



12. The importance of freedom of religion or belief and of religious engagement: Recommendations of the 2021 Working Group on FoRB September 30, 2021

Introduction

A recurrent focus of the G20 process has been to promote and accelerate sustainable development globally, in partnership with all countries, the private sector, civil society, and international and regional organizations. In alignment with this objective, a working group of the G20 Interfaith Forum has discussed the **crucial importance of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as well as State engagement and cooperation with religious organizations and communities in order to further the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, as described in the 2030 Agenda approved by all United Nations Member States.¹ The present document identifies a number of key respects in which religious freedom and the actions of religious communities can contribute to the objectives of the G20 process. The document concludes with six recommendations on how FoRB and religious engagement can advance the SDGs.

SDG 17 states that the Global Goals can only be met if we work together. It highlights the need to establish strong global partnerships and cooperation between public and civil society entities, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders, and all people.²

In this spirit, and in order to meaningfully advance towards the SDGs, it is essential that G20 States establish a **framework for regular dialogue and cooperation** with the world's religious/belief organizations and communities. It is also essential that G20 States commit to a **high standard of protection of freedom of religion or belief**, which is a necessary condition for religious communities to carry out essential spiritual, social, and medical services in keeping with their core identities and beliefs.

Dialogue and cooperation with religious communities, freedom of religion or belief, and the “five Ps”

The contributions of religious communities are necessary to make real progress towards achieving the SDGs. This applies especially in times of crisis, such as the one created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Such contributions will be possible **if the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is duly respected and protected**; i.e., if there is an appropriate legal and public policy framework that guarantees that all individuals and communities can live and act freely in accordance with the moral values that derive from their religion or belief. Further, the effects of such contributions will be amplified and better coordinated **if religious**

¹ G20 Development Ministers, *A global response to support COVID-19 recovery in developing countries and foster progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Matera, 19 June 2021. <https://www.g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/G20-Development-Communique.pdf>

² UN, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

and belief organizations and communities are more fully integrated into multi-level policy dialogues and cooperative initiatives across the globe.

The G20 commitment to FoRB and the recognition of the G20 Interfaith Forum as an Engagement Group will contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs, often summarized around five areas of critical importance (“the five Ps”: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership).

People: Ensuring the dignity and equality of all human beings implies acknowledging that approximately 84% of all people in the planet identify with a religious tradition.³ For many people religion and moral values are an important part of their identity, both as individuals and as members of a community. Religion and belief are an essential part of social reality, and religious/belief communities are a powerful force for good in society. They play a crucial role in strengthening social bonds and a sense of community, as well as preserving moral responsibility and generating the resilience that is needed to cope with situations of crisis. Nevertheless, the scale of religions’ contributions to society, including to peace and prosperity, often go unrecognized. Even when religion is seen as being a source of problems in society, engagement with religion will always be an important part of the solution to those problems. For instance, countering violent religious extremism or intolerance becomes more feasible through multi-level forms of cooperation and dialogue with religious communities, fostering relationships of mutual respect in an appropriate context of legal and social respect for FoRB. In addition, dialogue and mutual learning between G20 States and religions should include treating women without discrimination and with deep respect for their fundamental rights.

Planet: Religious organizations and communities can offer extensive resources and networks to raise awareness about the need to join efforts to protect the planet and about the fact that this is each person’s responsibility. Most religions transmit the notion that we all are part of an ecosystem that we have been tasked with respecting, loving, and preserving. In cases of natural disasters—some of them linked to climate change—religious/belief communities and institutions are well positioned to provide positive relief contributions, which can be enhanced through cooperation with public authorities. International faith-based NGOs and movements are invaluable providers of humanitarian aid. At a local level, religious/belief leaders and institutions can be key players in the distribution of emergency aid, in reconstruction efforts, and in the provision of psycho-social support, especially in contexts where government and external intervention is limited. Furthermore, positive engagement through an interfaith platform would better facilitate learning and mutual understanding between G20 nations and religious communities in order to advance together towards the protection of our common home.

Prosperity: Religion and belief, and people with a strong religious or ethical view of life, make important contributions to the economic life of their countries. In the area of education, institutions inspired by a religious or philosophical ethos make it possible for many young people around the world to receive a proper education and instill into them a sense of moral responsibility to use their talents for the service of other members of society, especially the poor and the disadvantaged. Health institutions with a religious or philosophical ethos also give many people, of all social classes, access to health services, complementing the necessary role of the State in this area. On all continents, charities inspired by religions or beliefs take care of people in difficult situations and make it possible for them to live with a minimum of dignity. Religion and belief may also play a significant role in less visible areas; for instance, in preserving a sense of moral responsibility in society or inculcating people with respect for all human beings.

Peace: A long-lasting climate of peace must necessarily rely on justice, which requires a high degree of actual protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, among them freedom of religion or belief for all individuals and communities. States have the responsibility to ensure that limitations on FoRB are only those based on internationally accepted principles and legal

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

standards, which include the rule of law, equality, non-discrimination, and proportionality (i.e., limits on FoRB should be no stricter than necessary). Such States' responsibility is not suspended in times of emergency or crisis, and therefore restrictions of FoRB must be duly justified and on equal terms with restrictions imposed on other fundamental rights. In any event, the actual respect for the FoRB of all requires, in addition to State action, the collaboration of the entire society, and especially of majority religions and religious leaders, which have a strong influence on social patterns of behavior. Religious perspectives may offer important contributions to creating cultures of dignity that are the underlying principles for human rights.⁴

Partnership: If given the opportunity, religious/belief communities and institutions will be very able actors who can cooperate with States in pursuing the SDGs. Experience demonstrates that religious people and organizations are willing to collaborate with governments if their identity and inspiring ethos is duly recognized and respected. States and religions/beliefs ultimately want to take care of the same persons and, although they have different functions, strategies, and perspectives, it is not difficult to identify areas of fruitful cooperation when each of the parties acknowledge the legitimacy and mission of the other. Such cooperation is always important, but it is crucial in times of crisis such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Therefore,

1. We urge the leaders of the G20 nations to **recognize that FoRB and religious engagement** can meaningfully facilitate the important work and priorities of the G20.
2. To ensure the **highest possible degree of freedom of religion or belief** for all individuals and communities, recognizing that the protection of this fundamental right constitutes a **paramount public interest** of the entire society, and acknowledging that religion or belief are often **essential to the identity and dignity** of individuals, communities, and institutions. Therefore, **restrictions** on freedom of religion or belief should be imposed only when they are justified by **objective and specific fundamental public concerns**, and when they are strictly **necessary and proportionate**, i.e., when there are not less restrictive means available to achieve a legitimate aim linked to the protection of public safety, order, health, or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.
3. To ensure that religious/belief activities and institutions are subject to **equal treatment** with respect to other comparable activities and institutions, and therefore to ensure that the exercise of freedom of religion or belief—including that of religious/belief minorities—is protected on equal terms in comparison with other fundamental rights. This implies that in times of **national emergency**, such as was caused by COVID-19, limitations on religious worship and meeting should not be stricter than those imposed on other activities considered essential for society.⁵ Moreover, as governments are not in a position to determine which practices are essential for each religion or belief, they should **consult** with representatives of religious communities (including minority communities) in order to ensure that State regulations do not restrict vital aspects of the freedom of religion or belief of any individual or community.
4. To promote the establishment and proper functioning of institutional **channels and platforms of cooperation and dialogue** between States/international organizations and religious/belief organizations and communities.

⁴ See: OHCHR, "*Faith for Rights*" framework.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/freedomreligion/pages/faithforrights.aspx>

⁵ See: *Religious freedom during public health emergencies: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.covid-religiousliberty.org/march-2021-policy-brief>

5. To enhance the role of such channels of cooperation and dialogue in **times of emergency or crisis**, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Such cooperation can facilitate the contribution of the vast network of religious/belief entities and institutions existing in virtually all countries, to the benefit of all citizens.⁶
6. In the light of the foregoing, and as previously recommended,⁷ we urge that the **G20 Interfaith Forum be recognized as a G20 Engagement Group**.

⁶ This is the case, for instance, of health institutions, which can be of help in a variety of ways, such as treating people infected by the virus, providing medical material and equipment, contributing to vaccination campaigns, enhancing hygienic measures that would help prevent similar situations to occur, etc. Religious and belief communities and institutions can also help in other less quantifiable areas, such as spreading and explaining anti-COVID-19 measures, raising in the population consciousness of the significance—also moral—of complying with government’s rules, identifying situations and sources of risk and conveying them to public authorities, combatting the disinformation—be it the result of ignorance or of mischievous interests—and hate speech that tend to proliferate in this type of scenarios, etc.

⁷ See the G20 Interfaith Forum Closing Statement, 2020: <https://www.g20interfaith.org/g20-interfaith-forum-closing-statement/>