T20

POLICY BRIEF

RELIGIOUS NETWORKS, THEIR IMPACT ON SDGS (SDG17), AND THE CHALLENGES FOR THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL ORDER

Task Force 7
G20 SUPPORT FOR SDGS AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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موجز السياسة

الشبكات الدينية، وأثرها في أهداف التنمية المستدامة (الهدف ١٧)، وتحديات النظام القانوني الدولي

فريق العمل السابع

دعم مجموعة العشرين لأهداف التنمية المستدامة والتعاون الإنمائي

المؤلفون

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ABSTRACT

There is an urgent need to better recognize and integrate the significant involvement of faith-based actors in development initiatives through effective policy-driven responses. These responses require novel and inventive engagement strategies, and the development of a coordinated effort. Faith-based networks should be steered toward a more systemic and comprehensive commitment to sustainable development, in the context of the Group of 20 (G20) priorities. This will make this engagement more relevant to G20 processes and translate across and convey more effectively the G20 governments' commitments. It will also gather greater support for their implementation and address the present challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly relevant to the pursuit of innovative responses to the challenges of the pandemic and the need for wider grassroots networks to support policy implementation. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for the G20 process to benefit from and develop an evidence-based understanding of the impact of religion on policy further and interact more effectively with emerging faith-based policy-oriented networks. It also provides new ways to engage with both the challenges and opportunities presented by the emerging geopolitical roles of religious actors.

هناك حاجـة عاجلـة للتعـرف بشـكل أفضـل للمشـاركة الجوهرية للجهـات الدينيـة وتوحيد جهودها في مبادرات التنميـة عبـر الاسـتجابات الفعالـة المدفوعـة بالسياسـة. وتتطلـب هـذه الاستجابات اسـتراتيجيات مشـاركة جديـدة ومبتكـرة، وإعـداد جهـد مُنسـق. ينبغـي أن يتـم توجيـه الشـبكات القائمـة علـى أسـاس المعتقـدات نحـو الـتزام أكثـر تنظيمًـا وشـمولية بالتنميـة المسـتدامة، وذلـك فـي سـياق أولويـات مجموعـة العشـرين. وهـذا مـن شـأنه أن يجعـل هـذه المشـاركة أكثـر ارتباطًـا لعمليـات مجموعـة العشـرين ونقلها بيـن الـدول وإدراجها بشـكلٍ أكثـر فاعليـة فـي التزامـات حكومـات مجموعـة العشـرين. هـذا بالإضافـة إلى جمـع دعـم أكبـر للتنفيـذ ومعالجـة التحديات الحالية في أعقاب جائحـة كوفيـد-١٩. ويرتبـط ذلـك علـى نحـوٍ خـاص بالبحـث عـن الاستجابات المبتكـرة لتحديـات الجائحـة والحاجـة إلـى شـبكات شـعبية أوسـع لدعـم تنفيـذ السياسـة. وهـو مـا يشـكّل تحديًـا وفرصة فـي آنٍ واحـد لعمليـة مجموعـة العشـرين كي تسـتفيد وتطـوّر فهمًـا قائمًـا علـى الدليل للأثـر الدينـي فـي التقـدم السياسـي، وتتفاعـل بكفـاءة أكبـر مـع الشـبكات الناشـئة القائمـة علـى أسـاس المعتقـدات والموجَّهـة سياسـيًّا. كمـا يقـدم سُـبلاً جديـدة للاسـتفادة مـن التحديـات والفـرص التـي تقدمهـا الأدوار الجيوسياسـية الناشـئة للجهـات الدينيـة.

CHALLENGE

Despite extensive and diverse evidence of the large impact of religion on public life, many G20 governments have done little to develop systematic policy responses. This means that governments cannot respond in a timely fashion to potential challenges presented by faith-based organizations or benefit from opportunities for joining forces to implement priority policy agendas more comprehensively.

The COVID-19 crisis has already highlighted the grave implications of a fragmented multilateral system and the urgent need for more robust mechanisms to address this fragmentation by identifying and acting on interlinkages between foreign policy, public policy, and civil society commitments and infrastructures. Policy engagement that includes faith-based networks provides an opportunity to explore particular dimensions that often remain in the blind spot of these interlinkages and to engage in faith-based networks[1] in policy formation. In particular, these networks can be engaged in more comprehensive responses such as the global challenges of pandemics (for example, the COVID-19 public health crisis), which includes social and economic inequalities, different measurable responses to inequalities from different faith communities, and the necessary post-crisis rebuilding.

Against the background of overstretched public services and unprecedented policy shifts in seeking imaginative solutions to the COVID-19 challenges, governments are yet to appreciate and fully engage with the challenges and opportunities presented by faith-based communities during crises. This includes their capacity to undermine or support the unprecedented and difficult policy choices and their grassroots infrastructure that often reaches out to those in need when overstretched public services fail to do so. Faith-based organizations offer:

• Local versus global interdependence of perspectives;

• Humanitarian work beyond narrow specializations;

• Distinctive capacities to mobilize public opinion;

• Opportunities to join forces with non-faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at a time when the NGO sector is challenged; and

• Mental health and inequalities solutions for the post-COVID-19 debate.

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1. Faith-based networks are construed broadly to include religious organizations, their charitable associations, representations before international institutions, humanitarian organizations with religious ethos, faith-based engagement groups, and transnational interreligious groups such as Religions for Peace and the United Religions Initiative.

The Ebola crisis in 2014 illustrates how the religious dimensions of important global policy agendas could become policy blind spots. (Haynes 2007; Ignatieff 2017; Karam 2019). The preponderance of efforts to address these shortcomings have focused primarily on issues such as the religious dimensions of violent extremism. Subsequently, there has been limited comprehensive policy engagement with how religious actors play multiple and complex roles in far wider global agendas.

The large institutional assets of religious institutions play significant political, social, and economic roles that extend well beyond their pastoral care and have a unique capacity to mobilize public opinion. Addressing these blind spots by mobilizing and consolidating faith-based organizations working in sustainable development is critical for building comprehensive G20 policy responses to COVID-19 and the broader G20 sustainable development commitment.

PROPOSAL

The recommendations outline practical steps toward the achievement of specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by strengthening cooperation with religious institutions. It highlights the critical need for existing indicators that guide global policies in relation to the SDGs to take account of religious perspectives and actions.

The impact of religion in policy can be defined broadly as where the structured moral conscience builds political consensus and solutions or contests the solutions that are being pursued (Marshall and Smith 2015; Marshall et al. 2020).

In the context of international organizations and other settings, religion and faith-based networks have gained increasing visibility in influencing policy, both foreign and domestic (Fox 2001; Fox et al. 2004; Fox et al. 2014). However, the scale of their impact is often miscalculated or considered irrelevant. Religion plays a critical role in regional conflicts and influences the agenda in international organizations. It shapes complex international geopolitical issues ranging from the expansion of NATO, peace in the Middle East, international environmental agreements, international law, and human rights (Petkoff 2015). Theology is often a free, viable critique of political thought, and political thought can be free to criticize religiously reoriented politics. At the center of the COVID-19 crisis, very few actions spoke with as much volume and generated the visibility and endorsement of controversial policy positions as the closing of Mecca, St Peter's Basilica, and other religious buildings. The profound interruption to the supposed unchangeable rhythm of religious practices signaled how much our social and political lives were affected beyond recognition by COVID-19.

In the face of the challenges presented by COVID-19 that are reshaping the global economy and the G20 agenda, faith-based networks have emerged as part of the challenges but also as an opportunity. Because of their powers to mobilize support for health policies, faith-based communities are a powerful asset for shaping the discourse during and after COVID-19. This includes ethical issues such as access to medicines and vaccines, managing the priorities of healthcare, distribution of life-saving drugs, and responses to challenges such as systemic mental health issues following from the broad impact of COVID-19 on social life. It also involves pilgrimage economies (which are at the center of pandemics) and the continuing commitment of faith-based organizations to food security, education, environmentalism, sustainable peace, justice, decent work and economic growth, responsible consumption and production, and strong institutions, sustainable cities, and communities. Faith communities have vital roles in advancing gender equality as defined in the SDGs.

Religious voices are often received reluctantly as co-participants in international co-operation, and this also applies to the G20 process (Marshall and Smith 2015; Musser 2020). For example, in the pursuit of greater gender equality, religious voices and faith-based networks are often perceived as being part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Yet, recent research suggests that societies that tolerate a greater level of freedom of all religions or beliefs offer greater opportunities for the fulfillment of gender equality (Bielefeldt 2013; Ghanea 2017; Marshall, 2010).

In practice, religious voices include both some of the strongest advocates for women's rights and opponents to them (United Nations Population Fund 2016). The roles of religion, gender, and remittances in development situations are central to the religious literacy agenda and policymaking. Efforts to provide operational analyses of religious landscapes and engagement on development topics are an important first step (Annett et al. 2017; Freston 2019).

Pilgrimage routes and economies, as well as close-knit religious communities, were at the center of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, it was often faith-based networks that mobilized the public support necessary to fight the pandemic, and this was often more decisive than governments. In doing so, they took on great risks to their theological (and existential) survival after deciding to close their doors to preserve public health (often continuing to provide religious services behind closed doors) amid major religious festivals. They quickly embraced new technologies to maintain their congregations during these strange times of self-isolation and social distancing. Additionally, major foreign policy agendas from the US response to climate change to the Middle East peace process are dominated and shaped by obscure millennialist theologies. However, very few religious voices have had a greater impact on the environmental movement than the continuous efforts of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and Pope Francis. In all those examples, religious voices and actions have been critical for the shaping of concrete and actionable policy commitments in several areas of sustainable development (Chryssavgis and Foltz 2013; Chryssavgis and Goldsmith 2014).

A wide variety of institutions inspired by different religious traditions and communities are directly engaged locally, nationally, and internationally in development and humanitarian programs (Marshall 2013; Marshall 2017). Individually and collectively, these institutions provide substantial assets and resources to development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding work, and many engage in partnerships with international and national institutions, public and private.

The various deliberate efforts to understand and engage with the complex array of religious actors and institutions include a United Nations Task Force (UN IATF) (UN News 2017; United Nations Population Fund 2010)[2] and efforts linked to the annual process of consultations within the G20 process (G20 Interfaith Forum). The Holy See, the German government, USAID, and several other multilateral and bilateral aid organizations support the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (Nitschke and Gabriel 2016) that includes both governmental and intergovernmental actors and faith-inspired organizations (UN IATF).

There is evidence of the many positive reasons for engaging religious actors, and the many assets they provide, including:

• High levels of trust in religious leaders and institutions;[3]

• Visibility of religious leaders and infrastructure (including media infrastructure) in delivering services;

• Notably, health and education and providing social safety nets, especially during natural disasters and conflicts;

• Vital, if often underappreciated, roles in fragile and poorly governed states and communities;

• Considerable financial and political power; and

• The power to mobilize volunteers, both nationally and internationally.

The overall focus on religious matters in international relations and with respect to international development has increased over time. There has been a general trend toward broader and more institutionalized approaches (Sachs 2019; Szerszynski, Bergmann, and Deane-Drummond 2015). These have come with controversies, as

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2. See http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals (Accessed August 14, 2020).
3. Among numerous examples are the World Bank Voices of the Poor studies, BBC and Gallup polls, the Philippines Weather Station, and the Lationobaromotro and Africabarometer studies.

some governments have questioned the merits of the deliberate engagement with religious actors in public policy settings.[4] The present situation, therefore, is mixed. Various United Nations, bilateral, and other development agencies are engaged in efforts to understand and build partnerships with religious institutions, while others maintain a policy of distance or deliberate neutrality. While there has been some initial progress in this direction, it has been overshadowed by the weakening of the international system and its institutions and a movement toward stronger national sovereignty-driven arguments. This places the G20 in a strong position to reclaim this particular policy space and reset the trends, which are already emerging in other contexts, more effectively within the G20.

In engaging with some of the overarching themes proposed by the Saudi Presidency of G20 2020, the proposed recommendations explore the impact of religion on policymaking.

Recommendations

Urgent action is required by G20 leaders to

• Develop a permanent engagement group on religion and sustainable development;

• Task the group with consolidating the emerging and existing metrics to identify how faith-based communities present challenges and opportunities for achieving the SDGs;

• Task the group to establish agreed strategies for the mutual respect, cooperation, and harmonization of faith-based organizations' activities to meet the SDGs; and

• Task the group to develop a particular thematic focus on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

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4. An example was the World Bank experience under President James D. Wolfensohn launched in 1999–2000. The Executive Directors, representing member states, voiced serious doubts about a systematic interreligious dialogue about development.

Recommendations in context: creating policy spaces and G20 points of engagement with faith-based organizations

A permanent group would offer a unique long-term dynamic perspective on SDG commitments within the G20 process and new channels for pursuing those commitments. This group will

• Enable policymakers to assess more accurately the impact of religion on policy formation in connection with the overarching G20 priority areas;

• Identify priority areas relevant to the G20 process, where there are noteworthy tensions between secular and religious entities (for example extractive industries, gender roles, religious cultural heritage, environmental protection, financing for development, private sector engagement, entrepreneurship, and youth engagement);

• Address religious roles in fragile states strategically,[5] starting with a systematic review of religious landscapes in fragile states and engaging with the G7+ organization that represents those countries. This will involve a process of consolidating the emerging approaches to religion in policymaking contexts. There is empirical evidence that countries with greater respect for the freedom of all religions also tend to offer more favorable social climates for business enterprises, gender equality, and empowering women (Grim 2008, 2012; Grim, Clark, and Snyder 2014; Grim and Finke 2006, 2007, 2010; B. Grim and M. Grim 2016). In the current focus on Countering Violent Extremism and Preventing Violent Extremism, religion is highlighted, but often in highly simplified terms. Subsequently, analyses of religion tend to focus on links to violence and conflict (Marshall and Smith 2015). The religious dimensions of conflict and the role of faith-based organizations in fragile states have great significance, but the focus on violence, including the funding of research and action, detracts from broader agendas. Studies on the interplay between religion and asymmetric warfare, religion as a factor of foreign policy, and the religious freedom deficit of modern diplomacy make addressing the religious metrics deficit in policy formation very urgent, relevant, and an appropriate agenda for the G20 Summits.

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5. The World Bank deems a country to be fragile if it (a) is eligible for assistance (i.e., a grant) from the International Development Association, (b) has had a UN peacekeeping mission in the last three years, and (c) has received a governance score of less than 3.2 (from the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment index of The World Bank).

Immediate action points

The creation of a specific G20 Task Force focusing on religion and policy will facilitate a systematic long-term engagement (tailored around each G20 host state priorities) with several action points that will deliver immediate benefits and enrich the G20 process:

• Actively mobilize existing faith-based networks to calibrate their work with the SDG agenda within the context of the G20 process;

• Mobilize faith-based networks to incentivize private sector support for the UN's SDGs by linking particular business projects with a commitment to the freedom of all religions, gender equality, and empowerment of women;

• Mobilize faith-based networks to support regional sustainable development initiatives aligned with the G20 host state's SDG priorities;

• Work to ensure formal religious engagement at priority policy "tables," similar to religious engagement in UNAIDS;

• Build on ecumenical and interfaith alliances and approaches beginning with specific priority sectors linked to the SDG framework (e.g., health and education);

• Deploy the G20 process to formalize the rules of engagement with religious actors as part of the G20 process;

• Support leadership among development actors so that they recognize, engage, and broaden their goals, and offer training to encourage strategic engagement by religious actors;

• Engage key countries/governments at national or regional levels (e.g., ASEAN) more directly on these topics;

• Pursue the enhancement of religious and development literacy; and

• Consolidate a broader and more comprehensive G20 SDG reception in the Global South and the Global North through faith-based networks.

Disclaimer

This policy brief was developed and written by the authors and has undergone a peer-review process. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the authors' organizations or the T20 Secretariat.

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