

United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week
II Dialogue on Faith, Peacebuilding & Development

Palais des Nations, 9 February 2017

Panel 2: Perspectives on Faith, Peacebuilding and Development

Introduction

I wish to thank UNITAR, in particular Mr. Alexander Mejia, for inviting the Permanent Mission of the Order of Malta to participate in to-day's Dialogue and to pay tribute to my colleague from Jordan and her country for this most welcome initiative. It is a special privilege to reflect together on the role of Faith, Peacebuilding & Development in addressing the enormous challenges before us.

At the outset allow me to briefly introduce the Institution I represent and its position on the international stage.

Founded in the 11th century, the Sovereign Order of Malta is a lay religious order of the Catholic Church. Its mission is based on its inspiring principles: witnessing the Faith and service to the poor and the suffering. Across the world, the Order of Malta is dedicated to the preservation of human dignity and the care of all those in need, regardless of their religions, their beliefs and their origins, as coded in the Order's Constitution. It is neutral, impartial and apolitical.

As a subject of international law, the Order's religious character coexists with its full sovereignty. To-day the Order enjoys diplomatic relations with 106 States and the European Union, permanent observer status at the United Nations, the African Union and the principal international organizations. It has also concluded over 100 Cooperation Agreements with States and intergovernmental agencies. This diplomatic network strengthens the Order's relationships with the governments of the countries in which it operates while the link between diplomacy and aid facilitates its humanitarian activities, allowing unrestricted and protected access especially in crisis regions.

On the operational level, the Order of Malta is a transnational, global and decentralized structure which develops socio-medical and humanitarian projects in 120 countries on all continents. Its programs are run independently or within

a framework of partnerships with governments, international agencies and local NGOs. This global outreach enables the Order to assist refugees, migrants and IDPs in countries of origin, of transit and of arrival, as well as helping people living in the midst of armed conflicts and natural disasters. With a goal of long-term development, the Order of Malta stays after the emergency and relief stage with the objective of reducing poverty and vulnerability through rehabilitation, reconstruction and disaster prevention measures.

What are the perspectives and where do we stand to-day with regard to Faith and Religion in the humanitarian and development context?

Religion is an important source of values. It influences people's way of thinking and their actions. Upholding human dignity and caring for people in need is deeply rooted in the teachings of religions. As we know, over 80 % of the world population is religiously affiliated and that share is increasing, as the importance of the world's religions is rising. Forecasts by the Pew Research Center suggest that by 2020, the share of people who identify with a religion will rise to 90%. Furthermore, advances in information technology contribute to religion becoming a more important source of meaning and continuity. They allow religious content to spread widely and are often more influential in daily lives than state authority.

Many of the world's largest development organizations are motivated by religion. Together with local faith and religious communities they are already essential to the delivery of basic public services, humanitarian aid and development. Particular strengths of faith and religion-based actors lie in their capability to respond not only to material demands, but to combine technical assistance with an ethical and spiritual dimension. They understand the culture which plays a crucial role in every recovery effort and possess a wealth of local knowledge and breadth of wisdom born out of faith, hope and empathy. Many survivors need as much emotional and spiritual first-aid as they need relief goods.

However, faith-based action also faces challenges, such as exclusion of members of other faith backgrounds, pressuring people to convert as a pre-condition for support, stigmatizing and discriminating against individuals or groups of people. Such inappropriate behavior not only discredits faith-based action, but is contrary to the basic humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. It is often suggested that religion is at the core of most conflicts. On this topic the

Order of Malta's Foreign Minister made the following comments in this very room during our 2015 Symposium on "Religions together in Humanitarian action". "Religious motivation can induce violence when separated from moral content and conflicts may contain religious elements. However, they are always driven by cultural, ethnic, territorial and other factors such as external pressures. Perhaps the answer to conflicts with a religious element is not less religion, but more of religion's peaceful, non-violent content as a rich source of reconciliation, social tolerance, devotion, humanitarian commitment, empowerment and peace-building."

Cooperation – Partnerships

For several years now we have been confronted with an extraordinary proliferation of crises and needs and their dramatic humanitarian consequences. The World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul in May last year searched for new solutions to improve assistance to people in need, including the bridging of the humanitarian-development divide. Amongst the Summit's thematic messages was that of "Religious engagement" which was addressed during a Special Session with the participation of more than 250 faith-based leaders representing all major world faith traditions from all regions in the world, as well as representatives of the world's largest humanitarian organizations. This Special Session was coordinated by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development which initiated a wide range of consultations during the nearly three-year overall preparatory process, involving stakeholders in every corner of the world. The result was the adoption of a "Charter for faith-based humanitarian action" in which faith-based actors made a number of commitments including to uphold and expand their humanitarian response, to overcome the manipulative and abusive attempts to link religion with violence, terrorism, exclusion of others, to keep affected persons at the center of all assistance planned and to ensure that women and girl's rights are protected. In its contribution to the discussion, the Order of Malta stressed inter alia the importance for the FBOs to respect international humanitarian law, to establish inter-religious links on the ground, urged the international community to make better use of FBOs in relief efforts and to direct more humanitarian funding to local partners. It was extremely rewarding to witness the recognition and the affirmation by governments and humanitarian stakeholders of the impact FBOs and religious institutions have in reducing human suffering through their material and spiritual assistance to communities in need. Even non-religious organizations like the United Nations and its agencies have now recognized that

FBOs have a unique comparative advantage in humanitarian contexts, as they enjoy a relationship of trust with local populations in which they are embedded. The WHS was a perfect opportunity to highlight and emphasize the importance of this role and it created a good base for reform and transformation of power in the current international humanitarian system. Now we need to look to the future and build on this outcome which calls for new approaches and cooperation initiatives, such as:

- Foster inter-religious and intra-faith dialogue and partnerships
- Explore and share innovative and transformative ways for local religious assets to be more effectively engaged in meeting needs
- Empower local faith communities through capacity building and financial resources
- Expand international networks
- Scale up faith engagement through increased participation in humanitarian activities
- Enhance religious literacy of all stakeholders
- Engage local religious and faith networks in the localization of aid agendas
- Invest in and strengthen partnerships with local religious and FBO networks, improve delivery and scale up interventions
- Achieve greater integration into humanitarian coordinating mechanisms
- Ensure the participation of grassroots communities in the efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Furthermore, increased attention should be given to the role of religious and faith networks in mediation and peacebuilding. A shining example in this field is no doubt the Central African Republic. During a seminar held here at the Palais des Nations last November on the Status of Freedom of Religion in the World, the Cardinal Archbishop of Bangui explained the interfaith platform that he had set up with the leaders of the Christian and Muslim religions. They are not only in permanent dialogue, but travel together to hotspots in the country and ensure that their press releases, radio messages and conferences are disseminated simultaneously under their names and signatures. The platform also engages in mediation, education and humanitarian action.

I believe we have not only come a long way, but that we are witnessing the gaining of strength and visibility of faith and religious actors in humanitarian aid, peace building and development. It is now widely recognized that religious actors are a crucial part of the international humanitarian architecture.

Important institutions such as the World Bank, the US National Intelligence Council, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, just to name a few, have published reports and established guidelines that are encouraging.

Moreover, my confidence is based on the new Secretary General's strong commitment. In an interview he gave to us in Istanbul during the WHS, I asked him how he sees the role of FBOs and religious communities in light of his long experience as UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His reply was: "It is an extremely important role, first of all in the delivery of protection and assistance to the victims. They are always in the front line, responding with enormous generosity and courage, they represent an enormous part of humanitarian action in the world. Secondly, their own advocacy in raising awareness, in making public opinion and governments assume their responsibilities so that they become more pro-active, more supportive of humanitarian action. And finally, their most important role is in creating conditions for understanding, for respect, for communities to be able to live together with different cultures, different religions, their capacity to prevent conflicts, their capacity to create conditions of solidarity and cohesion in our societies."

And on another note of optimism, I would like to conclude with a brief quotation from an official report by the German government entitled *Religious communities as partners for development cooperation*:

"For too long, the influence of religion in international cooperation has been neglected. A values-based development policy takes the contribution of religion seriously. In future, we will therefore seek to better harness the positive potential of religion for sustainable development and peace. And wherever religion is part of the problem, it must also become part of the solution."

Thank you for your attention.

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To the United Nations Office at Geneva