

G20 INTERFAITH FORUM 2021

Call to G20 Leaders: Priorities and Action

OCTOBER 21, 2021

The G20 Interfaith Forum met in Bologna from September 12-14, 2021 at a singularly troubled historic moment, with the COVID crisis still raging amidst troubling conflicts, humanitarian crises, and widening inequalities. The Forum calls for urgent action to heal deep health, social, and economic divisions. This call reflects the global and distinctive calling of religious and interreligious communities, to give true priority to the most vulnerable among us.

The COVID-19 emergencies demand priority action. G20 leaders and nations need to engage religious communities to: (a) support vaccination campaigns that assure vaccination of at least 70% of all communities worldwide within 12 months; (b) identify especially vulnerable communities and ensure a sharp focus on their needs; (c) convey positive messages that encourage positive actions by governments and citizens; and (d) take creative and purposeful action to address vaccine and other hesitations. Religious representatives need to be

engaged in planning at all levels for COVID-19 response and pandemic preparedness, with G20 nations including religious communities in aid plans and partnerships that can heal tensions around public health restrictions and fractures in social cohesion linked to the global crisis. Regardless of status and where they may be, authorities must act to ensure that forced migrants and refugees are vaccinated, for their safety and that of the wider population

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Inequalities within and among nations are deepened by the COVID-19 emergencies, with large increases in extreme poverty and lost momentum on global humanitarian and development initiatives (Sustainable Development Goals—SDGs). A pressing concern is for action to address the staggering hunger crisis, here and now, a repeated call that echoed during the Forum. G20 steps to relieve COVID-19 related financial pressures on governments and communities must expand, drawing on faith actor insights on effects, gaps, and priorities. As the focus shifts to recovery, economic and financial reform efforts will benefit from engagement with religiously affiliated networks (Religions for Peace, the Vatican COVID Commission, and Jubilee USA, among them) that can enhance accountability mechanisms, ensure integrity in use of financial resources, and address corruption.

Massive disruption of formal education by the COVID-19 emergencies demands urgent measures that go beyond a “return to normal” and make healing and well-being a cornerstone of education. Opportunities can and should be seized to address growing educational disparities among communities, and gaps in civic education that weaken society and accentuate polarization. The IF20 calls

for active dialogue about the needs of youth and children, drawing on actionable proposals for more purposeful and inclusive planning in education, to include trauma-informed, healing-sensitive approaches that draw on faith-inspired and indigenous traditions. Inclusive approaches are needed for reforms that address the large gaps in communities’ health-care access that the pandemic has so clearly revealed.

Peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts have suffered during the pandemic. Notwithstanding calls for global ceasefires during the COVID-19 emergencies, most ongoing conflicts persist and new forms of conflict have emerged, compounding the devastation of the pandemic. Religious engagement in diplomacy and peacebuilding, which often continues when governmental and international organizations’ work is disrupted, merit expanded support. Collaboration with religious groups that addresses conflict, hate speech, and the dangers of extremism, and advances conflict resolution at local and transnational levels is needed today more than ever.

The G20 2021 agenda includes high aspirations for action on climate change and threats to the environment. The Papal encyclical *Laudato Si!* highlights the multiple dimensions of religious concern, advocacy, and action, and includes actionable strategies, amplified by Patriarch Bartholomew’s address at Bologna. Pragmatic proposals, such as science-based action accountability measures can model and advance progress. As climate action and finance measures are debated during and around the G20 Summit and COP26 in Glasgow, exemplary religious involvement including the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) and Faiths for Earth offer promise for action and widening constituencies whose support will be vital.

The interconnected impact of racism and racial prejudice is a dominant, global concern that the G20 should take on as a central and continuing focus, in a manner that involves religious communities centrally. Healing, reconciliation, and equity are unachievable without attending to the

underlying impact of racism in its diverse forms. To establish a solid analytic foundation and enhance consensus for continuing action, the G20 should establish an International Commission on Racism that would (a) give central prominence to an underlying issue that in differing forms affects both nations and international relations, and to task the G20 leaders with responsibility for action; (b) assemble a tightly organized, multidisciplinary group of prominent states-people, scholars, and experts to draw on collective wisdom and positive action paths; and (c) set out in a widely promulgated document specific principles and proposals that will spur appropriate and urgent action.

The work of the Interfaith Forum's many partners were reflected in the Bologna discussions in myriad ideas and proposals discussed, both on foundations for actions and specific proposals to G20 leaders and to religious communities. They draw on the work of religious networks and leaders over months and years—work that continues—enriched by interreligious discussions in Bologna and the untiring work of Fscire and its partners. IF20 proposals to G20 leaders include the recommendation that the G20 Interfaith Forum be acknowledged as a formal engagement group of the G20. Active and distinctive inputs of religious communities during the COVID-19 emergencies highlight the value of religious inputs. The IF20's far-reaching processes of analysis and dialogue, engaging a global reach of networks and communities focused on the G20 agenda, validate this proposal.

The Bologna interreligious and cross sectoral gathering asked in countless ways: What will it take to heal? And, in an environment far removed from indifference, the IF20 underscored how and why religious communities, working purposefully together, and with governments, parliaments, transnational organizations, women and men, young and old, can and will engage. We must make this a Kairos moment, a time of grace, opportunity, and movement where we act together to bring change and justice, dignity and care. We look with great hope to the Summit of G20 leaders and their partners in October.

ANNEX

IF20 2021 Briefs – Highlights

1. The COVID-19 Emergencies:
Religious engagement
2. Prosperity, poverty and inequality
3. Urgent action on Education
4. Governance and Accountability:
Fighting corruption in the COVID-19 emergencies
5. Peace and diplomacy
6. Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
7. Faith Action to Address Climate Change
8. Interfaith Rainforest Initiative
9. Faith Action to Reduce Risk, Strengthen Resilience, and Respond to Disaster
10. Affirmations on Women
11. An inclusive approach to Artificial intelligence
12. The importance of freedom of religion or belief and of religious engagement
13. Anti-Racism Initiative
14. Action on Youth

1.

The COVID-19 Emergencies: Religious engagement

July 10, 2021

Religious and faith communities have played vital roles in mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 emergencies, including the numerous health, social, and economic challenges it has presented since the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Much remains to be done, including urgent action on vaccination and providing health care for millions of people. Effective and strategic engagement of religious actors can affect the outcomes. Beyond the immediate crisis of COVID's direct health threats, future success in addressing unacceptable health disparities, weak primary health care systems, and wide gaps in preparing for future pandemics are also at stake. G20 leaders and partners therefore need far more purposeful engagement with religious actors in the pandemic response.

The most immediate priority is to engage and organize strategic religious support in global COVID19 vaccination campaigns, with, notably, action on global vaccine equity, logistics of vaccine distribution and administration, positive messages to communities, and countering misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. Religious communities can address and combat resistance and counter misinformation, whether or not religious actors are responsible.

Religious leaders and communities will play crucial roles in the next phases of the COVID-19 crisis and recovery. Cooperation on vaccination rollouts can help build trust and local community confidence. The effectiveness of both national strategies and multilateral support may well depend on effective religious engagement.

Practical next steps involve drawing on knowledge and experience of a diversity of faith actors in

planning and coordination meetings and structures. Engagement needs well targeted strategies that, for example, understand the religious dimensions of vaccine resistance and recognize that these religious dimensions will be deeply intertwined with other societal factors. Engaging religious actors early on in developing public health messaging can head off resistance.

Experience argues for proactive support to the majority of religious communities that follow public health measures, provide social protection (hunger, livelihoods), and address conflicts. Strategic attention should go to the minority of religious communities that resist public health measures, further divisions, and spread misinformation. Clear information for policy makers on lessons from religious engagement can bolster the response.

Framing and delivering public health messages is crucial in the COVID-19 health response. International and national health authorities are engaging faith actors and could do more; WHO's appreciation for vital roles of religious leaders is reflected in outreach efforts and specific guidance directed to religious communities¹. Public health guidelines on gatherings, for example, meet generally positive responses and active cooperation from religious groups, but also some opposition and resistance.

Religious delivery of health care (integrated to varying degrees in national health systems) and spiritual care merit sharper attention. The positive potential of these roles is often ignored and the distinctive assets and challenges of religious actors are often not actively engaged or taken fully into account.

Religious community efforts to protect and support vulnerable communities suffer from weak coordination with, and limited support from, the public health sector. Religious focus on direct assistance for social and economic needs of vulnerable communities and advocacy for the voiceless argue for G20 engagement. This applies to health, pastoral care needs, and indirect effects of economic shutdowns.

Social tensions linked to the COVID-19 emergency often involve religious communities, including scapegoating of specific, often minority, groups. Increases in domestic violence and abuse of children during the crisis demand religious community response, as does active religious involvement in broader promotion of social cohesion through education and leadership, including addressing that hate speech which has expanded with the pandemic.

2.

Prosperity: Poverty and inequality

July 10, 2021

Extraordinary financial demands on states (as well as individuals) are a critical effect of the COVID-19 emergencies. While wealthy nations have capacities to mobilize resources including for social protection, less prosperous countries do not. Results are precarious fiscal situations and large gaps in delivery of critical services, notably those to vulnerable communities. Examples include cuts in funding going to refugee communities. Immediate fiscal pressures mirror wide and often widening inequalities that the emergencies make increasingly visible. The G20 plays central roles in multilateral mobilization of existing and new instruments that, for example, aim to address debt burdens of poorer countries and provide new funding to governments as well as unprecedented new funding.

The central if generally unheralded and uncoordinated roles of religious communities in meeting urgent social protection needs highlights gaps in reach and effectiveness of pertinent programs offer constructive knowledge for policy makers. They argue for further analysis of responses and strategic engagement as pandemic preparedness is examined.

Building on decades long engagement on global financial architecture and with a primary focus on its impact on poverty and inequities, religious actors (individual leaders, coalitions, and institutions) are among leading civil society advocates for bold action. They are part of the complex negotiations involving G20 nations and major multilateral players, notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. A G20 Interfaith objective and recommendation is to broaden and deepen the pertinent coalitions so that their engagement, at global and national levels, is more effective in assuring that the measures involve never stray from a sharp focus on poor and vulnerable communities.

Of particular concern is that the G20 nations act to increase funding of extraordinary humanitarian needs, with a special focus on refugees and IDPs, and on food crises.

The deep inequalities that the COVID-19 emergencies have made unmistakably apparent and, in many instances, accentuated, are a central concern for the G20 Interfaith Forum. These issues belong in a central place for the Italian G20 presidency, which focuses on emergency response and recovery, and for the Indonesian 2022 G20 presidency, which opens extraordinary opportunities for bold reforms. The 2015 Global Agendas and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets and indicators offer a constructive guide for global action but the framework and specific approaches and targets call for deliberate review and refreshing post COVID-19 emergencies.

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3.

G20 Interfaith Forum 2021 Working Group on Education

September 2021

Building Resilient and Well-Being Sensitive Education Systems: Recommendations for Practical Action by G20 Leaders

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in worldwide educational systems. In particular, during the mass school closures, and the attempted shifts to hybrid modes of learning, significant inadequacies and drastic global disparities in students' access to quality education have been brought to light. Alongside these concerns is a further recognition of the sufferings (material, physical, social-emotional, mental, spiritual) endured by children and young people throughout the lockdowns, and a striking gap in the provisions of online learning facilities and resources between higher and lower income countries. All these have aggravated an existing epidemic of youth ill-being, not least amongst young people who are already at the margins.

In response to this year's G20's agenda, *People Planet Prosperity*, and the G20 Interfaith Forum's (IF20) theme, *A Time to Heal*, the IF20 Education Working Group partners launched a Global Listening Initiative (GLI). The aim of the GLI was two-fold: (1) to ground policy inquiry in existing global proposals, (2) to understand youth lived experiences in diverse contexts and engage them in identifying actions for positive change in education.

The GLI consisted in two parts: an extended Desk Review to listen to the widespread calls to action from diverse international organisations, global educational commissions, religious communities, grassroots movement and scholars; and a global consultation to listen to young people and engage

with their perspectives. Over two thousand adolescents (aged 14-19) from 26 countries across five continents took part in online and/or in-person workshops hosted by NGOs, schools, and faith-based organisations. Adolescents from diverse backgrounds were invited to reflect on their experiences of life and education during the Covid-19 pandemic; identify who and what have been most supportive to their learning and well-being; and propose policy priorities that can explicitly support healing, learning and flourishing in education. Instead of a systematic comparative study, participants' insights were drawn out through a deep listening and dialogic process, and immersive data analysis, bringing together themes arising from structured and unstructured facilitators' and youth's reports, images, drawings, and quotes from participants.

Both processes have yielded rich understandings on the potential to work purposefully through education programmes to advocate for and advance equity, inclusion, and well-being. Conceptions and practices of healing and well-being rooted in faith, indigenous and other spiritual traditions have special importance and distinctive facets in the circumstances of the COVID-19 emergencies. In the light of policy priorities outlined by G20 leaders, and the emergent insights from the GLI processes, the IF20 Education Working Group partners support five key interconnected recommendations to address global challenges:

1. Safeguard healing and well-being as a cornerstone of education

- a) Focusing teaching and learning specifically on enriching students' and teachers' healing and well-being
- b) Developing whole school relational processes
- c) Shifting from stress-inducing standardisation and high-stakes testing to a relational, participatory, and well-being-sensitive approach to educational evaluation

2. Engage youth in educational decision-making

- a) Involving young people formally and informally in educational decisions at all levels, e.g. school, community, and beyond
- b) Providing opportunities for youth to play an active part in innovative educational visions and strategies that can enable them to meet global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social injustice, and climate
- c) Nurturing relevant competencies to empower youth leadership

3. Ensure all children and young people's equitable and consistent access to quality education

- a) Committing to financing education inclusively, equitably and equally
- b) Investing in good quality educational resources and facilities for all
- c) Providing infrastructures that ensure access to online learning

4. Embed global and ecological concerns in curricula agenda

- a) Supporting co-created curricular contents with young people to ensure that they are community-rooted as well as relevant to global concerns and challenges
- b) Integrating environmental and nature-based learning in curricula
- c) Enabling young people to participate in service learning and contribute to community regeneration

5. Prioritise teachers' well-being and strengthen their capacities to facilitate blended learning

- a) Establishing online platforms and resources for teachers' professional learning and well-being

- b) Financing professional development programmes that can enhance teachers well-being and strengthen their pedagogical capacities for digital and online education

- c) Nurturing teachers' professional competencies

4.

Governance and Accountability: Fighting corruption in the COVID-19 emergencies

July 10, 2021

Addressing corrupt practices is a continuing G20 priority, and different G20 engagement groups have highlighted the need for concerted action at national and multilateral levels. The G20 Interfaith Forum has also highlighted, over several years, both the need for cooperation and action and the distinctive roles that religious actors can and should play as integrated members of global coalitions and partners of committed national governments. The challenges involved are magnified during the COVID-19 emergencies, which highlight a set of amplified or new corruption related issues. These include vaccine equity and effectiveness of vaccination campaigns and, the challenges involved with large and rapidly prepared financial assistance and other actions such as debt relief that demand effective mechanisms to guard against corruption and assure that benefits reach those most in need.

Addressing corruption is central to protecting human rights and human dignity, as it jeopardizes the functioning and legitimacy of political institutions and processes, economic development, and the rule of law. This is the foundation for religious engagement on the topic, alongside the direct knowledge

that religious communities have of local impact and mechanisms of corruption, for example in health care and education. With wide variation in experience, religious communities have particular responsibilities and potential for action in the poorest and most vulnerable and fragile situations. Religious and faith traditions share teachings that speak to the core values of trust, righteousness and honesty; corrupt practices are considered shameful and reprehensible in light of their most fundamental beliefs and paradigms. There is potential for expanded action and cooperation by (a) building on ethical teachings to bolster effective action, (b) documenting the daily corrosive effects of corruption, (c) mobilizing communities in demanding public integrity, (d) encouraging accountability and transparency, and (e) serving as “watch-dogs” to expose and denounce corrupt actors and practices. Religious actors, however, need to meet several challenges that include limited accountability practices within many organizations, which contribute to sub-optimal engagement.

This brief highlights the need for G20 governments to engage with religious and other civil society communities in the specific context of the COVID-19 emergencies. It also distils the large body of operational and academic counsel as comprehensive recommendations covering public sector corruption, private company approaches and roles, specific actions to address the distinctive needs of vulnerable groups, the impact of new technologies on corruption, and civil society roles. It explores distinctive roles for faith communities and organizations with a view to enhancing engagement with G20 governments, leaders, and other bodies and engagement groups in the fight against corruption.

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5.

Intersecting Fractures: The Myriad Challenges Caused by COVID-19 and the Unique Role of Religion in Resolving Them

A Call to Action

The Italian G20 Presidency has identified a “swift international response” to the COVID-19 pandemic, including reversing escalating global inequalities, as prerequisites to advancing its interconnected pillars of action for the 2021 Summit: People, Planet, and Prosperity. Indeed, the global COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed a significant challenge for global public health, but exacerbated existing political and socio-economic divisions and eroded the stability of governments, economies, and civil societies around the world. As evidenced below, this has directly contributed to violent conflict and civil unrest, which can only be sustainably resolved through careful consideration of the pandemic’s multi-faceted impact, and to avoid the pandemic turning into an epidemic of despair.

In addressing this crisis, in an effort to strengthen global peace and security, the G20 Interfaith Association urges the G20 members to advocate for and model constructive engagement with religious communities, interfaith organization, elders, traditional leaders, and influencers, acknowledging their unparalleled social reach and a singular capacity for moral suasion, to support public health initiatives, strengthen economies, build community resilience, and mitigate drivers of violence.

In order to support stable and durable peace, the G20 Interfaith Forum Association recommends that G20 members better understand and engage the unique capacities of religious stakeholders, including moral suasion, networking, material resources, and social reach, in the following ways:

1. Develop a permanent secretariat to study the intersection of religion, sustainable development (including public health), and conflict. By providing faith-based actors with a forum to systematically contribute their technical and relational expertise, they can help to reduce the severity of future, unanticipated global crises.
2. Partner with active and accountable, global inter-faith action networks to mitigate civil society mistrust and grievances that currently push communities to resist government public health measures, deepen identity conflicts, and radicalize toward violence. This may include an outlet for the expression of shared spiritual values and collaborative action for accelerated vaccine delivery across faith traditions, and would require a public commitment by G20 members to pluralism and religious tolerance.
3. Seek partnerships with alternative faith influencers, especially women, particularly where traditional faith community leadership is exclusively male. The pandemic impact, economically, in terms of an increase in domestic violence, and in terms of unpaid labor needed to care for the sick, has disproportionately fallen on women, who need increased support and offer unique resilience within communities of faith.
4. Build systematic national and global mechanisms to enhance the technical skills and collaborative role of faith actors in responding to increased conflict in vulnerable communities, especially those who were severely affected by the political, economic, and psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. Highlights

July 10, 2021

Modern slavery and human trafficking have prompted many religious leaders and communities to advocate for action and to pursue programs aimed at preventing and halting exploitative practices and supporting their survivors. The G20 Interfaith Forum has over several years urged G20 leaders to act more forcefully and directly to combat this evil. With many trends exacerbated by the COVID-19 emergencies, the needs for focus and action are greater still.

Human trafficking is a low-risk, high-profit crime for perpetrators and an international focus for more than 20 years. The 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), the USA Trafficked Victims Protection Act Public Law (No: 115-393), and commitments that are part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect approaches and efforts. However, too little progress has been made to reduce and eradicate it. Root causes include poverty which forces or propels many into exploitative situations and the insecurity that drives movement across continents and borders by individuals and family groups, putting people in acutely vulnerable situations that trap them in debt bondage and human trafficking. People smuggling and human trafficking – at time coincident but distinct -- both prey on the vulnerability of human beings. The COVID-19 emergencies with their profound economic hardship have exposed the most vulnerable to greater risks. A disproportionate share of exploitation for women and girls is a particular concern; an estimated 72% of all victims of human trafficking detected worldwide are female, with sexual exploitation a predominant form of trafficking.

With long traditions of providing education, healthcare, and social services, particularly to migrants, women, and other vulnerable populations, religious institutions help strengthen community structures that should serve as bulwarks against modern slavery. Faith leaders are often a trusted resource for victims of trafficking, who commonly confide in them as a first step in seeking help. Places of worship have been used for sanctuary and safety; religious leaders play significant roles in ensuring the spiritual health and well-being of their congregations and communities.

Recommendations

In this time of crisis, radical new approaches to fight these evils are needed, and possible, at local, national, and international levels. High-level strategic buy-in with political will is needed, based on effective monitoring with meaningful metrics (of incidence, patterns, and efficacy of tested policy interventions). Six focal areas could spur progress:

1. Interventions with likeminded governments and multilateral bodies can remove slavery from supply chains and business models. With government procurement and business transactions subject to a legally binding ‘no human trafficking transparency framework,’ G20 governments can honour their commitments to international agreements and domestic legislation.
2. Establish a notion of ‘tainted money’ with financial benefit/profit from modern slavery or human trafficking surrendered or seized for reparation or to assist in the fight against modern slavery and human trafficking, and support survivor recovery.
3. Make the internet a modern slavery and trafficking ‘free zone’ by legal instrument.
4. Translate international instruments into policy and action for the modern day, for example for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
5. Engage multilateral bodies more actively, notably assets for action other than UN bodies.
6. Work to reset a global ‘moral compass’: people before profit or self-gratification. The overriding principle should focus on the causes and drivers, with an aim to revert criminal money to finances for good, redirecting the US\$150 billion with urgency and increasing responsibility and accountability.

7.

Faith Action to Address Climate Change

August 9, 2021

Religious leaders and communities can and must play active roles in policy responses to global and local threats posed by climate change and in mobilizing citizen support. Compelling reasons include: (a) extensive analysis reflected for example in the 2015 Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'*; (b) the large majorities of the world’s people affiliated with religious communities;¹ (c) substantial tangible assets held by religious communities where direct action is feasible; and (d) numerous active interreligious and religious networks sharply focused on climate and environmental issues (examples include Faiths for Earth, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, and the World Resources Institute’s Faith and Sustainability focusing on climate change initiatives for faith-based organizations). The goal is to ensure that organizations from multiple faith communities work proactively to address global climate challenges, contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement, and reducing environmental degradation throughout the world.

The scale of the climate crisis requires active participation and urgent mobilization across societal sectors. Transnational, global actors like the G20 Interfaith Forum can help galvanize collaboration between faith organizations, G20 governments, companies, corporations, and civil society organizations to address the climate crisis. UNEP (UN Environment Programme) is among many institutions and analysts that highlight constructive roles that religious institutions can play in delivering on the SDGs, where sustainability is a central focus. By integrating more explicitly environmental dimensions of these agendas, religious, faith and cultural communities can promote strong, inclusive, green, sustainable, and transformative economies based on well-being, circularity, sharing and collaboration, and alternative measures of growth. The many ongoing initiatives underscore both active work and potential expansion. Integrated approaches bridging religious and secular interests in sustainability have untapped potential for impact.

Faith organizations themselves can support broad efforts and serve as exemplars. They possess, maintain and preserve substantial lands and properties. They can contribute to the collective efforts to address climate change, but also demonstrate their direct potential for impact and leadership. A prominent and practical approach involves using science-based targets for faith organizations to establish an emission baseline on buildings or land owned by faith organizations. Likewise, socio-economic activities of faith organizations and communities add considerable value: In the United States, for example, a 2016 study (conducted by Religious Freedom & Business Foundation) estimates that they annually contribute about \$1.2 trillion of socio-economic value, like the 15th-largest national economy and more than the global annual revenues of the world's top ten tech companies, including Apple, Amazon, and Google. Faith-linked companies and corporations can shift from fossil-fuel based energy consumption and transportation to green technology and make workplaces truly ecofriendly. Clarity on the emissions they generate could help lower faith organizations' environmental impact, and enhance

their regeneration impact. With faith organizations' high investment power, they can seek out and invest in values-based, ecologically sensitive projects that contribute to socially and ethically responsible returns that also support the UN SDGs.

Religion has always been an important vehicle for forging what people value, embrace, and protect. Faith organization can play crucial roles in a brighter climate future.

Recommendations for Policy-makers

- Faith communities with G20 support should implement an 'SDGs Road Map' to clarify and define their contributions to the achievement of the Agenda 2030. A supported, ambitious, momentum building framework would ensure that faith groups – and the wider world – understand what their contribution is and help draw in the necessary partners and technical skills.
- The G20 should support faith-linked education systems, thus faith-related schools, universities and institutions, to inform new generations about climate sensitive practices and solutions.
- Multireligious initiatives on climate deserve direct, explicit G20 support
- The G20 should support faith community implementation of science-based targets to curb their emissions from their massive assets. This would offer faith groups and institutions a comprehensive, transparent framework – from commitment through action to certification – to guide their work implementing emission reduction targets.
- The G20 should support investment schemes for faith organizations to implement energy refurbishment of buildings to lower their emissions, and develop sustainable land-use plans

8.

Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests

August 3, 2021

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the urgent need for G20 leaders to support and protect tropical rainforests. Destruction of these forests poses an existential threat to the global climate: deforestation results in emission of billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year, exacerbates the effects of global climate change, and threatens the livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

Faith-linked initiatives play pivotal roles in directing global attention to the challenges facing the world's rainforests and in empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions. Moreover, proactive partnerships between these initiatives and G20 member countries offer significant opportunity to enhance awareness and spur action. The Italian G20 presidency includes "planet" among its top three priorities, calling on governments to "lead the world towards concrete and lasting solutions" on climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity loss.² Key recommendations of the 2021 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief on Rainforests include:

Faith-linked initiatives play pivotal roles in directing global attention to the challenges of the world's rainforests and in empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions.

Protect and Restore Rainforests

Preserving intact rainforests and restoring degraded land are essential to curbing the long-term damage of deforestation. G20 members should promote measures that protect forests endangered environments rehabilitate degraded ecosystems. Leaders can also take decisive action by withdrawing support for subsidies to industries that rely on deforestation.

Promote Indigenous Rights

Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by deforestation. G20 rainforest countries can take concrete steps to support these populations by upholding customary land rights, recognizing Indigenous claims to ancestral lands, and supporting community-based monitoring systems that report human rights violations. Furthermore, G20 leaders should ensure that Indigenous voices are included in policymaking processes at all levels.

Stronger Oversight of Industry, Promotion of Lifestyle Changes

G20 leaders should use their influence to press for greater transparency regarding the environmental and human rights impact of commercial industries. Support for independent third-party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations is one promising approach. G20 governments should endorse national initiatives to reduce consumption of meat and dairy sourced from deforested land.

Support Research and Faith-Linked Advocacy Efforts

G20 leaders should fund research to better understand the impact of deforestation on the spread of viruses; rainforest countries in particular should promote land protection efforts that reduce the risk of disease transmission from animals to humans. G20 countries and organizations such as the UN and WWF should continue to work closely with faith actors on issues of deforestation and conservation.

9.

Faith Action to Reduce Risk, Strengthen Resilience, and Respond to Disaster

August 16, 2021

Rising numbers and severity of extreme weather disasters are an expected long-term effect of climate change. Changes already perceptible in different world regions include intensity and duration of heat waves, more frequent and more severe drought incidents, flooding frequency and severity, and the power of storms. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (Sendai Framework) adopted by UN member States in 2015 offers a framework for reducing disaster risk and losses. Actions aimed to prevent, protect, and reduce disaster risk and increase resiliency outlined in this Framework, and by experts in the field, are an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As local civil society actors in some of the world's most vulnerable areas, religious and faith-inspired organizations are consistently at the forefront of attending to the physical and spiritual needs of communities affected by disasters. At transnational levels many religious actors are leading advocates for action to address both response and mitigation as well as responders.

This brief urges G20 Leaders to promote more robust partnerships across disciplines and sectors to mitigate the hazards of climate change, and specifically to reduce risk, build long-term resilience, and limit future costs of increasingly severe disasters. More specific focus on religious roles in assessing, communicating, and meeting local needs can increase the reach and impact of planning, policies, and programs for disaster risk reduction (DRR).

Recommendations

- Devise and improve national and local DRR strategies in G20 countries in partnership with local faith communities.
- Support such strategies in non-G20 countries and especially the V-20 nations (Vulnerable)
- Develop and assure consistent, well prepared and tuned, and reliable information flows between governments and religious/faith groups whose focus is response to disasters both globally and very locally.
- Establish and implement robust frameworks for coordination and sharing of best practices with religious networks, organizations, and actors to increase the efficacy of DRR strategies and mitigate impending risks and development losses.

10.

Affirmations on Women

July 2021

The Interfaith Forum calls upon the G20 Leaders and Member States to:

1. Fully engage faith actors in the strategies affirmed in the brief, supporting women's roles across social and economic sectors.
2. Engage with existing dialogical platforms where policymakers and faith actors explore ways to optimize faith engagement in gender equality and encourage the creation of similar dialogical platforms in states where such platforms do not yet exist.

3. Strengthen the evidence base on faith influence – both negative and positive – on social norms relating to gender equality, engaging faith leaders throughout the process, to improve understanding of the roles of faith actors.
4. Document, elevate, and support people, institutions, and initiatives leading change at the intersection of faith, gender equality, and women's leadership.
5. Advance faith literacy as it pertains to gender equality within all G20 Member States' institutions.
6. Improve data collection and harmonization among G20 member states and enhance cooperation in eradicating damaging stereotypes and creating public policies to protect women through the recovery period of COVID-19.

Half the world's population is women. Women will be the agents for transformation in the world as they assume their proper place in all human institutions. Finding an equitable balance of power between men and women by encouraging the participation of women at all levels of society – government, religion, civil society, corporations, community, and family – will manifest in far-reaching ways, benefitting governments, societies, and economies, and helping to resolve the world's challenges.

Women will be the greatest agents for transformation in the world as they assume their proper place in all human institutions.

11.

An Inclusive Global Conversation on Artificial Intelligence

July 10, 2020

Summary recommendations

- Various religious communities and think tanks with theological links are exploring risks and benefits of the rapid development of AI. Their focus on values dimensions of different dimensions positions them well to contribute to global and local dialogue on AI policies and governance challenges at national and international levels
- Religious communities could themselves enhance discourse and identify responsibilities both within religious communities and in interreligious platforms. Specific contributions should focus on framing policy-focused ethical approaches and injunctions, developing an inter-religious understanding of cultural differences, and helping to identify vulnerable social groups in need of protection and uplift.
- The setting is the challenge for governments to act quickly to harness artificial intelligence (AI) for the public good and mitigate negative outcomes. Industry and civil society, including religious communities, should be involved in the governance process. It is at country and regional governance levels that norms and standards to guide regulations are best situated.
- A challenge where religious institutions can be effective advocates is in pressing for more global, inclusive approaches to AI governance, given the diversity of experiences and concerns facing the international community.
- Shared cultural values—often reflected in or emerging from religious practice—can guide national, regional, and international policies so

that AI develops as a tool that assists and augments human capability.

- A common and vital theme is to ensure that human beings are central to the organization of AI-enabled cybernetic systems. AI should be used to supplement, rather than replace, human judgment. Respecting human dignity could help ensure, for example, that systems should not influence individual choices by being designed in ways that nudge individual decisions in consumer-choice or democratic participation. Broadly, a human-rights based framework is critical to develop shared norms across countries.

12.

The importance of freedom of religion or belief and of religious engagement:

Recommendations of the G20 Interfaith Forum's 2021 Working Group on FoRB

September 29, 2021

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. 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).

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.¹ 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.

Recommendations

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.

¹ UN, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

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.² 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.
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.³
6. In the light of the foregoing, and as previously recommended,⁴ we urge that the G20 Interfaith Forum be recognized as a G20 Engagement Group.

13.

Anti-Racism Initiative: An International Commission of Inquiry on Racism and Discriminatory Policies and Practices

September 23, 2021

Racism, in its many expressions including multiple practices of discrimination, is globally ubiquitous and stubbornly persistent. While we recognize the day-to-day impact of individual acts of racism, the G20 processes offer the potential to engage systemic and structural racism with a view to bold action. This deserves an explicit priority because of racism's grave social, ethical, economic, legal, political, and religious and spiritual impacts. The wide and interconnected impact of racism and racial prejudice for all Sustainable Development Goals and targets as well as, more immediately, the multifaceted COVID-19 emergencies, argues for action by the G20 to take on anti-racism as a central and continuing agenda focus.

The G20 Interfaith Forum, through its Anti-Racism Initiative and its other policy work, is committed to confronting racism in all its forms, with the aspiration of supporting actions that eradicate it. Healing, reconciliation, and equity are unachievable without attending to that goal. This call to action reflects a continuation of efforts throughout history to engage racism, discrimination and injustice.

² See: Religious freedom during public health emergencies: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.covid-religiousliberty.org/march-2021-policy-brief>

³ 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.

⁴ See the G20 Interfaith Forum Closing Statement, 2020: <https://www.g20interfaith.org/g20-interfaith-forum-closing-statement/>

The G20 Interfaith Forum recommends that, to establish a solid analytic foundation for continuing action, the G20 establish an International Commission on Racism. The goals of such a Commission would be:

- To give central prominence to an underlying issue that in differing forms affects each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in both nations and international relations, and to task the G20 leaders with responsibility to act.
- To assemble a tightly organized, multidisciplinary group of respected states people, scholars, interreligious leaders, and experts for gathering the considerable collective wisdom that exists on positive action paths.
- To set out in a widely promulgated document specific principles and proposals that will spur appropriate and urgent action. Such action could include removing racist language and racist legislation that may still exist, as well developing antiracist legislation.

Racism in its Multifaceted Forms is the Crisis of Crises

Racial injustice permeates the many crises that threaten humanity. It is a common thread that, if root causes are left unaddressed, threatens the legitimacy of the international order. Racist practices influence policies and structures that undermine international cooperation in vaccine distribution, food security, and climate mitigation and adaptation.

Efforts that address racial injustice reinforce the stabilization of the international order and promote economic development.

Contributions of Interfaith Organizations and Communities

Interfaith organizations recognize the importance of commissions of the kind that we are propos-

ing. Although commissions can be imperfect, they provide a principled way of opening up necessary conversations and facing with honesty and courage some of the challenges we face in the world. There are historical examples of such commissions in recent history and in several regions of the world, including several in G20 member states. While religious communities have at times been part of the problem, they can also be part of the solution. As religious communities begin to reclaim their spiritual roots as distinct from their institutional constructs, they may more effectively speak for the needs and aspirations of the over 80% of the human community who have a religious affiliation. The antidote for racism is to accept and embrace the full humanity of every person. This includes the sacredness of human conscience and the full dignity and access to all human rights which are inherent in the world's religious and spiritual traditions. These religious attributes require legal protection and promotion to achieve a culture of respect for human beings.

Recommendation

To achieve peace among cultures and peace among religions, it is our conviction that the scourge of racism must be addressed. We believe the background and arguments above to present a compelling case.

We therefore recommend the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry with members from the G20 (the 19 nations and the European Union). We acknowledge that Commissions of Inquiry of many sorts have a rich history with mixed results. While a Commission of Inquiry's findings and recommendations are not binding, they significantly influence public opinion, shape public policy, and promote healing.

The IF20 urges the leaders of the G20 to consider this recommendation and pledge to commit its considerable networks and resources to its realization.

14.

Action on youth

July 10, 2021

Summary

The United Nations Security Council affirmed unanimously (December 9, 2015) that “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.” G20 leaders have recognized the role that young people play, with the 2020 G20 Presidency Agenda highlighting that “the G20 should be forward – looking and adopt a long-term approach to pave the way for the future generations.”

The brief highlights youth-centered recommendations as an integral part of the key themes and topics of the 2021 G20 Summit, reflecting inputs of young interfaith leaders from around the globe, presented by A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY), a global youth movement that brings together young people from many backgrounds, to increase understanding of different cultures and faiths and promote peace and coexistence, by delivering local community activities. Launched in December 2015, ACWAY fellows have engaged in over 200 interfaith and intercultural activities, ranging from educational seminars to peace walks, national conferences and media campaigns and including five international forums in Morocco, Australia, Sudan, and Azerbaijan and one online international forum for the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week. ACWAY is the Global Youth partner to the G20 Interfaith Forum and Chairs the Youth Working Group of the G20IF.

The brief outlines the challenges facing young people around the world, and practical policy-centered recommendations to address them. The consultation process began with a global call for submissions, in which young interfaith leaders were asked to submit the most pressing challenges in their communities, along with potential solutions. At a second consultation during the ACWAY Youth Forum in February 2021, a youth-specific focus group of 75 young people, collected multiple perspectives on further recommendations.

Areas of policy focus include the following: (1) access to education, (2) stable employment, (3) mental health, (4) youth in conflict zones, (5) climate change, and (6) access to the decision-making processes. ACWAY recommends that the Interfaith Development Goals be adopted by all G20 member states as a tool to monitor and measure interfaith impact in the sector.

Contributors

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ENDNOTES

1 Worldwide, Pew Research Center estimates indicate that over eight out of ten people have a religious affiliation (a demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories estimates that the 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe represented 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion). Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/.

2 “Planet.” Italian G20 Presidency. <https://www.g20.org/planet.html>

Photo courtesy of Flickr user Michael Pieracci