledge and practice, and be part of broader civil society and government partnerships. This is critical to the necessary trust that is required for such engagement. In addition, it is required as part of facilitating the ownership of national development processes by all strategic partners.

We have learned that as the United Nations, we cannot, and should not, work with only one faith tradition, nor only one FBO, or the same group of religious leaders on all issues. We are obliged to work with all faiths, several FBOs, and varied religious representatives on a multiplicity of human development needs. And we must do so maintaining the same manner of (mutual) respect, and appreciation for the respective strengths and modus operandi, as long as there is agreement on the goals of human development: human rights, peace, and security of all peoples.

We have learned that the responsibility for learned, strategic, and sustained partnerships to realize human rights, lies on all sides. As we bear our own responsibilities within the respective United Nations agencies and hold ourselves accountable to our (intergovernmental) boards, mandates and civil society partners – we expect our FBO partners to do the same with each other, and with the United Nations.

The lessons learned over the years have resulted in some interesting trends: one which argues that religion is too contentious, and that religion should not be involved in public life. This perspective is born out of a generalized view of religion which maintains sense that religious identity, deeply felt by many and yet intangible and to many, irrational, can be divisive. Those who maintain this perspective will refer to ongoing religious tensions in many parts of the world which further communalism, sectarianism and strife. They will also reference general religious conservatism around gender equality, contraception, and homophobia, to name but a few contentious human rights issues.

Another perspective encompasses those now running to embrace what has become a new ‘fashion,’ – ie that of ‘engaging with religion’, sometimes with little study of impact involved. This attitude often instrumentalizes religious leaders in particular, and sees their value as ‘rubber
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Stamping’ or adding legitimacy to – relatively less – contentious initiatives around issues such as ‘peace-building’, social cohesion, nutrition, and the environment. This outreach also argues that some faith-based actors and organizations often have access to human and financial resources, and are therefore important to involve in a world of diminishing ones. While there is value to all approaches, it remains problematic that the engagement with faith communities and representatives remains largely ad hoc and has yet to be systematically monitored or evaluated. This also means that there is no way of appreciating the implications of engaging religious leaders to endorse environmentally sensitive policies, but who may stand directly opposed to other aspects of human rights.

Thus, both trends represent challenges. We need to enhance, strengthen, and support the human rights-based culture of the UN. In order to do so, I believe a sensitivity to the impact of religion on all aspects of life needs to be diligently, studiedly, and systematically applied. This does not mean becoming apologists for any abuses of human rights. On the contrary, this would entail strengthening our arguments for human rights and dignity – from within every faith tradition.

The United Nations remains a vital and ever more necessary body, and I would conclude by echoing what the UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki Moon himself has articulated:

I have long believed that when governments and civil society work toward a common goal, transformational change is possible. Faiths and religions are a central part of that equation.

Note
1. The following segments are taken from Karam 2010.

References
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