G20 Interfaith 2020, Asia Regional Consultation, August 5-6, 2020

**The Consultation**

A regional consultation including participants from the East and South Asia regions took place, virtually, on August 5-6, 2020. KAICIID, as one of the four G20 2020 partners, took the lead role in organization, with participation also from the G20 Interfaith Forum Association. The consultation was one of six regionally focused events leading up to the G20 Interfaith Forum that was held on October 13-17, 2020.

Three sets of topics were the focus:

1. Education, youth and women (Responsible use of social media; youth and women as peace messengers; and Structural inequalities and gender inequality)
2. Governance and faith (Inclusive governance and religion; The rule of law, rights and religion)
3. Protecting the planet (Commitment of faith networks to disaster-risk reduction; Practical partnerships to address environmental challenges notably climate change, access to water, etc)

Participants included about 50 leaders from the regions. The format for the consultation was three plenary sessions (which were open to registered participants), followed by working groups among invited participants on specific topics (see agenda below).

Proposals emerging from the dialogue focused on education, gender and youth, protecting the planet with a focus on partnerships to address environmental challenges, and strengthening disaster prevention, preparation, and response. Assuring faith engagement in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was a priority.

Concluding observations by Mohammed Abu-Nimer (KAICIID) and Katherine Marshall (G20 Interfaith Association) reflected highlights of the two day consultation.

**Background:**

The discussion reflected the regions’ multicultural diversity and rich history, traditions, culture, religion, and demographic profile. Participants highlighted the geopolitical importance and enormous potential, but also internal conflicts centered on identity, engagement with religious and ethnic minorities, and growing elderly and youth populations. With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the region in significant ways, pre-existing inequalities are magnifying primary and secondary impacts. Despite remarkable resources of resilience, formal and informal social and economicprotection mechanisms are uneven and overall insufficient to ensure that none are left behind. School closures have grave long-term consequences, and closures of lifesaving services such as community gathering spaces and safe shelters limit access to help for those experiencing violence.

The expected global recession affects women most severely as they are over- represented in all sectors of informal labor markets, notably in South Asia; many occupations within the formal labor market cannot be done remotely. They are the frontline nurses, doctors, shop assistants and cleaners in many parts of Asia. Those from ethnic minority communities may confront additional vulnerabilities. Migrants and refugees also face distinctive challenges linked to the COVID-19 emergencies. The recession affects younger people’s participation in labor markets. The situation risks exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, impeding access to education services and other learning opportunities. There is fear that it could lead to a generation being out of education in the future as prolonged closures of educational institutions are likely to increase drop-out rates, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls, thus entrenching gender gaps in education and leading to increased risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, early pregnancy, and early and forced marriage. Such closures also increase the risk of child labor and recruitment by armed groups and pose a serious threat in terms of malnutrition for those families who relied on school feeding programs.

**G20 Interfaith Asia Regional Consultation: AGENDA**

**AUGUST 5           DAY 1**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 9:00 - 9:30 | Plenary. Welcome, Expectations, Overview of agenda & logistical notes, Key note speeches by HE Faisal bin Muaammar and Dr. Katherine Marshall. Facilitator: Mohammed Abu-Nimer |
| 9:30-10:30 | Panel Discussion. Faith Based Action: Asia Priorities.  Discussants: Dr. Kezevino Aram, Amb. Ong Keng Yong, Dr. Muhammad Hidayat Nur Wahid and Dr. Dicky Sofjian. |
| 10:30- 10:45 | Break |
| 10:45 - 12:15 | Working group 1. Education, Youth and Women. Structural inequality and gender inequality. Facilitator Dr. Samia Huq. |
| Working group 2. Governance & Faith. Inclusive governance and religion. Facilitator Dr. Brian Adams. | |
| Working group 3. Protecting the Planet. Commitment of faith networks to disaster-risk reduction. Facilitator Katherine Marshall. | |
| 12:15 - 13:00 | Plenary. Reporting Back from Working Groups |

**August 6: DAY 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 9:00 - 9:15 | Plenary. Welcome and Reflections on Day 1 |
| 9:15 - 10:45 | Working group 1. Education, Youth and Women. Responsible use of social media; youth and women being a peace messenger. Facilitator: Dr. Amjad Saleem. |
| Working group 2. Governance & Faith. The rule of law, rights and religion. Facilitator: Dr. Brian Adams (TBC) | |
| Working group 3. Protecting the Planet. Practical partnerships to address environmental challenges. Facilitator Ms. Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswatiji | |
| 10:45 - 11:00 | Break |
| 11:00 - 11:45 | Plenary. Reporting Back from Working Groups – presentation of key recommendations/ (15 min per group) |
| 11:45 - 12:30 | Closing Remarks by Dr. Cole Durham and Dr. Mohammed Abu-Nimer |

Education, gender and Youth youth

**Background**

The topics of education, gender and youth are interlinked in a variety of ways. They demand attention, separately and in conjunction, if Asia is indeed to harness its century of growth and progress. Asia’s success in education attainment is renowned, but there remain concerns about quality that are reflected in low learning levels. Inadequate practical competencies such as literacy and numeracy keep Asians, especially in South Asia, in poverty traps. While certain measures aim to redress these problems, education quality issues extend beyond questions of practical competencies, with concerns about establishing connectedness, communication, exchange and sharing that can harness education’s capacity not only for quantitative attainment, but also, and equally, for enhancing human capital to meet complex challenges of the contemporary world. Thus, questions of holistic content, pedagogy, delivery, and capacity building of teachers, amongst other topics, become very important. Education quality and delivery have a direct bearing on youth matters in Asia, where transition between education and employment is one of the largest obstacles facing youth in the region.

The region sees an increasing number of disaffected youths who are associated with urban crime, ethnic violence and political unrest. Reasons why youth are prone to “risky” behavior stem from education attainment and quality, but also because for cultural and political reasons, youth are not given center stage in voicing their concerns and aspirations.

Questions around education attainment, quality and inadequate voices lead us to the question of gender equality and how men and women are implicated in Asia. The four sub- indexes outlined by the Global Gender Gap Index highlight that the largest gender disparity is the political empowerment gap. Gender disparity is deeply rooted and starts very early in the lifecycles of men and women. Consequently, the relative gaps between Asian men and women on measures of health, education, economy, and politics are not improving at the desired pace. Discrimination begins at birth, with boy preferences still dominating in parts of East and South Asia and the Pacific. Disparities in educational attainment remain high. Discontinued education for the girl child often spells early marriage, early childbirth, and poor post-natal and reproductive health for young women. Men and women are subjected to violence, and women continue to endure sexual harassment, sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Political participation and subsequently women’s ability to demand rights for their protection in the private and public spheres are compromised.

**Challenge**

**Shortfalls of current policies**: International educational policy discourse has shifted from the decades-old conditional and cost-benefit analyses of schooling encapsulated in the human capital theory and rate of return analyses to a rights-based approach that emphasizes marginalized and hard to reach populations. Access to schooling/education today is viewed as a fundamental feature of human and citizenship rights. This rights-based approach to education is manifested through several policy instruments such as Education for All (EFA) 91990 and 2000), the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals (2000, 2015). As the various layers of SDG 4 demonstrate, education attainment is linked to other points of the SDG framework, especially as education seeks equitable coverage (SDG 4.5) and education content and delivery modes that promote values of sustainable development and global citizenship (SDG 4.7).

Thus the focus needs to go to questions of cohesive education and avenues and institutional imperatives that reflect 21st century demands. The Asia region, however, has been slow to focus in on these substantive matters of quality and content. The numbers of literacy and numeracy deficient are staggering: Asia houses the highest numbers of illiterate youth, women and adults. There is cultural variation in understanding the key elements in SDG 4.7, and countries in the Asia Pacific have actively incorporated some elements, such as CSE in Thailand and climate education partnerships in the Pacific Islands, peace education, mainstreaming social cohesion by promoting gender equality and non-violence in education.

There is significant scope to assess how far faith traditions have been brought to bear on these processes and if so, what the nature of that deliberation is. SDG 4.7 leads quite directly to the questions of youth and gender equality, notably through its interconnectedness with SDG 16 and 5. While many initiatives have been promised by nation states, and the importance of youth upholding values of tolerance and cohesion is appreciated, there remains scope to further the work where youth are engaged in interfaith action towards cohesion and peace, creating safe spaces for reflection on challenges and aspirations. Last but not least, progress has also been slow on SDG 5, with low levels of women in decision-making. Raising the voices of women and the youth, thus, presents important policy imperatives.

In these policy shortfalls, especially as they concern education, youth and gender, religion represents important cultural determinants of success. A Pew Research study (2012) highlights that some 8 in 10 people identify with a religion. In many parts of Asia, religious ideals also determine norms and what should constitute the contents of education. While religion and religious actors may appear solely culpable of impeding progressive values, in fact, it is conservative norms of gender and ethno- religious cohesion that often inform nationalist agendas of sovereignty and security. Thus, it is important to mobilize religion and faith actors to think about policy goals and processes. Research shows that ‘conservative’ faith actors find aspects of SDG 5 threatening for seeming to contradict certain norms about men’s and women’s roles, as well as for the perception that it fails to promote the proper place of sexual relationships as only being within heterosexual marriages. Both goal 16 (‘peace and justice’) and 17 (‘partnership for the goals’) were also seen as difficult where religious particularisms sometimes get in the way of dialogue and collaboration.

Thus, in all three areas (education, gender, and youth), religious actors can play positive roles towards better outcomes for equality, justice, and cohesion.

**Proposals and recommendations on gender**

* Equal education attainment must be prioritized.
* Faith inspired perspective on early marriage, equal opportunity, gender based violence, etc highlighted in education and through civil society activism.
* Training on gender equality for both men and women.
* Deeper engagement of faith traditions by women must be more formally encouraged so that women can acquire religious authority and becomes spokespersons for religion

**Proposals and recommendations on education**

* Greater religious and spiritual literacy is needed, that is culturally nuanced and based in ethics, moral, and historical stories. Such religious literacy needs to be grounded in faith and inter-faith perspectives, and not solely in a “secular” humanistic one. The inter-faith angle must mean that the idea of any religion as the “best” must be discarded as a starting premise for instruction in religious studies.
* As a part of an inter-faith approach, experiential learning should be incorporated into the pedagogy by way of opening up spaces that bridge the gap between religious and secular perspectives, and adherents of different faith traditions.
* Transparency and vetting around the curriculum and text book writing processes is vitally needed, to ensure that religion and ethics are taught in historically relevant, culturally sensitive and humanistically capacious ways.
* Adequate teachers and high-quality teacher training that aligns teacher preparation with desired outcomes of instruction in religious studies are needed.

**Proposals and recommendations on youth**

* Youth need to be educated towards tolerance, beyond religious practice and towards effective non-verbal communication such as mindfulness and mindful language.
* Youth need to be familiar with global issues and priorities- such as transnationalism, displacement, refugee concerns and citizenship rights
* Youth voices must receive center stage where their perspectives, aspirations and challenges are actively solicited by policy makers.
* Avenues for youth participation in research, activism and internships can and should be created, so that they know how to engage real life situations and negotiate challenges productively and meaningfully.

**The Planet and its governance:**

**Background**

There was a resounding agreement from all participants, representing diverse countries, religions, and experiences from across Asia, that the environment underscores every aspect of life. There is a core awareness that without a clean and unpolluted environment, without access to clean water, air, and soil, nothing else can even be considered as we project into the future. Therefore, it is crucial for all of us, regardless of what spheres we belong to, also work for the protection and preservation of the planet and the environment.

It is abundantly clear that as the diseases we suffer from, such as COVID-19, show no discrimination, these also show our interconnectedness and that we can no longer erroneously operate as if we are separate from each other and from the environment. We need to come together and act together with a focus on practical efforts to bridge borders and connect religious organizations and other sectors and stakeholders to push forward the importance of the environment.

People turn to their religious leaders and to their faith for their values, ethics and priorities, and to understand how they should think and live. Faith leaders and faith-based organizations are already very active in communities and play an important role in education, but it is time that this is furthered even more by policy makers and governments helping FBOs to capacity build and partner with other important organizations from all sectors. It is of critical importance that we are educating our communities to feel the necessity to protect the environment, giving them tools to connect on a logical and intellectual level, but also on an emotional level. This is where faith leaders and organizations can have s great influence as we move from consumerism to cooperation.

**The Challenge**

Religious communities, more often than not, naturally have an innate calling to help humanity and inspire positive action within their followers, due to their teachings of truth, love and unity. This is why many faith-based organizations serve the purpose of awareness raising, capacity building, and education within communities. When it comes to protecting the planet and the environment, different regions face different challenges, and religious scholars in areas of poverty or social unrest, may not consider the environment as a top priority; links between social issues and the environment may not be understood by all faith leaders. The environment is inextricably linked to all humanitarian issues, from youth and women in India, to human trafficking in Indonesia, and to world peace. Furthermore, in many religions the natural world is even considered as a living being. These foundational principles and beliefs must be built upon with practical steps and concrete action.

Active consideration of environmental issues and challenges by religious groups should be a priority, in association with both governments and a variety of grassroots level organizations. Broadening our horizon of responsibility with a focus on care will be important to change behaviors and instigate long-lasting and sustainable change. Critically important issues on global agendas are tightly interconnected to global climate change discussions, notably education, labor and migration issues, governance challenges, and social and international conflicts. These elaborate linkages complicate efforts to address climate change and immediate environmental damage. The siloes need to be far better linked

**Proposals and recommendations focus on four areas: partnerships, policy, capacity-building, and faith-based organizations**

Partnerships:

* Promote partnerships between faith-based organizations and both grassroots level and policy level organizations working on environmental issues. Partnerships between FBOs and those working on the environment can ensure that religious scholars, actors, and leaders build their knowledge and capacity to be able to properly and effectively impact, influence, and advocate for the environment. Those working to promote environmental sustainability will also benefit from community support and behavior change that ensues when working more closely with faith leaders and organizations. We must not limit ourselves to ecological theology; the focus must be on results based partnerships and action.
* Promote collaboration between faith-based organizations and educational and environmental institutions to ensure that environmental education is offered in all schools and programs. Education is paramount to tackling the issue of protecting the planet. Many organizations are already working in education but it is important to ensure that this includes an environmental education including the SDGs. Moving towards a more values based approach, including ethical thinking, feeling, and acting, can make youth more aware of and connected to the environment is essential.
* Promote partnerships between faith-based organizations and organizations working with marginalized communities, especially youth-based. Faith leaders and faith-based organizations educate not only in schools but in communities. The world of faith must harness their power and influence to ensure that they are properly educating our communities on how to live sustainably. Faith leaders should partner together with the appropriate grassroots organizations to ensure that FBO-led community advocacy and education reaches all groups and their families.
* Religious organizations must do proper due diligence and advocate for change in governments and organizations who are harming our environment. Religious organizations must use their power of advocacy to change the way that our governments are working, to change the way that business is working and to combat environmental destruction. Clear guidelines should be devised to best help faith leaders leverage their influence.
* Religious leaders should work hand in hand with agricultural organizations and with government policy around agriculture and farming. The impact of both animal agriculture - the livestock industry - as well as other forms of non-eco-friendly agriculture are primary causes of much of the environmental destruction that is happening. FBOs must reach out and work with agricultural and farming organisations to advocate for sustainable agricultural practices.
* Form intergovernmental partnerships. The G20 could partner with the institutions that train religious leaders and increase the centrality of protection of the planet in their education.

Policy

* Policy makers should embrace the ‘green faith’ movement; partner with it, work with it and make it part of their environmental programs. All of our organizations must be courageous and empowered to speak out clearly when the planet is threatened. The ‘green faith’ campaign should become a global movement, not just of the religious organiations but from policy organizations down. The concept of theology isn’t enough; it needs to be joined with action to nspire compassionate awareness, connection and responsibility.
* Expand the definition of SDG-16 ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies’ to include peace towards nature (ecology of peace). All organizations working on SDG-16 must ensure that they are also working on the environment. Ecology and the environment should be included by governments in a new definition of peace and creating peaceful societies. We have been acting for too long as if we are at war with nature. The new definition of peace needs to include the right to a healthy environment (clean water, air, etc.). Societies cannot be peaceful if there is a toxic and unhealthy environment stemming from a toxic relationship with our environment. Climate change, environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption of natural resources is the cause of many conflicts and this connection should be highlighted.
* Ensure that FBOs advocate for greater rights for the environment in line with indigenous traditions' view of the earth as a living Mother. We must encourage governments to expand the consideration and effect of environmental impacts in their policies and programs. The environment should not be a separate issue with regard to government policy, but an integrated aspect as it is the foundation which supports all lives and systems - it is interwoven with education, business, security and so much more. Giving the natural environment greater rights, such as that of a living being when approaching policy discussions will improve environmental outcomes.

Capacity Building and governance

* Good governance can be promoted with recognition and awards. In order to promote good governance, religious institutions could give prizes or awards to governments who are doing the best in this regard of an integrated approach to the environment. This might inspire our governments to really take up the cause of the environment in a critical way.
* Build the capacity of faith-based organizations as much as possible. Faith-based organizations often operate under limited resources and often underinvest in the capacity building of their teams. The world of faith actors, leaders and organizations needs to partner with capacity building and training organizations to be advocating effectively.
* Recognize, acknowledge and learn from the work of grassroot FBOs. Many FBOs are working on the ground in sustainable, eco-friendly ways, so it is very important for them to share this with others. Guidelines for best practice should be put together, summarizing the knowledge and experience of these organizations. Lessons can be given to other religious organizations and all other stakeholders to promote the importance of faith-based approaches. An improved evidence base for behavior and perception change in communities should also assist faith leaders to follow best practice, which may include working with scientists and behavior change experts to track impact.
* Map our existing capacities to act on environmental problems. Capacity expert groups should be created on specific environmental issues to also lobby and advocate to the government as well as companies or factories. Through mapping out the changemakers and visionaries within the community and the populations they serve, support can be more easily mobilized when it is needed.

Action of FBOs

* Support environmentally conscious religious leaders at the regional level to produce a set of guidelines for religious institutions on how they can help protect the environment. Through identifying those in the religious community who are already invested in passionately supporting a ‘spiritual ecology’, messaging can be effectively communicated to other leaders in their community. The religious institutions that are pioneers in promoting these values should be supported in reaching out to those who are not carrying forward this message.
* Raise the interfaith voice to global governments to spend more on financing developing countries in ending their deforestation. Investing in areas which have a higher payoff per dollar spend is important, especially around biodiversity hotspots in such tropical countries around the equator.

**Preparing and responding to disasters (including COVID-19): religious roles**

**Background**

Worsening natural disasters are a major threat and reality across the Asia region. Religious communities as first responders have much to offer and belong at policy tables. The question is how and where to translate this principle into action. The COVID-19 crisis has deflected attention to health issues, to the detriment of action on the broader agendas. That includes responding in specific ways to natural and manmade disasters.

In the areas of ***prevention, preparedness, and response***, religious entities have broad experience and, in fewer cases, institutionalized mechanisms for response to a range of disasters. In all instances religious actors work alongside other sectors. Faith-linked activities range from transnational youth groups that address global and regional structural issues, to very local community action, for example, to raise awareness of poor handling of waste and working with communities to develop meaningful and revenue generating alternatives, for example recycling.

Multi-faith cooperation can benefit policy responses at all levels: local, national, and transnational. Inter-religious initiatives and networks reinforce resilience within communities and contribute to overcoming conflicts around religious and ethnic identities. Dialogue and cooperation need to be reinforced, as absence or weakness leaves societies vulnerable to religious intolerance, discrimination, and conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the magnitude and demands of crises and the possibilities that they stand to aggravate existing divisions and tensions within societies.

**Challenges**

Experience and challenges for *prevention* are closely tied to education and to raising public awareness, as well as advocacy, especially with national governments. Broad engagement on climate change issues (including protection of rainforests) involves broad communication and dialogue efforts by faith actors. This topic as well as on nuclear threats have transnational dimensions that involve the G20. Action at local levels combines awareness raising and constructive action; an example is garbage collection and recycling with links to flooding and mudslides.

In many kinds of disaster, the remarkable mobilization of faith communities, motivated by humanitarian impulses and faith teachings, is a feature of *response to disasters*. Responses are linked to the remarkable resilience that is often observed in disaster situations. Some action is linked to institutional mechanisms that are designed for the purpose or able to adapt swiftly, others to more spontaneous mobilization. This is witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with actions to support others that are aptly described as “countless”. Although detailed recording and counting of specific responses are not the priority, better understanding and appreciation are warranted and could help in many ways.

**Proposals for action**

* Training and capacity building and resource mobilization are priority tasks, to which several institutions are committed, with promising programs. More encouragement of exchanges and active lesson learning among countries and communities would be beneficial.
* Action, both at interreligious and G20 levels, is needed for *better preparedness*. At various levels, whether for communities, cities, national bodies, regional, and global, there are significant gaps both in preparedness mechanisms and in faith community involvement in them, but also promising experience to share. However, with few exceptions and all these levels, religious institutions are not sufficiently at the tables and within the mechanisms that prepare for many sorts of disasters. A priority is to find meaningful ways to ensure that religious voices and experience are more systematically taken into account. That calls for better knowledge of what they do and its rationale, as well as of broader cross sectoral activities. For faith communities, there is a call for more mutual respect focused on generous action in many situations.
* On disaster response, there is substantial scope to strengthen such responses and make them more efficient, reaching more people and especially those who are most vulnerable. Information systems, use of various technologies, and openness to partnerships are in use in many settings but could be expanded. Such measures could help assure that available financing goes to where it is most needed and that it is well used, with meaningful accountability. A goal is to assure that the very separate efforts that are part of response and resilience can be better harnessed to feed into both prevention and preparedness.
* Accountability is a priority and religious institutions have major potential roles to play in highlighting the needs of the most vulnerable and holding governments and other partners (including themselves) to account for the use of resources.
* Multi faith multi religious action in disaster response can potentially contribute to more systematic use of accountability mechanisms, whether the old-fashioned speaking truth to power by individuals, or newer, more modern technologically based approaches. There are promising examples of multi-faith programs (Indonesia following the tsunami is an example, as well as the Philippines), that ease interreligious tensions and can actively contribute to dampening or preventing tensions.
* Resource use and mobilization, linked explicitly to the COVID-19 disaster but with broader implications, are an immediate issue and aith actors can and should contribute to efforts to mobilize, allocate, and use the resources well.
* On the *COVID response,* wide skepticism about the presence, nature, and risks of the disease, including among religious leaders, needs to be addressed. There is great suffering, including widespread hunger. Specific issues of scapegoating specific groups, tensions between religious communities and governments around regulations applicable to religious communities, the serious and inequitable impact of school closings, especially for poor communities, and the impact on migrants and refugees, including those forced to return home, declining remittances, and some evidence of scapegoating are central concerns.
* Given the centrality of the COVID-19 agenda in 2020, specific recommendations appropriately center on faith roles in pandemic response, including lessons for health system preparedness, addressing issues of scapegoating and discrimination, and focusing sharply on those who are most vulnerable.

**Summary observations on consultation themes: Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Katherine Marshall, August 7, 2020**

Voices of religious leaders and other religious actors are getting louder in policy circles. This contrasts with a time not long ago when religious perspectives were almost entirely ignored and absent, even in areas with both long histories and present engagement (health care, education) and keen interest (protection of the environment, care of the most vulnerable). Today many religious actors are “pushing with our elbows," insistent that their practical and ethical perspectives and voices be heard. The voices are far from consistent or even coherent. Some have a prophetic quality, focusing on deep injustices such as inequality. Others focus on what many term “culture wars,” especially around sexuality and relationships between women and men. The voices are not necessarily heard or agreed to in the policy circles where they make themselves known. But their volume and frequency is rising.

For better or for worse—in many senses both—the leading reason is keen interest throughout the policy community in the rise of violent extremism, often couched in religious terms. Efforts to address recruitment of extremists, to gather intelligence, and to draw on community support in identifying extremists have opened opportunities for a broader engagement with many religious communities, especially Muslims but also Buddhists, Hindus, and to a lesser extent Christians.

Nevertheless, there is increasing interest in enlisting religious communities, from clerics to grandmothers and young leaders, to understand grievances and the appeal of both religious and non-religious pull factors towards extremist tendencies. Many governments seek the help of religious leaders to counter extremism, especially in South Asia but also in other regions. There are risks associated with this development: both from working with governments (repression, distortions) and accentuating problems of stigmatizing some faith groups. Issues at the intersection of secularization trends and religious identities include both tighter relationships between religious institutions and governments and increasing hostilities among them. The negative consequences of this instrumentalization approach have also been detected by many communities of faith.

Though some do, it is important not to harbor illusions around the roles of religious leaders. There are factions that see religion as the primary solution to today’s flawed governance and to society’s ills of greed and selfishness. Others see retrograde religious beliefs as the central problem, irretrievably tainted against human rights. But the truth is that religion or religious agencies alone, with their roaring diversity, won't solve any national or global problems. Religious entities have certain functional roles and can contribute to the whole, but they should not be held solely responsible for societal ills, such as inequalities between women and men or violence and societal tensions, and it is a grave error to pursue that line of argument. Rather, they should be part of the larger collaborations that are part of the interconnected world, one of the stakeholders, alongside at least eight or nine others (media, civil society, donors, business, education, governments, etc.). In contrast, they can contribute to any matter and should be excluded nowhere.

There is much well-warranted attention to religious literacy, which essentially points to the need for policymakers to understand, engage, and feel more comfortable with religious approaches and actors. But there is also, in all regions, a need for better policy literacy among religious actors. We see many religious actors who seek to avoid the perceived contamination of engagement with policymakers, or when they are invited to the table use faith language alone—a common turnoff. There is thus a need to build this literacy. We should not only blame policymakers for religious illiteracy, but also build the capacity and look for policy literacy among religious communities.

One place where these issues emerge starkly is the [G20 Interfaith Forum](https://www.g20interfaith.org/), that reflects an effort to bring together networks of religious communities: clerics, academics, and entities operating to advance development and meet humanitarian needs. Annual forums, along with regional and other events leading up to them, draw on the rich array of analysis, dialogue, and action to formulate proposals and priority recommendations, to the G20 sherpas and leaders. Contrary to the misunderstanding that engaging religious agencies with policymakers will lead to mixing faith and theology too much with governance, this G20 interfaith process and recommendations represents a process, a contribution to the ideal forms of participatory, multi-stakeholder processes we aspire to for global governance. The process aims to build across years with different contributions to the process and collection of evidence with the goal of bringing the rich experience of religious communities more actively into global policy processes.

The intent of the G20 interfaith partners is to bang and knock on the doors of policymakers, but the spirit of engagement is not to pit us versus them. It is and needs to be a dance of engagement, as opposed to a dance of confrontation, blaming, and shaming. The G20 Interfaith Forum is one step in the process, coming alongside others. It deserves a high priority, demanding standards, and sustained support.